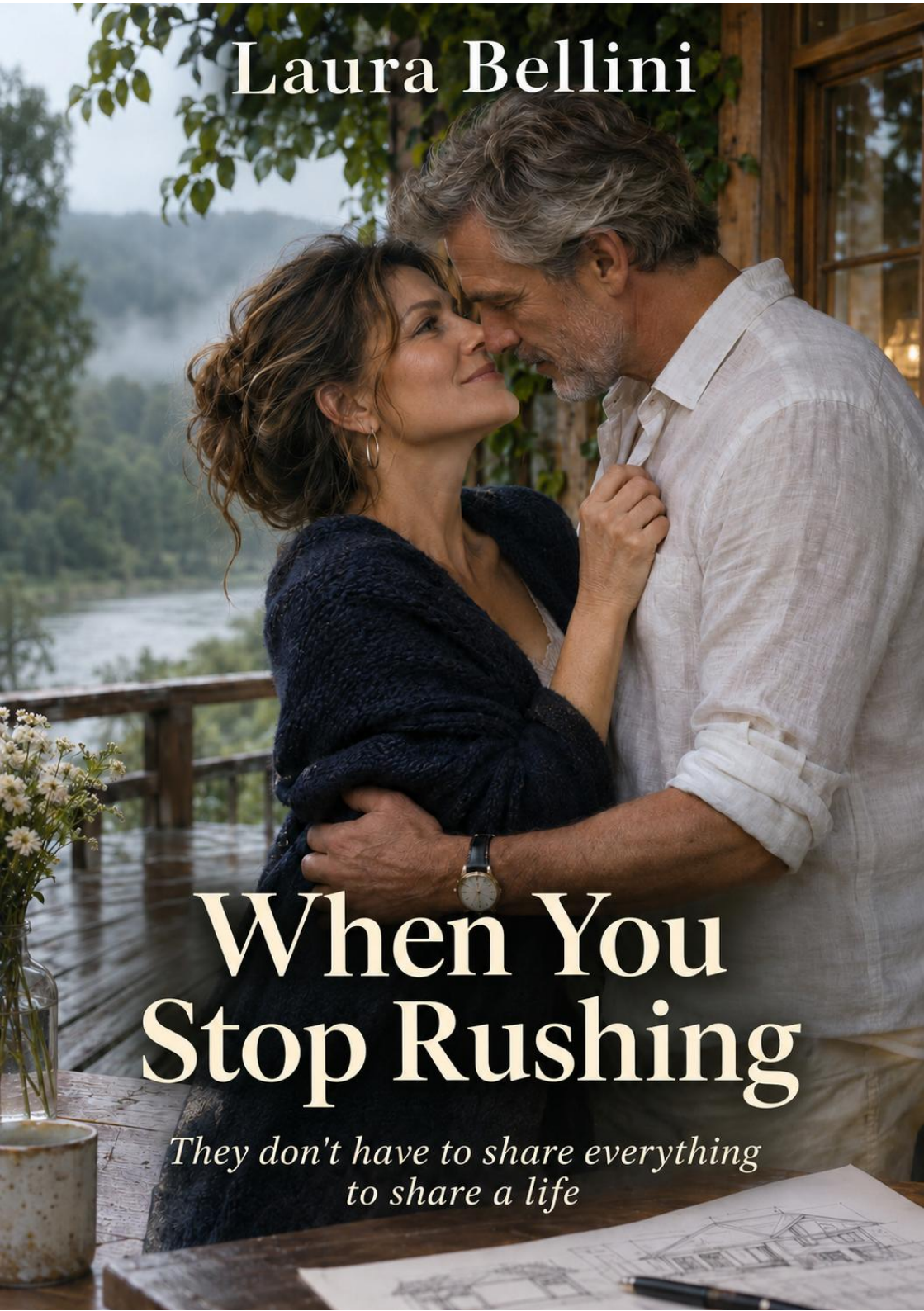
Laura Bellini



# When You Stop Rushing

*They don't have to share everything to share a life*

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Laura Bellini

ROMANS

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# INTRO

On my first morning by the San River, I woke to the sound of rain, although the forecast had promised sunshine. The drops struck the metal windowsill with such regularity that it seemed someone was tapping out a rhythm I had no intention of following. I lay motionless for a while, watching the pale strip of light beneath the bedroom door. My phone was silent, I had no appointments scheduled before ten, and yet in my mind I had already rearranged three deliveries, called the carpenter, and adjusted the placement of paintings on a wall that hadn't even been painted yet.

I was fifty-six years old, and for most of my life I had considered the ability to anticipate problems a virtue. Only recently had I begun to suspect that sometimes it was a way of avoiding everything that couldn't be entered into a calendar.

I got up, slipped on a linen dressing gown, and went downstairs to the kitchen. The little house smelled of wood, damp earth, and the coffee I had prepared the evening before in a metal moka pot. I had bought it three years earlier, when my marriage had finally disintegrated into paperwork, property valuations, and conversations conducted through lawyers. The property was small, with a crooked terrace and a garden where old apple trees grew according to their own rules. That was precisely why I had fallen in love with it. No one could tell me I ought to arrange it differently.

Spread across the table was the plan for my summer gallery.

I had marked the places for paintings in red pencil and the areas for guests in green. I intended to turn the former living room into an intimate exhibition space for contemporary painting. There would be evening gatherings with artists on the terrace, while several sculptures sturdy enough to withstand the rain would stand in the garden. My gallery in Rzeszów was doing well, but for some time I had been missing something less predictable than another exhibition opening, another negotiation, another shipping deadline.

Here, I wanted to feel the joy of creating a place again, rather than merely the responsibility of keeping it running.

My phone rang.

My friend Marta's name appeared on the screen.

"Tell me you're still asleep," she said without bothering to say hello.

"I've spent the last twenty minutes trying to convince myself I'm relaxing."

"So you're already dressed and revising your schedule."

I glanced at the red pencil in my hand.

"I'm wearing a dressing gown."

"Remarkable progress. Listen, I spoke to Stanisław yesterday."

My hand stopped above the plan.

"Which Stanisław?"

"Irena, we both know there's only one Stanisław whose name you pretend not to remember."

I walked over to the window. The rain had eased, and a low mist hovered over the river. On the opposite bank, the trees formed an uneven green line.

Stanisław Jastrząb.

I hadn't seen him in almost nine years. Yet I remembered his calm way of speaking, the patience with which he listened to other people's arguments, and that particular kind of confidence that never required him to raise his voice. We had met when we were both still busy building lives with other people. He was an architect, a man with an extraordinary instinct for space. He could walk into a room and immediately understand why nobody wanted to stay there for more than a few minutes.

"How is he?" I asked cautiously.

"He's sixty, still works far too much, and apparently has finally learned to make a decent risotto. More importantly, he knows someone who could help with your terrace."

"I already have a contractor."

"One who hasn't answered his phone in two weeks."

I said nothing.

"Irena, you don't have to do everything yourself."

"I know."

"You don't sound convinced."

I ended the call with a promise to consider the suggestion. Naturally, I intended to call my own contractor first, find another one second, and only as a last resort admit that Marta might be right. I slipped my phone into the pocket of my dressing gown and went out onto the terrace to check whether water was collecting by the door again. The boards were slippery, and something beneath one of them gave an alarming creak.

That was when I heard a car.

A dark navy estate car stopped on the narrow road outside the house. A tall man wearing a light-coloured shirt with the sleeves rolled up stepped out from behind the wheel. His grey hair was slightly tousled by the wind, and a leather bag hung from his shoulder. For a moment, he stood beside the car, studying the house with an attentiveness that immediately betrayed his profession.

I recognised him before he turned his head.

"Don't tell me Marta sent you here without warning," I said as he approached the gate.

Stanisław smiled slowly.

"Good morning to you too, Irena."

He was older than I remembered, but age had given his face greater definition. The lines around his eyes didn't look like signs of exhaustion. They seemed more like evidence that, over the years, he had found enough reasons to smile.

"Marta has no right to organise my life."

"She told me exactly the same thing. Which is why I'm not here at her invitation."

"Then whose invitation are you here on?"

He took a folded sheet of paper from his bag.

"I found your advertisement looking for an architectural consultant for a temporary exhibition space. I sent a reply yesterday evening."

I remembered a message from a design studio identified only by its initials. I hadn't got around to checking the owner's name.

"That's a little unfair."

"That I replied to an advertisement?"

"That you knew who had placed it."

"And you didn't check who was replying. It looks as though we both took a chance."

I opened the gate, although I wasn't prepared to admit he had a point just yet. Stanisław stepped onto the path, stopped beside an apple tree, and looked towards the river. He said nothing for several seconds. I remembered how that habit of his used to irritate me. I filled silences with decisions; he allowed them to linger until he noticed something worth saying.

"Beautiful place," he said at last. "But the terrace needs more than a couple of boards replaced."

"I know. That's why I'm looking for a consultant, not someone to take over the entire project."

He looked at me more closely.

"Do you still begin every conversation by establishing what the other person isn't allowed to do?"

I felt a flash of irritation because he had come far too close to the truth.

"Do you still try to provoke people before you've had your coffee?"

"Only the ones I remember well."

For a moment, we looked at each other without speaking. Behind me, I could hear water dripping from the gutter. Suddenly, I became aware that I was standing in front of him in my dressing gown, my bare feet tucked into garden clogs and my hair carelessly tied at the nape of my neck. Yet I didn't feel embarrassed. What surprised me more was how easily an unplanned sense of familiarity had returned between us.

I invited him into the kitchen.

Stanisław took off his damp jacket, hung it carefully by the door, and sat down at the table. He didn't touch the plans, although I could see he wanted to examine them. Instead, he waited until I slid the sheets towards him myself. That small gesture pleased me more than I was willing to admit.

"First, tell me what you don't want to change," he asked.

I placed a cup of coffee in front of him.

"The house. The garden. The character of this place. I don't want some elegant pavilion pretending to be something it will never be."

"And what do you want?"

I gestured towards the open doors leading onto the terrace.

"I want people to come here for the paintings and stay because they enjoy talking to one another. I don't want anyone to feel they have to pretend to be an art expert. I want it to be a little beautiful and a little ordinary."

Stanisław rested his hands on the table.

"That sounds like something worth doing."

He didn't say it in the voice of a man trying to sell me his services. It sounded more like someone who had just recognised a desire I had never managed to express quite so simply.

After a moment, he unfolded the drawing and pointed to the connection between the terrace and the living room.

"I can help you. But on one condition."

"I'm listening."

"You won't treat every suggestion I make as an attempt to take something away from you."

I leaned back in my chair.

"And you won't assume that working together gives you the right to make decisions for me."

His smile grew warmer.

"Agreed."

He extended his hand across the table. I took it, feeling the roughness of fingers belonging to a man who, despite his profession, didn't confine himself to drawing plans. The handshake was brief. Yet it lasted long enough to remind me how long it had been since anyone had looked at me with such open curiosity.

When he withdrew his hand, I glanced at my carefully organised list of tasks, the red lines marking the boundaries of the future gallery, and the man who had just appeared in the middle of my perfectly ordered plan.

"Stanisław?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you really come?"

He stopped smiling, but he didn't look away.

"Because when I saw your name, I thought I didn't want to miss a second chance to get to know you better."

Outside the window, the rain had stopped completely. The kitchen fell quiet, and for the first time in many months, I didn't reach for my calendar to fill the silence with something useful.

I looked at him, knowing I could still turn everything back into a professional conversation. All I had to do was open the cost estimate, point to another wall, or ask about a deadline.

Instead, I heard myself speak.

"And what if I'm no longer the woman you remember?"

Stanisław moved his coffee cup aside.

"Irena, do you really think I came here looking for the woman you were nine years ago?"

# Chapter 1 - Boundaries on Paper

Stanisław didn't look away, and I discovered that his question demanded more courage of me than all the decisions concerning the gallery. I could have answered with a joke or reminded him that he had come to discuss architecture. Instead, I lifted my cup and took a sip of coffee that had already gone cold. He watched me without impatience. He didn't look like a man expecting an immediate confession, although he had just said something I would have considered inappropriate only an hour earlier.

"I don't know whom you came looking for," I replied. "But I hope you really know something about terraces."

He laughed softly.

"You always knew how to choose the safer question."

"And apparently you still haven't learned to accept an answer."

"I accept them. I simply remember the ones I didn't get as well."

I rose from the table, gathering up the plans. Not because I wanted to end the conversation. I needed to move, to occupy myself with some ordinary task that would restore my sense of proportion. Stanisław Jastrząb was an old acquaintance, an architect, and a potential collaborator. The fact that his presence seemed to change the temperature of the kitchen should have had no bearing on any of those circumstances.

I led him into the living room, which was to become the main exhibition space. The room was almost empty. Three paintings wrapped in protective film stood against one wall,

colour samples lay scattered across the floor, and the open terrace doors let in the scent of the rain-soaked garden. Stanisław walked slowly along the wall, stopped by the window, and looked up at the ceiling.

"How many people are you expecting at the opening?"

"Forty. Perhaps fifty, if the weather is good."

"And if the weather is bad?"

"Then everyone will have to like one another a little more."

"Irena."

I recognised that tone. It wasn't stern, but it contained a request that I take his question seriously.

"Thirty people inside," I admitted. "The rest will have to wait on the terrace under the roof."

Stanisław studied the opening between the two spaces.

"You need a safe connection between these areas. The existing threshold will be an obstacle, particularly for anyone using a walking stick or wheelchair."

"I've included replacing the threshold in the budget."

"Replacing the threshold alone won't solve the difference in floor levels."

He took a small tape measure from his bag. I watched him check the height between the living room and terrace, then write the measurement in a dark-covered notebook. His movements were calm and economical. He made no attempt to impress me with his knowledge or tell me about his achievements. He simply noticed things I had previously overlooked.

"We can improve access without rebuilding the entire house," he said. "But we need to start with the terrace structure and only then think about displaying the artwork."

"That's precisely what I didn't want to hear."

"I know."

"You're not even going to try to reassure me?"

"I could tell you everything will be fine. But then you shouldn't hire me as your architect."

I stopped beside a chest of drawers where I had spread out photographs of the works planned for the exhibition. Among them was a painting by a young artist from Przemyśl, Joanna Radecka. It depicted a woman standing beside an open window. Her face was hidden, but the way she rested her hand against the frame conveyed more anticipation than the most detailed portrait could have done.

"I want to open the gallery on the first Friday in July," I said. "I've invited the artists, made preliminary arrangements with the caterers, and attracted interest from local media. I can't postpone everything simply because the terrace has turned out to be more troublesome than I expected."

Stanisław looked at the photograph of the painting.

"I'm not suggesting you postpone the opening. I'm suggesting we establish whether your deadline is realistic."

"In my profession, deadlines become realistic when people stop looking for reasons something can't be done."

"In mine, that's exactly when the most expensive mistakes happen."

I turned towards him. For a moment, neither of us spoke, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. I had the impression that Stanisław was deliberately allowing me to decide

whether I wanted to continue the argument. It was astonishing how irritating I found that.

"I have no intention of handing you control of my house," I said.

"I'm not asking you to."

"But you're already deciding the order of the work."

"Because if I'm going to put my name to a design, I need the right to say when something is unsafe. Even if the owner doesn't like hearing it."

"I can hire someone else."

"Of course."

He said it without the slightest hint of a threat. That was precisely why my argument gave me no satisfaction.

We went into the garden, where Stanisław inspected the supports beneath the terrace. He crouched beside one, brushed away the wet leaves, and pointed to a section of timber that began to crumble under pressure from the end of his tape measure. An unpleasant heaviness settled in my stomach. For weeks, I had been walking across those boards carrying paint samples, with a phone pressed to my ear and my head full of plans. It had never occurred to me that something appearing so solid might actually require urgent repairs.

"Don't use this part for now," he said.

"Is it that bad?"

"I don't yet know how extensive the damage is. But I'm not going to pretend that not knowing means it's safe."

I crouched beside him. Up close, I could see a dark line running along the wood and moisture beneath the layer of

old paint. Stanisław shifted aside so I could see better, but made no attempt to move me away. He explained what needed to be exposed and inspected, and what could only be assessed after several boards had been removed.

"I could abandon the idea of using the terrace," I said.

"You could. But then you'd lose part of what you yourself described a moment ago as the most important thing."

I looked towards the river. Beyond the garden, the San flowed peacefully, as though it had no interest whatsoever in my deadlines or expenses. It was for views like this that I had bought the house. I wanted people to be able to leave the gallery, stand among the trees, and watch the water for a while. Without hurrying, without feeling obliged to comment on the art.

"How much time do you need for an assessment?"

"Two days for an inspection and a preliminary proposal. Then we'll know more."

"Two days is a long time."

"I know. For you, it's practically an eternity."

I gave him a sharp look, but his smile took the sting out of the remark.

We returned to the kitchen with wet shoes and a new problem. Stanisław spread a sketch in front of me, marking the areas that required inspection. He also wanted to examine the electrical installation in the living room and establish what kind of lighting I planned to use above the paintings. With every question, I discovered that my vision, however beautiful on paper, still needed a great many practical answers.

"Can you work with a contractor of my choosing?" I asked.

"If he's competent and agrees to the safety requirements."

"And if you don't like the way he works?"

"I'll explain why. Then you can make the decision."

"Provided it doesn't contradict your opinion?"

Stanisław put down his pencil.

"Irena, I don't want to win arguments with you. I want people to be able to walk safely onto that terrace. There's a difference."

I felt a little ashamed. Not because he had been unkind, but because he was being reasonable. During my marriage, calm objections had too often been the opening moves in prolonged struggles for control. I had learned to respond before the other person could finish speaking. After the divorce, I promised myself I would never again allow anyone to make decisions on my behalf.

Except Stanisław wasn't trying to do that.

"All right," I said after a moment. "You'll prepare a preliminary assessment, the scope of work, and a quotation for your services. No ordering materials and no contacting contractors on my behalf."

"Agreed."

"I approve every expense personally."

"It's your project."

"And if I decide your proposed solution is too expensive?"

"We'll look for another. Or I'll tell you honestly that I don't know of a cheaper option that meets the requirements."

For a moment, he turned his pencil between his fingers. Then he looked at me with an expression I couldn't immediately interpret.

"I have one more condition."

I sighed.

"Naturally."

"You won't pretend to know everything when you don't."

"That's a rather outrageous proposal."

"I know. But I can accept the same rule for myself."

I regarded him with reluctant amusement. After nine years, Stanisław apparently still knew how to unsettle me without ever raising his voice.

"In that case, you won't pretend you're always right, either."

"That will be harder for me than you think."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

Around noon, Natalia, my employee at the gallery in Rzeszów, called. The frame supplier had mixed up the measurements, and one of the artists wanted to change the collection date for her paintings. For ten minutes, I talked on the phone while simultaneously checking messages and notes. When I finished, Stanisław was sitting at the table, looking through an exhibition catalogue I had previously placed beside the plans.

"You didn't have to wait," I said.

"I wanted to see how you work."

"And?"

"You still manage three conversations at once. Only now you're even better at it."

"Is that a compliment?"

"An observation."

I closed my laptop.

"Do you know what I love most about my work? When something is finished, I can actually see the result. A painting is hanging on the wall, the light falls exactly as I wanted it to, and people begin talking. For a few minutes, everything makes sense."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards, I start planning the next event."

Stanisław closed the catalogue.

"Perhaps that's why you find it so difficult to notice when something has already succeeded."

His words stopped me more effectively than his criticism of the terrace had done. I didn't answer immediately. I remembered my last exhibition opening in Rzeszów, a successful evening during which, instead of talking to my guests, I had been correcting the invitation list for the next event. I also remembered Marta telling me that, just once, I ought to stay at my own party until the end.

"Did you come here to design a gallery or analyse my habits?"

"Apparently, I'm providing the second service free of charge."

I smiled despite myself.

Stanisław closed his notebook, slipped his tape measure into his bag, and reached for his jacket. I made no attempt to keep him there. I knew we both needed time to examine this unexpected reunion from a little distance.

At the door, however, he stopped and looked at a painting leaning against the wall. It was a small work by Joanna Radecka, depicting two empty chairs standing beside each other in a garden.

"Will this painting be in the exhibition?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Because the chairs are close together, but they aren't facing each other. They're looking in the same direction."

"So?"

"Nothing. I simply like the idea."

I stepped closer. I had chosen that painting because of the light, but I had never considered the position of the chairs. Stanisław wasn't trying to impose the one correct interpretation upon it. He had shown me something I hadn't noticed before, then left me free to find my own meaning.

"I'll come tomorrow at nine," he said.

"Ten. I have a call with Natalia at nine."

"Ten it is."

"And bring the paperwork so I know what I'm paying for."

"Of course."

I opened the door. The air after the rain was fresh, and the first bright patches of sky were appearing between the clouds.

Stanisław stood on the threshold and looked at me with a faint smile.

"I'm glad you answered my question."

I frowned.

"Which question?"

"Whether you really are a different woman now."

"But I didn't answer."

"That's precisely how I know you are."

Before I could find a suitable comeback, he headed towards his car. I remained in the doorway, watching him carefully avoid a puddle beside the gate. He didn't look back until he opened the car door. Then he raised a hand in a brief farewell.

I went back inside and closed the door behind me. The plans were still spread across the table, now supplemented by his notes. For a long moment, I studied the uneven lines drawn in pencil. They were practical, without ornament, and yet they changed my entire vision.

I reached for my phone to enter the time of our next meeting. When I came to Stanisław's name, I hesitated, wondering whether to label him simply "architect." Instead, I entered his first name and surname.

Then I put down my phone and allowed myself to do absolutely nothing for several minutes.

The following day, he arrived punctually at ten, carrying two materials catalogues and a laptop. I was even better prepared. The property documents, building plans, photographs of the electrical installation, and a detailed cost estimate I had prepared the previous week were waiting on the table. I had put on a white shirt and dark trousers, as though I intended to convince myself that our meeting was purely professional.

Stanisław looked at the documents laid out before him, then at me.

"I see I'm dealing with a serious investor."

"A very demanding one."

"You really didn't need to add that."

This time, I didn't respond provocatively. I indicated a chair and sat down opposite him. For more than an hour, we discussed the scope of the work, possible solutions, and costs. I was surprised that he made no attempt to persuade me to use the most expensive materials. Several times, he suggested simpler alternatives himself, explaining why they might be better suited to a small house beside the river.

When he proposed reducing the number of lighting fixtures, I objected.

"Paintings need light."

"Of course. But they need shadow too. Otherwise, the whole place will look like a lighting showroom."

I studied his sketch. Rather than illuminating the entire living room evenly, he suggested creating several calmer areas where the eye could rest.

"That might work," I admitted.

Stanisław raised his eyebrows.

"Should I make a note of the date?"

"Don't get used to it."

He smiled and returned to his drawing.

By noon, we had a preliminary plan. Stanisław closed his laptop and reached for his coffee. I noticed that he looked tired. There were faint shadows beneath his eyes that I hadn't seen the previous day.

"Did you sleep badly?" I asked.

"A little work last night. Nothing unusual."

"You don't look like a man who knows how to rest."