# It’s Getting Ugly

Rob pushed open the door to the old country pub and looked around the lounge expectantly. As he spied his old school friend's smartly-dressed appearance and professional demeanour, he visibly relaxed and raised a hand in greeting. Charles Devine acknowledged the gesture and got to his feet from his discreetly placed corner table at the opposite end of the lounge from the bar.

As the two of them shook hands, they looked each other up and down, measuring life's impact since they had last met several years earlier. "It was great to hear from you this morning," said Charles, noticing that his friend looked somewhat weary and dishevelled. "And it was fortunate that I had a client cancel their appointment with me at short notice so I was free to join you here for lunch."

"You're right. And I'm very grateful," said Rob. "Let me get you a drink, and I'll tell you why I wanted to meet up so urgently."

When they were both settled with their drinks, had despatched the customary small talk and had ordered their lunch from the bar menu, Rob fiddled nervously with his pint tankard and hesitantly began to tell his tale.

"You probably remember that Andrew Bardner and I had been working on a five-year plan to build up our software business to a point where we could sell out and enjoy the fruits of our labours while we still had some life in front of us.

"Well, it's all been going swimmingly, despite Brexit, Covid and all the rest. We've been very much at the leading wave of AI-supported web design, and six months ago we had a discrete approach from the country's leading full-service Ad agency." Rob paused, sipped his beer, and looked up with a worried expression. "Before I go any further, can I just check that you are OK with this? No conflicts of interest or anything?"

"No, I don't have anything to do with commercial law, so you can tell me what you need to. I'll make sure it's all covered by client-attorney privilege."

"That's a relief! Anyway, its Accenture Interactive, and we've negotiated the sale of Bardner Williamson to them for a very handsome seven-figure sum, and even though mine is a minority stake, I stand to do very nicely out of it."

"So what's the problem? How can I help you?"

"I'm just coming to that." Rob paused as if uncertain how to continue. "I'd better set the scene. Andrew and his wife, Steph, had invited Mandy and me to their house for dinner. It was a sort of last-minute informal family confab before the four of us joined the ranks of the glitterati -- or something like that."

"I was cutting things fine at the office yesterday, and barely left enough time to get changed for the evening, so Mandy gave me a hard time. But at that point, I didn't notice anything amiss. It was a scene we had played out hundreds of times before, so I could understand her exasperation."

"I should explain that the Bardners live in a beautiful house, deep in the Kent countryside, a good hour's drive away from our home. So, I had to get a bit of a wiggle on to make it in time, and that's where I began to notice that something more than the usual might be getting under Mandy's skin. She seemed to be uptight about something, and my driving was just making things worse. She denied that there was anything going on, but she seemed more and more uptight. It wasn't like her at all. By the time we arrived, it was early evening and I knew with great certainty that things were going to get ugly."

"But nothing had prepared me for what happened in the course of the evening. Andrew seemed to sense that all was not well with Mandy, and so he was especially attentive to her. That didn't go down too well with Steph, and the whole atmosphere just got more and more tense. To try and ease the tension, I said that we could all do with some of the collective smarts that the high-powered psychologist had talked about at that Seminar a couple of weeks ago that Andrew and I had both planned to go to. I recalled that Andrew had called off at the last minute, and missed a great event. Well, if the atmosphere had been tense beforehand, my innocent remark stretched it to breaking point."

Rob's mouth felt dry, so he took a deep swig of his beer before continuing. "Mandy blushed deeply, Andrew looked uncomfortable, and Steph almost spilt her wine. 'Do you mean that programme at the Institute of Directors about ten days ago?" She asked me. And slowly and painfully, the truth emerged. Steph had suspected for some time now that Andrew had been carrying on with someone else. I had inadvertently not only provided her with tangible evidence, but Mandy's reaction had made it clear who his partner-in-crime was! 'Ugly' turned out to be an understatement."

Charles looked at his friend sympathetically. "Is that why you wanted lunch so urgently with your friend the divorce lawyer?"

Terry Cooke-Davies
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