Plan C

By David Mark

Sunday night.

11.28pm.

The rain has started coming down harder here, on this quiet country road. It blackens the tarmac, which twinkles, like iron ore, in the light of the half moon. It darkens the trunks of the trees: turning sycamore and elder into great columns of steaming charcoal. It pools in the creases of the few evergreen leaves: before tumbling in a persistent pizzicato onto the muddy ground.

For years this bar was called The Rose. It did a decent Sunday lunch and made its money from the men and women who worked at the airport, drinking alongside the smattering of super-rich clientele who had built classless mansions on the long-dead arable fields beneath the flight plan. It won a few awards from the Real Ale people and its roast potatoes in goose-fat were gushingly lauded by a reviewer in a broadsheet food column. It made just about enough money to gives its licensees, Robin and Emily, a tolerable life. Tolerable wasn't good enough for either of them. It never made anywhere near the kind of cash required to support Robin's appetite for gambling. Nor did it put enough in Emily's purse to stop her from falling in love with an Air Traffic Controller who wooed her with tales of exotic places like Dusseldorf, Humberside and Inverness. Their divorce was a messy affair and Robin began tipping most of the pub's wine cellar down his throat. Standards slipped. Staff quit. The police were called by concerned customers who could not convince themselves that Robin was only joking when he said he planned to blow the whole place up. It closed a year ago. Robin is living in a bedsit somewhere in Bermondsey. He drinks every day and eats when he remembers. Emily has yet to see Inverness. She's working part time in a Lidl, frittering the little she took from the divorce. She's on her third verbal warning for using her phone while she's on shift. She still believes he'll call...

The Rose is now in the hands of a private property developer who has recently begun work on turning the old coaching inn into the sort of upmarket bistro that serves raw veal cheeks and deep-fried badger snout on planks of wood.

Tonight there are two cars in the car park. An off-road vehicle is neatly tucked away next to the lock-up at the far end of the car park. The other is the comfier kind of hatchback, a sporty number: the gleam of its metallic blue paintwork blunted by the pocket of pitch dark in which it has been carefully parked, shielded from the road by a the curving tree-line, and from the pub windows by a brick out-building.

A door opens, softly, silently.

A middle-aged woman, in a short black dress, boots and a fur-lined leather jacket, climbs out, holding a designer case. She is a little overweight; her tummy, below the belly button, a swollen lip that presses against the wide red leather of her elasticated belt. She has barmaid breasts, an expensive haircut eight shades of blonde, and well-tended nails. She has the ruddy skin of somebody who spends a lot of time on a sun-bed, but who is given more to freckles than a tan. Arty rings bookend clustered diamonds on most of her fingers.

She is accompanied by a tall, well-built man in his thirties. He disentangles himself from the too-small vehicle and joins her in the shadow of the pub.

“After you,” he says, and admires her backside as she walks across to the double doors.

The woman’s name is Wanda. She runs currency exchanges across the South East, including a lucrative booth just off Leicester Square. The exchanges provide a handsome income and also serve as a front for the money laundering business that her husband masterminded and which has made them both millionaires several times over. He has little opportunity to spend his savings, given his current status as a Category B prisoner, serving six years for his extremely minor role in the armed robbery of a private bank in Mayfair. Her husband, Tariq, helped the gang source some of the surveillance equipment they needed and put them in touch with a useful fence. That was enough to see the police

take a very dim view and as one of the few people actually arrested for the crime, they did their damnedest to ensure he got as weighty a sentence as possible. Since his incarceration, Wanda has taken the reins. She has done well. She has opened two new bureau de changes in the past year and her books have never looked cleaner. Truth be told, she is rather enjoying the freedom that Tariq's jailing has given her, even if she does miss his company and the beguiling, spiced-almond smell of his neck. She is confident in her abilities. She is the kind of woman about whom men use the word 'formidable' and who looks as though she has taken a few slaps and returned each and every one. It takes a lot to scare her, but the men she is meeting tonight found her weak spots and squeezed.

"You take me to the nicest places," says Wanda, pushing open the double doors to the pub.

There is only one light on in the shadowy expanse of The Rose. A lamp with a pink shade has been plugged into the wall and sits on a round wooden table in the centre of the empty bar. Most of the fixtures and fittings have been ripped out and the floor is covered with equipment left by the builders and decorators assigned to giving the building a facelift. Two men are seated at the table. She knows one to be called Nicholas and has never heard the other's name spoken aloud. Nicholas looks as though there is some Indian in his background. He's olive-skinned with brown eyes and a neat beard. He's younger than she is but not by much. He's wearing a blue suit with a striped shirt. The man to his right is broad-shouldered and wears his black hair in an unfashionable cut; short on top and long at the back. He wears a black jacket, zipped up to the neck. There are tattoos on the back of his hands.

"Wanda," says Nicholas, staying seated but making the effort to give her a smile of welcome. "Good of you to come so far out of your way."

Wanda shrugs. "It's not so far. And we needed a tête-à-tête."

"You dressed for it," says Nicholas, nodding at her chest and throwing a smile to his companion. The man beside him stands and crosses to Wanda. Rolling her eyes she puts her arms out to the side and allows herself to be professionally frisked. She half expects him to linger on her buttocks or breasts but he is interested in nothing save for doing his job. He takes a position behind

Nicholas, nodding his confirmation that Wanda is not carrying a gun and that the only wire about her person is the one in her black lace bra.

"How can I help?" asks Nicholas, sitting back in his chair and inspecting the backs of his hands. "You know I live to serve."

Wanda looks around in the hope that somebody will be standing nearby with whom she can share an eye-roll or a disapproving tut but she is friendless in this room. She decides she may as well just get on with it.

"We were robbed," she says. "£86,000 in different currencies. The poor lass who was working the counter still isn't talking in complete sentences. Now, when I agreed to your proposal it was on the condition that I was paying for both protection and the access to your resources. I'm not feeling particularly well protected, Nicholas."

Nicholas gives an understanding nod. "It must be frustrating. You have never missed a payment and I know it took a lot to persuade you that you were better off under our umbrella. This is certainly a test of faith."

Wanda looks at him with wide eyes, expecting more. Nothing comes.

"So what are you going to do?" she asks. "Have you got who did it? Can we at least talk about next month's payment? It doesn't seem right to be paying for security when we were breached without anybody lifting a finger."

Again, Nicholas nods. He reaches into the pocket of his coat and pulls out his sleek white phone. He plays with the screen for a moment and then slides the phone across the table. Wanda peers at it. She is supposed to wear glasses for close-up work and it takes a moment come into focus. She tries to keep her face impassive as she realises what she is looking at.

"That's you," says Nicholas, sweetly. "Enjoying a hazelnut latte and a blueberry muffin. You're sitting in the café of the gym you attend on Thursday and Sunday mornings. The tall lady

beside you is a Detective Constable attached to Operation Trident. She seems to be eating a banana and yoghurt but I get the impression she would prefer a bacon sandwich."

"I know who she is," says Wanda, nonchalantly. She shrugs and starts playing with one of her rings. She wonders if he can hear her heart, battering against her chest like a rat in a cage. "She tries it on. They all try it on. But I've never been a grass and I'm not about to start. My husband's in prison, for God's sake, and I've never given the cops a single piece of useful information. What are you suggesting?"

Nicholas turns to share a look with his associate. There is a creak as the old timbers above him settle and shift but Nicholas pays them no heed. He looks at Wanda with an expression of sadness.

"These are difficult times," he says. "No doubt you've had your head filled with all sorts of shit. You've probably heard that our organisation is on the back foot. You've probably heard there is a vendetta being carried out by some crazy old bastard who refuses to die. You might be wondering whether there is anything to gain by paying up on the 15th of each month. Well, you're not the first to ask such a question but all I can do is show you what happened to the last person who decided to miss a payment."

Nicholas reaches out and takes the phone back from Wanda. He flicks forward through a dozen images and then shows her something that makes her hands start to shake. She knows the man in the chair. He runs girls out of a club in South London. He's German. Easy enough to deal with. Does a bit of money-lending on the side and isn't above acting as middle-man when somebody needs somebody else removing from the face of the earth. He's not likely to go to Heaven without some serious purgatory first but in Wanda's mind, he did not deserve to die like this. His hands have been nailed to his knees and his entire upper body is a mound of blackened flesh. His face has been left alone so she can fully appreciate the look of agony locked in the rictus of his features.

“As you can see, we are not the Inland Fucking Revenue,” says Nicholas. “We don’t come to arrangements. We don’t give you 28 days to pay and we don’t allow you to chip away at the debt a little at a time. You pay, or you pay the penalty.”

Nicholas smiles at this, pleased with himself. Wanda wishes she had asked for a drink. Wishes too that she had a cigarette to play with.

“So I’m paying you for nothing,” she says, defiantly. “It’s just a shakedown. We’re not a part of the family – just another outfit to be ripped off.”

Nicholas puts one index finger on his nose and points the other at her, grinning widely. Wanda cannot help but look disgusted. She had not expected much more but had at the very least entertained notions that he would treat her with respect. She held out against this man’s organisation for a long time. The fight cost her good men. It was only when Tariq was targeted in prison that she agreed to start kicking money upstairs to the outfit known to the authorities as the Headhunters and known to people like herself as truly vicious bastards.

Wanda looks around her, suddenly wondering whether she is going to be taught a physical lesson. Nobody knows she is here. The man who sat in the passenger seat beside her and told her where to go had made her double back and triple back so many times she is no longer entirely sure which of the London boroughs she now finds herself in. She looks up at the ceiling, as if for support. Down to the floor, and the shadows where the bar used to be. She sees nobody to help her.

“It must seem as though you are being pulled between two unappealing options,” says Nicholas in the sort of voice used by guidance counsellors at schools for troubled teens. “On one hand you can pay us for a service you do not feel is being provided. On the other you can talk to the police and risk losing all of your money, and the not inconsequential matter of your life. I must admit, I would not care to be in a position where my whole future depended on picking between option A and option B.”

Wanda gives a nervous smile. “You have nice hands,” she says, and seems surprised it has come out of her mouth.

“Thank you,” he says, with a genuine smile. “I spent time as a croupier when I was younger. It teaches you to respect the appearance of your fingers. These hands are my badge.”

“Soft?” asks Wanda, with the practised smile of somebody who has done pretty much whatever it has taken in order to become somebody of substance.

Nicholas looks over her shoulder at the man by the door. They share a smile. He reaches across the table and Wanda takes his palm as if she were a fortune teller.

“Like calfskin,” she says. She takes Nicholas’s hand and presses it swiftly to the swell of her breast. His fingers dip into the hot cleavage and he looks at her impishly, like a schoolboy who has been allowed to slap a teacher’s behind.

“I’m sure we can help each other through a difficult time,” says Wanda and for a moment she and Nicholas are the only people in the world. Then, just as suddenly, the moment passes and she feels him withdraw his hand. She emits a small moan of disappointment and grabs his wrist. He shakes his head, disappointed she would risk her dignity with such a wanton act, and then his eyes widen in surprise as she pulls a flick-knife free from its bindings inside her belt and rams it down through the back of his hand; pinning skin and bone to the table where is splays out like the body of a tortured spider.

“Shoot her,” hisses Nicholas, through locked teeth, as his bodyguard lunges forward and tries to pull the knife from the back of his employer’s hand.

Wanda does as she was instructed. Puts her trust in the stranger with the kind but haunted eyes. She pushes herself backwards from the table and covers her head.

Nicholas and the other man look up as the ancient timber falls from the roof beams like a felled tree. Nicholas throws one arm up but the wood is centuries old and hard as pack ice. It falls

across the back of his neck and he is crushed beneath its weight as it crashes to the floor in a shower of dust and splinters.

The other man shouts something unintelligible in Russian and tries to pull his gun from inside his jacket. The cellar-hatch swings open and an old man appears in the dark void beneath. There is a flash of flame and smoke and then Nicholas's bodyguard is collapsing in on himself, the remains of his head hanging from his neck like orange peel.

The bodyguard at the door does not carry a gun. But he keeps a short knife in a sheath in his sock. His fingers close upon the handle at the same moment that the front wall of the pub bursts inwards and a red pick-up truck ploughs into the bar area like a wrecking ball. The man is flung backwards, arms raised, and the figure who had been hiding in the roof space shoots him in the back of the neck as he pinwheels into the wall.

For a moment there is no sound. Then the shape beneath the open cellar hatch becomes larger and the man called Mahon emerges into the half light. He's a monstrous thing; all scars and twisted skin, as if half his face is made from cold spaghetti. He is also a huge specimen and despite his age and the dead arm that hangs at his side, he is still the feared enforcer who kept a gangland king on his throne in the North East for half a century.

"You took your time," he says, growling into the ceiling cavity.

Gingerly, a good-looking man clambers down and drops onto the wreckage of the floor. His name is Owen. He was a journalist once. He helped catch a serial killer. And then everything in his life was taken away from him and he suffered years of abuse at the hands of the man who has visited so much pain on so many people.

"Told you there was a Plan C," says Owen, squatting down to look at what remains of Nicholas. He extracts the mobile phone from the rubble.

"You ready?" asks Mahon. "I'll try to be gentle. I'll probably fail."

Wanda has gone pale but she finds the strength to nod. Mahon gives no preamble. He lifts the shotgun and unloads the second cartridge. An explosion of shot slams into the wall behind Wanda and she squeals as a handful of tiny pellets pepper her outstretched hand and forearm. She finds herself falling, slumping down hard on her backside, grabbing her bleeding hand.

"You've got moments," says Mahon. "Bleed as much as you can. You need them to think you're another victim. Keep your mouth tight shut. The money will be where we promised. Get through the police interviews, say nothing you don't have to and I swear you and Tariq will be sipping sangrias from high-heeled shoes within the week. Fuck me over and I'll pull your skeleton out through your arse. Clear?"

Wanda grits her teeth and nods. She turns her head at the sound of the car engine being revved from its position in the doorframe. Wanda has only had the briefest glimpse of the driver but something about his shape makes her think of Gothic images; a winged, bat like form hunched over in the cold corners of some ancient, blood-drenched cathedral.

"You taking the head?" asks Owen of Mahon, as if enquiring of a friend whether he intends to finish his fries.

"I've got enough heads," says Mahon, and he picks his way towards the car. He climbs into the passenger seat without saying a word to the man behind the wheel.

"I promised we'd be here," says Owen, as he passes Wanda and squeezes her should reassuringly. "He almost lost our friend on the drive but it made no difference. They've been using this place for weeks. I've spent the past few days working as a fucking carpenter. Me! I'm not even Eastern European."

Owen winks as he climbs over broken wood and plasterboard and climbs up and into the back of the wagon.

They pull away without another word.

In a moment, Wanda is alone with only her own pain and fear for company. Only now does she let herself cry; smiling all the while that the tears fall.

Plan C is a bonus chapter from ***Scorched Earth***, the 7th DS McAvoy novel by best-selling crime writer David Mark. Find out more at www.davidmarkwriter.co.uk