



## BOOK EXTRACT

Title: Like Asif  
Author: Philip Sagar  
Publication Date: 2 November 2005  
Page Extent: 178  
ISBN: 1-904444-51-2  
ISBN 13: 978-1-904444-51-0  
Book Type: Paperback  
Classification: Fiction  
Price: £7.99

---

The dead rat was Carstairs' idea. He had carried it, tail wagging, to Corbett and placed it proudly but gently at his feet. It was one of the largest rats Corbett had ever seen. "Carstairs, that is a very good idea indeed," he said as he lifted the creature up gingerly with his garden fork and examined it more closely. It was a pity it was December. In summer the rat would have ponged a good deal more and might even have had a few nice maggots wriggling in it, but December was too cold for that. It was just a dead rat. But, in the circumstances, and because he hadn't thought of anything better, it would do. It was, for the time being at least, a fitting response to the challenge from the *Guardian* columnist. Corbett tied a note round the rat's neck, and within two hours had delivered it safely and without incident through his opponent's letter box. The accompanying note was short and sweet: "GET STUFFED. ASIF."

Rayner was rather pleased about the rat when the report came in. Not bad, he thought; and then, before he could help it, good for you, Mr Asif.

It was less than an hour before the columnist was on the line. Ranting would have been an understatement. Rayner heard him out with silent enjoyment and then took pleasure in regretting that at present there were insufficient manpower resources to meet his demand for police protection. When the columnist promised to speak to his MP about all this, Rayner thought it was a pity that he didn't live in Sunderland East, while explaining that if he followed police advice when writing his column any future unpleasantnesses could, he was sure, be avoided. The columnist promised him that he would hear more about this before slamming the phone down.

That evening Rayner and Corbett, unwitting allies in the war against the *Guardian* columnist, were unaware that they had another ally in the form of the columnist's wife. It was all right for him, she shouted. He hadn't been there. It was she who had picked up the bloody dog turd, and now a dead rat, not him. And no! The fact that he had been there when the thunderflash had exploded didn't make any difference. She had had enough.

"I'm not going to let that bastard get away with it," the columnist said.

"So what are you going to do? Find him? Catch him? The police haven't been able to. What makes you think ... ?"

"Okay. We'll move house. Sell up and move somewhere else."

She fixed him with a look that would have stopped a basilisk in its tracks. "Oh no! No way! If you want to run, go ahead. Without me. I'm staying right here."

"But I'm only thinking of your safety."

"The only thing you think about is your effing column. All right, if it's me you're thinking of, why don't you do what the police suggest?"

"No one tells me what to write," he retorted from his high horse. "Never have. Never will."

She saw the opening and struck immediately. "I'm not telling you what to write. I'm telling you what not to write."

"Ah," he said.

Two days later Rayner in his office, and Corbett in bed with his morning tea, turned to the *Guardian* ahead of any other newspaper. They both read the column titled, 'Feminism and the Woman's Role in the Home'. Rayner went through it from start to finish and smiled grimly. Well, well! He's chickened out, he thought. Another victory for our man. Corbett didn't regard it as a victory. The article contained no phrase that could have included either 'like' or 'as if'. Coincidence? Not after the, 'My Right to Write What I Like' article. A draw then. The jury was out, and that is where he would leave them, until the columnist reoffended.

## CHAPTER NINE

Rayner's pride, shared by his team, at having succeeded in putting an end, at least temporarily, to the ASIF incidents, was tempered by the fact that they were really not much closer to getting their man. He had almost certainly been seen near Guildford. He was seen, but only at a distance, in Putney. He had possibly been seen in Hampstead. He might have been seen in Sunderland. He was definitely seen in Billingshurst, but the girl who could identify him would not be back from her skiing holiday for another four days. Even then they would only have another description, which would presumably match those they had already received from the other witnesses. Rayner knew from past experience that descriptions and the picture-fits produced by police artists and technicians often did not lead to an arrest, even when widely circulated. Even if an identikit turned out to be remarkably accurate, it was no more than a one hundred per cent precise picture of a needle in a haystack. The CCTV images did not bring much to the party. Eleven so-called sightings had been reported in London already. None had led anywhere.

Zoë and he had discussed the possibilities in the hope of narrowing down the geographical area on which they should focus. Their man could, of course, be living somewhere in London. That was where most of the incidents had taken place. They decided to rule out the North of England. This was a risk, they knew that, but one had to go by gut feelings once in a while. The pattern of mailings, plus the incidents outside the London area, pointed to Surrey or Sussex, with Hampshire coming in as an outsider. Throw in the Billingshurst flower shop and they felt that the probabilities, rather than just gut feeling, pointed to Sussex and, for choice, to West Sussex. So what was the population of West Sussex? Half a million, give or take? Divide that by two for the different sexes. Two hundred and fifty thousand. Assuming the witnesses' descriptions were accurate as to age, how many sixty-year-old men might there be in that number? Ten per cent? Twenty maybe? That would boil it down to between twenty-five and fifty thousand potential suspects.

"That's not too bad, Sir," said Roberts. "About the size of a decent football crowd."

"Thanks very much," replied Rayner. "So all we do is go and watch a football match in West Sussex and hope our man's a football fan."

"Oh I don't think it's as bad as that, Sir." Zoë sounded almost cheerful. "It's better than sixty million, which is what we started with. Twenty-five to fifty thousand? How many of those read *The Times*? If their national circulation numbers are to be believed, it's read by about two per cent of the population. Four per cent if two people read the same copy. That narrows our numbers down to between one thousand and two thousand. Then," she added excitedly, "how many of those own a big dog? Ten per cent? Twenty per cent? That means we've narrowed it down to only one or two hundred people."

"And there he is!" cried Roberts, pointing out of the window. "And he's got his labrador with him!"

They all laughed, and Rayner was glad to be part of a team that could try to look on the bright side. After a pause, "Lady Luck. Where are you?" he said.

\* \* \*

Quarter Master Sergeant Ginger Evans, Royal Marines, stroked his moustache and continued to fret. An hour ago the adjutant had shown him a police enquiry about some missing thunderflashes Mark IV. Twenty of these had been used in a series of incidents a few weeks ago, one of which had even included Number Ten Downing Street. The enquiry had been passed down from the Ministry of Defence to all military establishments, and, as usual, Territorial Army units had received it later than their regular counterparts. Were any units deficient in their supplies? Had any thunderflashes Mark IV gone missing or might they, in one way or another, have fallen into the wrong hands?

Ginger knew that the adjutant regarded the enquiry as merely a routine one and that no supervised stores check would be initiated. If Ginger said that there were no thunderflashes unaccounted for the adjutant would take his word for it. But, and it was a big but, what about old Alan Corbett? Surely Alan couldn't be the guy who, according to the media, was responsible for blowing up half of London? Alan, of all people? And why? If Alan, or anyone else - and it must be someone else; it couldn't be Alan - wanted to blow anything up they wouldn't use thunderflashes, would they? What would be the point? A thunderflash wouldn't blow in a door, let alone a safe. So what were they trying to achieve, whoever they were?

Alan Corbett had wanted the stuff for his moles. That was fair enough. Ginger thought that, properly positioned, a thunderflash could be pretty effective against moles. Let's hope that was what Alan had used them for and not for something else.