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A Gentleman's Game: A Queen Country Novel



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Tara Chace may be the most dangerous woman alive. She can seduce you into believing shes the woman of your dreamsor kill you with the icy efficiency of an executioner. As the new head of Special Operations for British Intelligence, she no longer has to court death in the fieldshe wants to. Throw away the old rules, the old school, the old-boy network. The world of international espionage is about to learn the hard way that spying is no longer merelyA GENTLEMANS GAMEGreg Ruckas electrifying thrillers have pushed the boundaries of suspense fiction to where few have dared to go. Now, in A Gentlemans Game, one of the genres most fearless writers brings readers of international espionage his most fearless heroine yet: a no-holds-barred woman whos as lethal as an assassins bullet. When an unthinkable act of terror devastates London, nothing will stop Tara Chace from hunting down those

responsible. Her job is simple: stop the terrorists before they strike a second time. To succeed, she'll do anything and everything it takes. She'll have to kill again. Only this time the personal stakes will be higher than ever before. For the terrorist counterstrike will require that Tara allow herself to be used as bait by the government she serves. This time she's turning her very life into a weapon that can be used only once. But as she and her former mentor race toward destiny at a remote terrorist training camp in Saudi Arabia, Tara begins to question just whose pulling the trigger and whose the real enemy. In this new kind of war, betrayal can take any form...including one's duty to queen and country. Based on the graphic novel series that won the coveted Eisner Award, *A Gentleman's Game* is an electrifyingly realistic, headline-stealing thriller with an unforgettable protagonist who redefines every rule she doesn't shatter. From the Hardcover edition.

Chapter One London--Oxford Street, Marble Arch 07 August 1517 GMT

The planning was exceptional, the result of two years spent preparing for the action, an operation meant to run like clockwork. And much like clockwork, it nearly failed, simply because men are not machines, and they feel fear. When it came upon him, it came by surprise. It stole his breath and cramped his stomach, and for an instant he was certain he would wet himself. Just inside the Marble Arch tube stop he balked, the wash of passengers flowing past him in both directions. He felt the uncomfortable pressure of the glass bottles in his backpack, felt the sweat springing to his palms. Adrenaline filled him, made the stink rising from the tunnels all the more rank, the perfumes and deodorants and colognes that much more cloying. The noise of the station, the echoes of the trains and the voices and PA, became almost unbearably loud, adding to the sudden rush of vertigo. For a second time, he thought he might vomit. He steadied himself against the wall, closed his eyes, fought to control his breathing. Of all the things he had practiced, of all the things he had envisioned the eleven times he had made this same trip as a dry run, he had never considered this. He had known he would be nervous. He had even acknowledged that he might be scared. But this level of fear was unexpected, and it unmanned him. Worse, it made him question his faith, and that added a new emotion, a rising sense of shame. He willed himself to walk on, to continue through the turnstiles and onto the escalator and down to the platform, painfully aware that seconds were passing, that the schedule they had so carefully crafted was now in dire jeopardy. And still he couldn't move. He thought of the others, ready to board trains at Baker Street and Bank, and he was certain that their faith was stronger than any fear. His mind, which had seized, as paralyzed as the rest of him, suddenly snapped into gear once more, began racing with doubt. Even if he did move, they would fail. Even if he did move, it wouldn't work. Even if he did move, he would be stopped before boarding the train, before opening his backpack, and perhaps the others had been stopped already, had been caught already. Perhaps they had talked, and even now, on close-circuit monitors, he was being watched, and the police were beginning to close in upon him. He prayed, or tried to pray, but the battering his faith had taken was enough to make him feel insincere, and he had no hopes for it. God worked through him and others like him, and everything he did was as God's Will, and wasn't it, then, God's Will that he be weakened in this moment? Wasn't it God's Will--all praise to Him--that he stand here now, lost? Someone laughed, and he was so certain it was directed at him, that it was mocking him, that his head jerked round in an attempt to find the source. It was a woman, or a girl almost a woman. Perhaps sixteen, traveling with friends the same age, of both sexes. She was small and slender, with a lovely face and a mouth that, to his eyes, was impossibly large as it opened in her laughter a second time, now shrieking with glee as she batted the hands of one of her male companions reaching for her. A boyfriend, he thought, and watched as the boy wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her through a turnstile. When the boy hoisted her, her skirt crushed between them, accentuating the curve of her maturing hip, the slender strength of her thigh. She twisted in his grip, laughing, and the cotton shirt she wore was trapped between them, the front pulling down slightly, and it revealed cleavage and, against the stretched fabric, the curve of her breasts and shape of her nipples. Then they were through, moving toward the escalator, and without another instant of hesitation, he followed, his prayer answered, his faith restored. He had seen it all throughout Europe: women without men to watch and protect them. Women forced to live what was so condescendingly referred to as liberated lives. They worked as clerks and hostesses and teachers to men, their bodies and voices and every movement geared to entertain and to advertise. Even now, riding the long escalator down to the platform with the girl and the boy and their friends only a few meters ahead, he was surrounded by it. Placards and posters advertising clothes and watches and perfumes and liquors and movies. All using women as bait, the promise of their sex, of their surrender. A tease and a temptation, degrading both the subject and the viewer. How could they not see the danger this posed? How cruel it was to treat them in this fashion? To treat women in this way, to allow them to be used and paraded and corrupted, and in so doing, to make them creatures that

could only corrupt others. It made him angry, restored his strength, made him feel righteous. All of it coming to a point in the form of this girl, at this moment. Surely Pakistani, perhaps born not far from his own home in Kashmir, now standing on the platform with her mouth pressed to the lips of that London boy, her skirt blowing against her leg with the crush of air from the approaching train. That girl, who could have been a good girl--should have been a proper girl--raised in another place, in proper way. That girl, who would have been contented as one of many wives, protected and nurtured and honored, rather than corrupted in the arms of neglect. Perverted by a myth called liberation, an excuse for indulgence and hedonism, flying in the face of God's Will. That girl, who could have been his sister, if his sister had not been murdered. He followed them into the car, entering as close to the front of the train as he could manage, so he would be near the conductor's door and so his back would not be exposed. The train was not so crowded that he could not find a seat, and he removed his backpack before sitting, then set it on the bench beside him, claiming it as his own. He heard the muted clink of the bottles inside as the train began to move again, but he was the only one who heard it, and it did not worry him. Even if it had been heard, it would mean nothing. He was just a young man, just another tourist university student with a backpack, youth hostel-bound, nothing more. His watch read three-twenty-three, and he saw that his fear--already fading into an embarrassment--hadn't cost him. He was still on schedule. He prayed the others were, too. The train squealed, began slowing into the Bond Street station. He waited until the doors slid open and passengers began to move, then used their motion to conceal his own. He opened the backpack just enough to reach inside, found the pistol resting between the two liter bottles of petrol. He wrapped his hand around the butt of the weapon, grateful for the solidity of it in his grip, anchoring him to the moment. It pleased him that his hand no longer perspired. Doors closed. He looked to find the girl and the boy, and they had stayed aboard. The girl was touching the boy's face, speaking to him, and the boy had placed one hand on her bare knee. The train took speed again, heading toward Oxford Circus, and as its acceleration crested, he rose, pulling the pistol free from the backpack. His thumb struck the safety, knocking it down, and he raised the gun and imagined himself as he appeared to them, moving with precision and grace, and he felt an indescribable elation. He shot the girl first. "Get out!" he screamed. "Get into the next car!" Then he shot the boy, and then pivoted and shot the middle-aged man surging off a nearby bench, trying to reach him. The motion of the train and the man's own momentum carried him forward, and as the man's body slid to a stop by his feet, he stepped aside, moving his sights across terrified faces, still shouting at them. "Now!" he screamed. "Get out!" And to urge them, like cattle, he fired again, and again, and there was screaming now, and the passengers were scrambling over each other, pulling on one another to make for the door at the far end of the car. He fired into them, hitting a woman he thought was moving too slowly. The car emptied, and the train was still swaying, speeding toward the station. He turned to the closed-circuit camera in the corner above him and put a bullet into it, knowing that it had already witnessed what he had done. If all was to plan, the conductor was already contacting the station, and the station, in turn, had begun its emergency response. The evacuation would have begun, the police been notified, Armed Response Units dispatched. All to plan. With his free hand, he reached into the backpack and removed the first bottle, turning and throwing it down the length of the carriage. It shattered on a metal handrail, glass bursting, petrol splashing, its scent sudden and almost sweet. He took the second bottle and threw it against the conductor's door, where it smashed. Petrol spattered on his pants and arms, sloshed across the floor, saturating the clothes of the wounded man at his feet. He heard the door from the adjoining carriage open, and he fired without looking, not caring who, or even if, he hit. The gun was almost empty, but the gun had never been the weapon, only a tool. Even the petrol was only a tool. As he had been taught, he was the weapon. He reached into the backpack a final time for the box of matches. He tucked the pistol into his pants and opened the box quickly. The door at the far end opened again, and he knew they were coming to stop him, seeing this moment as their opportunity, or perhaps realizing what would happen next. He fumbled the matchbox in his excitement, the wooden sticks spilling onto the floor. He heard cursing and shouting, but it didn't matter, he had a match in his hand, now, and with a stroke it was alive, and he let it fall. The air around him moved, heated, and he saw flame race the floor of the car, eating the petrol, taking purchase, growing hotter. The man at his feet made a noise as he caught on fire, and he glanced down to see that his own clothes had also caught, felt the fire climbing his body. He looked the length of the carriage, saw that the flames now held the others at bay, felt the flames sear his skin as his shirt caught. From the corner of his eye, he saw the blackness of the tunnel open to the harsh light of the station. He pulled the gun from his waist, put the barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. It happened again three minutes later, on the Bakerloo Line, as the train pulled into Piccadilly Circus. And again, seven

minutes after that, on the Northern Line, at King's Cross. When the final numbers were in, the death toll stood at three hundred and seventy-two. Very few of these fatalities came from direct contact with the terrorists, all three of whom had used essentially the same technique: the gun as the instrument of terror, to empty the car and to buy time; the petrol as the primary mechanism of attack, to set the trains aflame and to force them to stop on the tracks. As anticipated, the Underground suffered from not one but two weaknesses, and the terrorists had exploited both. The first was that, at any given time on the tube, there were more trains in motion than there were stations to receive them. A station closure, therefore, or an instance of track blockage would result in multiple trains stacking up between stations. If those trains were then forced to evacuate their passengers, the evacuees faced walks of varying lengths through the tunnels until they could reach appropriate access back to street level. With most of the tunnels one hundred feet or more beneath street level, it made for quite a trek. In and of itself not life-threatening, but certainly an added complication for riders and rescue teams, should the situation ever arise. It was the second weakness that made the situation not simply life-threatening but a death trap. The Underground had no mechanical means to circulate air, fresh or otherwise. No air-conditioning. No fans. Air moved through the tunnels and the stations as a result of the movement of the trains, forcing dead air up and out at stops and other ventilation points, sucking new air into its wake. While the cars on the Underground were constructed with fire-resistant and fire-retardant materials, gasoline can ignite dirt. With three trains set ablaze on the three busiest London lines, all within minutes of one another, the tube had come to a violent and convulsive halt. Cars evacuated into tunnels that swiftly filled with roiling clouds of dense black smoke, an orgy of burning plastics that in turn spawned their own toxic gases. While counterterrorist and emergency service personnel responded as best they could, as fast as they could, civilians succumbed to the lethal mixture of poisonous air and their own panic. King's Cross, which had seen a fatal fire in 1987 that claimed thirty lives, suffered the worst, as dozens of riders were trampled to death in the panicked attempt to flee the station. An added tragedy came to light in late August, when The Guardian ran an article citing an uncirculated report commissioned by the Home Office through the Security Services at the request of the Government. The report had been undertaken specifically to determine what, if any, exploitable weaknesses existed in the public transport systems in and around London, and it had concluded that the Underground--despite massive counterterrorism measures taken in the past--was still vulnerable to "a coordinated attack directed against those traits unique to the system." Further investigation revealed that this document had actually enjoyed limited circulation and support, until it was killed by a senior civil servant in the Home Office, who had unfortunately given his reasons in writing. "While the report is admirable in its concern," he had written, "it fails to take into account the difficulties, both financially and in terms of public discomfort and inconvenience, that a retrofitting of the Underground would require. Given the unlikelihood of such a coordinated effort as described, and the pointlessness of the result of such speculative mass murder, the author's suggestions shall be set aside until such time as action becomes feasible." From Publishers Weekly. Inspired by his Eisner Award-winning Queen Country graphic novel series, the author of the adrenaline-charged Atticus Kodiak thrillers (Critical Space) offers up this British cloak-and-dagger hardcover introducing Tara Chace, an intrepid, relentless female assassin. In a coolly orchestrated terrorist raid chillingly reminiscent of September 11, a well-trained trio of al Qaeda-linked fanatics bomb London subway trains at three major stations, killing 372. In retaliation, Minder One (the head assassin of Her Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service) Tara Chace is given the assignment of killing Dr. Faud bin Abdullah al-Shimmari, a Saudi Arabian religious leader. She can't undertake an operation inside Faud's high-security Saudi homeland, but when the Mossad gets involved on a mission of its own, the hit is scheduled to take place on Yemeni soil. In a bit of bad luck, Chace completes her primary mission with a daring hit on Faud inside the Great Mosque, but ignites international outrage when she blows away a Saudi prince, too. As a result, her queen and countrymen betray her, and she is forced to flee with one final chance to avoid being sacrificed as a pawn in a worldwide political chess game. Though a trifle muddled by bureaucratise, the novel's superb pacing, offbeat characters, wry plot twists and damning insight into oily schizoid Middle Eastern diplomacy add up to an engrossing read. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.