THE MEMORY MAN: T14 BOOK 1 by MARCUS FREESTONE

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> CHAPTER ONE CHAPTER TWO CHAPTER THREE CHAPTER FOUR CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX CHAPTER SEVEN CHAPTER EIGHT CHAPTER NINE CHAPTER TEN CHAPTER ELEVEN <u>CHAPT</u>ER TWELVE CHAPTER THIRTEEN CHAPTER FOURTEEN CHAPTER FIFTEEN CHAPTER SIXTEEN CHAPTER SEVENTEEN CHAPTER EIGHTEEN CHAPTER NINETEEN CHAPTER TWENTY CHAPTER TWENTY ONE CHAPTER TWENTY TWO CHAPTER TWENTY THREE CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE CHAPTER TWENTY SIX CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT CHAPTER TWENTY NINE CHAPTER THIRTY CHAPTER THIRTY ONE CHAPTER THIRTY TWO CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE CHAPTER THIRTY SIX CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT CHAPTER THIRTY NINE CHAPTER FORTY CHAPTER FORTY ONE CHAPTER FOR TY TWO CHAPTER FORTY THREE CHAPTER FOR TY FOUR CHAPTER FOR TY FIVE CHAPTER FOR TY SIX CHAPTER FOR TY SEVEN **CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT CHAPTER FOR TY NINE CHAPTER FIFTY CHAPTER FIFTY ONE CHAPTER FIFTY TWO CHAPTER FIFTY THREE CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR**

> CHAPTER ONE March 2nd 2024

It all began the day I read my obituary.

Using the Cartesian Cogito and Occam's razor I reasoned that I was alive, so there were three options.

Somebody was trying to threaten me.

Somebody had good reason to think I was actually dead.

Somebody was sending me a coded message.

I could think of more effective threats, particularly with the resources and moral contortions available to the people I was currently pretending to work with. Besides, if they had worked out who I really was they would have just rung the doorbell and shot me in the head, or at least tried to. They would also have no way of finding out about the code system unless they'd captured one of my fellow agents and tortured them. No, be sensible, don't let your imagination run away; there's already enough paranoia in the organisation.

Although this was one of the publications where I could expect to find such coded communications, this one didn't make sense. Part of it seemed to be a message directed at me, a warning, but the rest wasn't part of our code system, or rather the last two sentences were a meaningless jumble of various messages.

In any case, a knowingly false obituary could potentially draw unwanted attention, despite the fact that only around a dozen people knew me under that name. The group I'd infiltrated knew me by that name so it was a high risk strategy.

The problem with being properly undercover, not just playing at it, is that you are entirely on your own. Last year I had been briefed on my mission and then cast adrift. Since then I had not been able to directly contact anyone at T14. Unless my life or cover were in immediate danger, I had to deal with everything myself until the mission was over. I'd amassed nearly enough evidence to put the gang away but there were still a few loose ends.

Anyway, the point was that I couldn't just phone up the office and ask what the message meant; I had to figure it out for myself. Assuming it had come from HQ then it was not a risk they would have taken lightly -I'd only received two messages since the mission began. But it had to be from them: the chances of anybody accidentally using so many of our code phrases in a genuine obituary were infinitesimaly small, even allowing for the coincidence of it being somebody else with such an unusual surname.

I came to all these conclusions in the newsagents. I purchased a few items and quickly returned home, whereupon I locked and bolted front and back doors, turned off all but one of my phones and closed all the curtains.

Unlikely as it was that anybody had been stupid enough to enter my house during the twenty minutes I'd been out I checked all my traps nevertheless. They weren't traps in the James Bond sense, rather items I placed in certain exact positions that couldn't fail to move if anyone entered a room. A piece of sellotape on a door opening is always a good standby, or tiny pieces of bluetac strategically scattered over a carpet. Several items of apparent junk mail were also strewn across the length of the tiny hallway – there was no way anyone could traverse these without treading on some of them.

I gathered them up and paused for a minute, listening intently. There was no sound of movement so I made my way through the living room - no problems there - to the kitchen and back door. It would be impossible to move or climb over the tumble drier I kept up against the door without disturbing the pieces of bluetac under its feet.

Everything was okay so I relaxed very, very slightly. It was just after 10am so I had plenty of daylight left in which to escape if needed. People think darkness is best for an escape but they're wrong - nobody can look inconspicuous at night. If you think you're being watched or followed the best course of action is to stride out purposefully in broad daylight among plenty of witnesses. If I didn't receive a phone call by midday then that was what I would be doing.

I started packing and cleaning away anything I couldn't leave behind. Still unsure whether I would be returning to the house, I had to hedge my bets.

Two hours. There was a lot to do but I took the time to sit down and rest, drink plenty of water and coffee and eat the three Mars bars I'd bought. It would be a long day and I had absolutely no idea what would be required of me so I needed to fill up on energy while I could. I also needed some space to think.

If I wasn't contacted today then that brought up a whole new smorgasbord of complications. It could mean that my own employers

had ordered my death, though that made no sense – besides, it just wasn't cricket. Mind you, I thought I had ruffled Peterson's feathers when I... no, that's absurd. He was a creep but he wouldn't have me killed. He wouldn't dare.

It could be a double bluff - I think that they think I've been dealt with and then compromise myself. It would have to be somebody who hardly knew me to think I'd fall for that one. Or it could be that everybody, my employers included, thought I was already dead. But then who was the message for?

Would it be such a bad thing? I had plenty of money squirrelled away in untraceable accounts so I could just disappear and go back to living a normal life. However, I couldn't do that without knowing for sure and I couldn't think how to find out without revealing my continued existence. I wasn't sure if I could actually be charged with treason but I was certain that any perceived dereliction of duty or hint of going AWOL would be frowned upon in a rather severe manner. Besides, I fucking love my job.

I churned things over in my mind as I drank a third coffee and continued packing.

An hour or so later I fired off emails to the few people with whom I maintained the identity delta seven. This served a double purpose. Firstly to cover myself in this 'real' life by telling all the regular people who were likely to contact me that I was going on holiday for two weeks. I often went on these spontaneous 'holidays' - it fitted in with my cover story about having won the lottery eleven years ago and being single with no ties or responsibilities (if only) and also got everyone used to me disappearing with little or no notice when something cropped up. This meant nobody would call at the house and become involved in any possible conflagration.

Secondly, it would let one of the very few people I really trusted know that I was in fact still extant and had read the obituary. They would by now have also read my obituary and been equally puzzled (at least, I fervently hoped they would) by its true meaning and been checking for a secure communication. I had inserted three code phrases known only to the two of us in the emails. I was confident he would have read the message by now - he obsessively checked them several times a day - but it was strictly one way traffic, I couldn't possibly risk contacting him directly. The gang I'd infiltrated may seem a bit stupid but I had no idea how sophisticated the people behind them were. They knew about my lottery cover story but they thought it was a cover for what I was doing with them rather than for my real job.

I slapped my forehead in frustration. How stupid could I be? The most obvious explanation was that Adam had posted the obituary as a warning. Jesus, I'd been doing this job too long, got myself caught up in the old habits of the public school brigade – seeing intrigue and mystery at every turn instead of coldly and logically assessing the facts. It meant that I was in danger but he couldn't be specific. After all the work I'd put in to the mission... still, I couldn't ignore the message. Whether the obituary was a threat or a warning and regardless of who had sent it, there was only one possible inference I could draw from it – disappear, and quickly.

I checked a few things on line, looked at the weather forecast, printed out a few train times - none of which I had any intention of taking - and shut down my laptop.

There was no room left for denial; it was 12.26 and I had received no contact. I checked the contents of my rucksack and jacket pockets for the eighth time and retied the laces on my trusty hiking boots. The rucksack was heavy but I'd toughen up after a few miles. Taking the gun without having my ID on me was a risk but one I had to take. If the gang saw me departing I'd have no choice but to kill them all and ruin a years work.

I intended staying in youth hostels and similar accommodation to begin with so that I could get a good nights sleep without worrying about being ambushed. I could also use free wi-fi and other people's mobiles to gain information without revealing myself; indeed I took great pleasure in stamping on one of my phones until the screen cracked and it died the death its appalling customer service deserved – it would make a good prop to elicit sympathy and offers of lent phones.

Maybe I could even get myself a shag – it had been a while.

As I left the house it never occurred to me to check the local news. Who knows how my actions would have changed had I known that two days previously somebody who lived a few streets away had been followed from their home, dragged into an alleyway and stabbed to death. I still don't know whether I'd have stayed, for that person looked remarkably like me.

By three o'clock I was well away from civilisation and making good time. The country path used to be a railway line and frequent, monolithic stone bridges and archways peppered the route.

I hadn't seen anyone for over an hour which perfectly suited my current mood. I was wearing headphones but not listening to anything, a handy trick if you want to avoid passing conversation. I was one hundred percent sure that nobody was following me so I relaxed, maintaining only a peripheral alertness for any sudden movement, and had a really good think.

I needed proper contact with Adam but couldn't think of how to achieve this securely, bearing in mind that I couldn't currently be sure of what was happening at HQ. In any case, it was one of the few unbreachable rules that an agent maintaining an undercover identity never goes to the office and never makes uncoded contact. If they want you they'll find you but currently nobody could find me, no matter how badly they wanted to.

Adam would know by now, unless something serious had kept him from checking my emails, that I was unharmed. However, if somebody was out to get me, or thought they already had, then were they also after Adam, or at least tailing him? He was in a very difficult position and couldn't just abandon whatever else he was working on and devote all his attention to my situation, even if he were able to ascertain whatever that situation actually was.

I followed this line of thought for a moment: if it was his message then what would he expect me to do? Leave the house and go incognito - fine, job done, but what then?

Had my identity been compromised? If so I could have several rather unpleasant people trying to find me in order to do something rather unpleasant to me. It was no good, I simply had to contact Adam, otherwise it meant I was completely in the dark as to what to do next and had no idea whether or not to continue using identity delta seven.

CHAPTER TWO

Adam nodded peremptorily at the thin, crooked figure of Peterson. Fortunately the deputy director of T14 was, as per usual, bustling about looking important and clearly didn't have time for a conversation. Adam breathed an audible sigh of relief as the man left the room. The other four occupants also seemed to visibly relax. It wasn't any kind of deference, respect or fear that made people avert their eyes in Peterson's presence, rather, in addition to his unctuous, unpleasant manner, his uncanny resemblance to the "Simpsons" character Mr Burns.

Adam continued his journey to the kettle and made himself a coffee. Even without the disturbing presence of Peterson, the room maintained an almost reverentially silent hush; this wasn't the sort of organisation where casual gossip was advisable, or even tolerated. There was also a well understood code of etiquette which meant that, by sitting in a corner on his own, Adam would not be disturbed unless it was absolutely essential.

He chose a comfy, Victorian-looking armchair that would be more at home in the House of Lords and sat down with his coffee and notepad. He desperately needed a brainstorming session away from his office, some space to think. He stretched out his long legs, brushed out an invisible crease in his trousers, and flattened down some imaginary wayward strands of his short, dark hair.

He had, of course, read the obituary on his way to work, but only to check that they'd spelled it correctly. He knew from checking Agent 45's email account that his message had been received and correctly interpreted so hopefully any immediate danger had been averted. Nonetheless, he still had little idea what, if anything, was really happening. Nobody he had encountered thus far today had said or done anything to indicate that there was something relevant he didn't know about. Peterson did seem to be even more agitated than usual but it was hard to tell with such a highly string, St. Vitus dance of a personality.

He should go straight to the top and talk to the director, but he was incommunicado for a couple of days, so Adam had had no choice but to phone in the obituary. Protocol meant he should have gone to Peterson, but he didn't trust him enough to put Agent 45's life in his thin, grasping hands.

Adam took a sip of coffee and began making some notes. The murder could, of course have been a coincidence. It certainly, from what he'd been able to glean from the pathology report, appeared to be a thoroughly amateur attack rather than the work of any professional killer. However, he simply couldn't dismiss from his mind the uncanny resemblance between the murder victim and Agent 45. A woman in her mid thirties, long, straight blond hair, five feet eight inches tall, blue eyes, similar figure - they could have been sisters. The location of the victim's home was also only a few streets away from the current residence of Agent 45. The killing had taken place at night so it would be perfectly understandable for it to be a genuine case of mistaken identity. There was no mistake about the viciousness of the beating though - it was clearly meant to kill her.

If it was meant to be 45, that obviously left the unanswered questions: did whoever had ordered the killing know it had been fucked up? If so, had they already instigated a fresh plan with a proper professional at the helm? If that was the case, how could Adam alert Agent 45 inconspicuously? She was already in hiding, so that was good, but with so little information he had to tread very carefully.

Peterson.

For some reason Adam drew the deputy director's name in block capitals and put a large circle around it.

It had never occurred to him before that he didn't trust him. Why? He trusted everyone else in T14, you had to because your life often depended on them. Something was wrong. He didn't trust something specific about Peterson. There was something nagging away at him but he couldn't place it – some reason to suspect Peterson of something. Well, it was currently the only starting point Adam could think of so he resolved to take every opportunity to observe the deputy director today and see if anything materialised. In this business a suspicion was enough to warrant an investigation but he was reluctant to put anything on an official footing without anything tangible to present. Still, there was no problem in his looking into Peterson this afternoon, that was well within his job description; he could easily invent a spurious technical reason for looking at some personnel files – some kind of random check.

Adam finished his coffee and made another one. He could hear that the people sat around a table were having a general conflab that he could legitimately join, so he went over and subtly steered the conversation around to Peterson and his private life.

After a few minutes a woman Adam had very few dealings with and consequently only knew as Agent 64 threw out a remark that almost made him spill his coffee. Fortunately he quickly regained his composure and masked it as humorously exaggerated disgust.

"Of course," said Agent 64, "the creepiest thing about the old man was that time he made that awfully crass drunken pass at 45."

"Aha!" thought Adam as he walked as casually as possible back to his office, "I knew there was something."

Peterson turned away from the bar and almost fell over. This was the most drunk he'd been for decades but his marriage was in such a state that he just didn't give two shits anymore. He wasn't going to make director at his age anyway so the only possible future available to him was another few dreary years of stagnation and then retirement with his ungrateful, harping wife and revolting children. He could picture himself in years to come doing pointless domestic chores his wife had given him to keep him from under her feet.

"I'm fucked if I'm spending all day up a step ladder," he spluttered, startling the barmaid.

She shook her head pitifully as he ambled off in the general direction of a wall.

On the other side of the room Agent 45 was looking at her watch and wondering how long it would be before she could politely leave. Not only was this 'social event' more tedious than an ITV Sunday, it was also in her opinion a flagrant breach of policy to have so many members of the organisation together at one time with no security and a free bar.

She was woken from her reverie by a nudge from a passing colleague.

"Run for your life, the old man's eyeing you up!" he choked as he sauntered past looking for a good spot from which to view the ensuing carnage.

She looked up to behold the terrifying spectacle of a man in his late 50s, who'd never been particularly attractive to begin with and to whom age had not been kind, looming towards her out of the tacky neon lighting like a pissed space-hopper. She grimaced and tried to ignore him but he ploughed into her with all the grace of a double decker bus driving over eggshells.

"Hey, the lovely Jennifer!"

She frowned and looked around their immediate vicinity.

"Don't use my real name you stupid twat!" she hissed, desperately trying to both control the security situation and rid herself of the company of this repulsive old stick insect.

Several witnesses observed from a distance as Peterson, just about managing to stay on his feet, grabbed Jennifer's left breast and squeezed it like a dog's toy. Half of them turned away wincing, the other half ran at top speed towards the unlikely couple. It was not concern at the event itself or for Jennifer's welfare that prompted either reaction, rather a genuine fear that she may well spoil her career by killing the old man before anyone could stop her.

Luckily she was far more in control of herself, merely grabbing his scrotum and twisting it ninety degrees anti-clockwise.

Adam shuddered at the memory of the deputy director curled up on the floor screaming his head off. That was over two years ago and Jennifer had been undercover, and therefore out of Peterson's view, for nearly eighteen months now. At least, that's what Adam thought. He was wrong.

He looked up the relevant regulations to see what scope he had. He would give Peterson the works. If he had been up to anything, he would have been pretty good at covering his tracks. However, Adam also knew that he was easily rattled, and likely to betray himself if he was trying to hide anything. Not that Adam believed he had actually tried to have 45 killed, that made no sense at all. But he had no firm leads and... okay, he admitted it to himself: he didn't like Peterson, and the idea of turning his house over appealed to him because the old man would hate it but could say nothing.

"He'll be in the office all day, damn," thought Adam. "I can't justify waiting until tonight. Although," he smiled, "that means I either get to kick the door in or scare the shit out of his stony-faced wife."

As he put the procedure in motion, Adam reflected on the unfairness of his last thought.

"Twenty odd years married to Peterson would be enough to turn anyone to stone."

CHAPTER THREE

It's often handy for work to have a digitally enhanced memory, though now I can't remember what that work is because the Firewire stick I plug into my neck has crashed and I don't know who or where I am.

All I can access now are disassociated fragments of corrupted files and what little I can dredge up from my actual brain. This means that the only things I currently know about myself for certain are that I had a pet dog called Red when I was nine, I once got told to piss off while trying to get Ian Botham's autograph, and I don't like Cadbury's Cream Eggs. It's not much of a life but it's all I have now.

I've had to hide myself away in this room because everyone I see could be my best friend, my worst enemy, or my wife.

I think I had one of those yesterday, or ten years ago, or however long I've been here, though it could equally be a corrupted image of someone I've never met.

I can remember the basics, like eating, drinking, going to the toilet. All that seems to be provided for me in this room but I don't know how or why or by whom. Am I on holiday or in prison? I've no way of knowing.

Maybe I didn't shut myself in here after all because sometimes...

Sometimes I think people are talking to me but they can't be real. If they are then I've totally and irrevocably lost my mind because I can't understand anything they say.

Why don't I leave the room?

I'm scared.

This may all be a dream, I've no way of knowing.

Maybe I've always been like this. I think I used to be normal but maybe that's an illusion. Maybe I'm just mad. After all, surely you'd have to be mad to allow yourself to be turned into a computer? Maybe I did something awful and this is my punishment.

I'm hungry now, I hope some food will arrive soon.

If the people are real, why won't they tell me where my mind is?

CHAPTER FOUR

Adam was disappointed that he didn't personally get to break into Peterson's house. It was also deeply irritating that his wife kept following them around, nagging them about placing ornaments back in the correct position. He felt as if he were being assessed by a menopausal infant school teacher.

That was the only reason Adam decided to check her phone.

It was not part of standard procedure, but he could easily justify it later as being the way to get her out of their hair and allow a proper search. This turned out to be correct as she kicked up such a fuss she left everyone else alone and concentrated all her ire on him.

Margery looked highly perturbed as Adam plugged her phone into his laptop and scanned it, but almost certainly because she was socially affronted rather than having anything to hide.

He really wasn't expecting to find anything, just to keep her occupied.

He was therefore as surprised as Margery when his laptop emitted a loud alarm.

"What's that?" she demanded, leaning around to look at his screen.

He pushed her unceremoniously away.

"That's classified information," he half shouted.

She was about to protest but checked herself. Adam sometimes displayed a passive, even slightly wimpish exterior when it suited him, but now his eyes betrayed a seriousness that was not to be challenged. Margery saw sense and made a tactical withdrawal to the kitchen.

Adam stared for a moment longer at the piece of information that had triggered the alarm, allowed himself a smile of self justification, unplugged her phone and put it in his pocket. Saving the search information, he closed the laptop and went upstairs to see what the rest of the team had found.

"In here," said an enthusiastic young man in his first few weeks with T14.

Adam looked over his shoulder at the piles of money hidden away at the back of Peterson's sock drawer.

"Ten thousand quid, all in twenties," he said, handing one of the piles to Adam.

He leafed through them. Non-consecutive serial numbers, all in different states of wear and tear.

"Maybe he was going to buy himself a suit from this century," quipped the young man.

"Maybe," said Adam distractedly. What the hell was the old man planning to do with the money? "Okay, photograph and log it all and put it back. Carry on."

The rest of the search turned up nothing else but Adam was confident he had more than enough. In these days of virtually instantaneous electronic transfer of money, where even a newspaper could be bought more quickly by waving a card than by handing over coins, there was no legitimate reason for anyone to have large amounts of cash in their home.

Ten thousand pounds was about the going rate for an amateurish hired killer these days, and the number flagged up on his wife's phone belonged to somebody who possibly fitted that job description.

CHAPTER FIVE

Two figures stood in the middle of Grand Central Station, New York. One a petite, athletic looking woman of thirty with a neat bob of dark red hair, the other a man in his mid forties with closely cropped, rapidly greying hair, a weeks stubble and a frame which suggested he favoured a few pints of beer over anything athletic.

"Jesus, why are there so many American flags everywhere, this isn't Baghdad?"

John fumbled irritably for a cigarette, remembered he was in America, decided it would be more stressful being shot than going without one, so put them away.

"They give free guns to school kids but you can't fucking smoke anywhere!"

Hannah raised her eyes and took a deep breath.

"As soon as we get to the hotel you can have a drink," she said, trying to placate him.

"Oh yes, drink, I can have half a pint of fizzy cows piss in a bottle but I can't have a fag to go with it, can I? At least I can smoke on the balcony."

John glanced up at the gargantuan stars and stripes hanging from the ceiling.

"The only English people this keen on flags are the BNP."

"They put that up after September 11th."

"Typical jingoism," snorted John.

A passing couple eyed him with disgust. John was impressed they knew what the word meant.

Hannah put an arm around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

"That's enough," she whispered, "you're drawing too much attention."

John assembled his face into a passable imitation of contrition.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said hugging her tightly.

"I'll go outside and see if we've been met," he whispered, "you check the locker."

Hannah broke the clinch and stared reproachfully at him – he wasn't sure whether it was genuine reproach but that was a good thing; if she could fool him she could fool anyone.

"You just want to smoke, don't you?"

"Of course, I'm awake and sober. If we have any future assignments here I'll demand enough expenses to cover forty fines a day."

"Okay," she patted him on the back just hard enough to hurt, "you go and have a cigarette, honey, I'll get a coffee."

"Good idea," thought John as he walked briskly towards the exit, "drinking coffee from a Styrofoam bucket is the best way to fit in around here."

Hannah bought a small coffee, which still required both hands to carry, and strolled across Grand Central Terminal. Looking as if she had all the time in the world she pretended to spend a minute looking for the locker rather than going straight to it. Putting her coffee down on the floor she tapped in the combination and opened the locker. A box wrapped in gift paper and tied with a pink bow awaited her ("patronising twat!" she muttered to herself).

Careful not to reveal in her actions how heavy the contents were, she picked up the package and slid it into her overnight bag.

At the hotel John paced up and down the tiny balcony doing a fair impression of an industrial chimney.

A familiar, satisfying metallic click from the room behind brought him to his senses; he reluctantly stamped out his cigarette and went back to find Hannah screwing the silencer on to the rifle. He looked at his watch.

"There's ten minutes yet, I could have finished my fag!"

"I need the smoke to clear so I can see the target," said Hannah, standing up and carrying the rifle towards the balcony. "Anyway, the motorcade may be early."

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