

Day of the Assassins

The first Jack Christie Time Travel Adventure

'Save the Past, Control the Future'

Johnny O'Brien



THE YEAR: 1914

THE PLACE: SARAJEVO

THE MISSION: ASSASSINATION OF
ARCHDUKE FRANZ FERDINAND -
HEIR TO AN EMPIRE

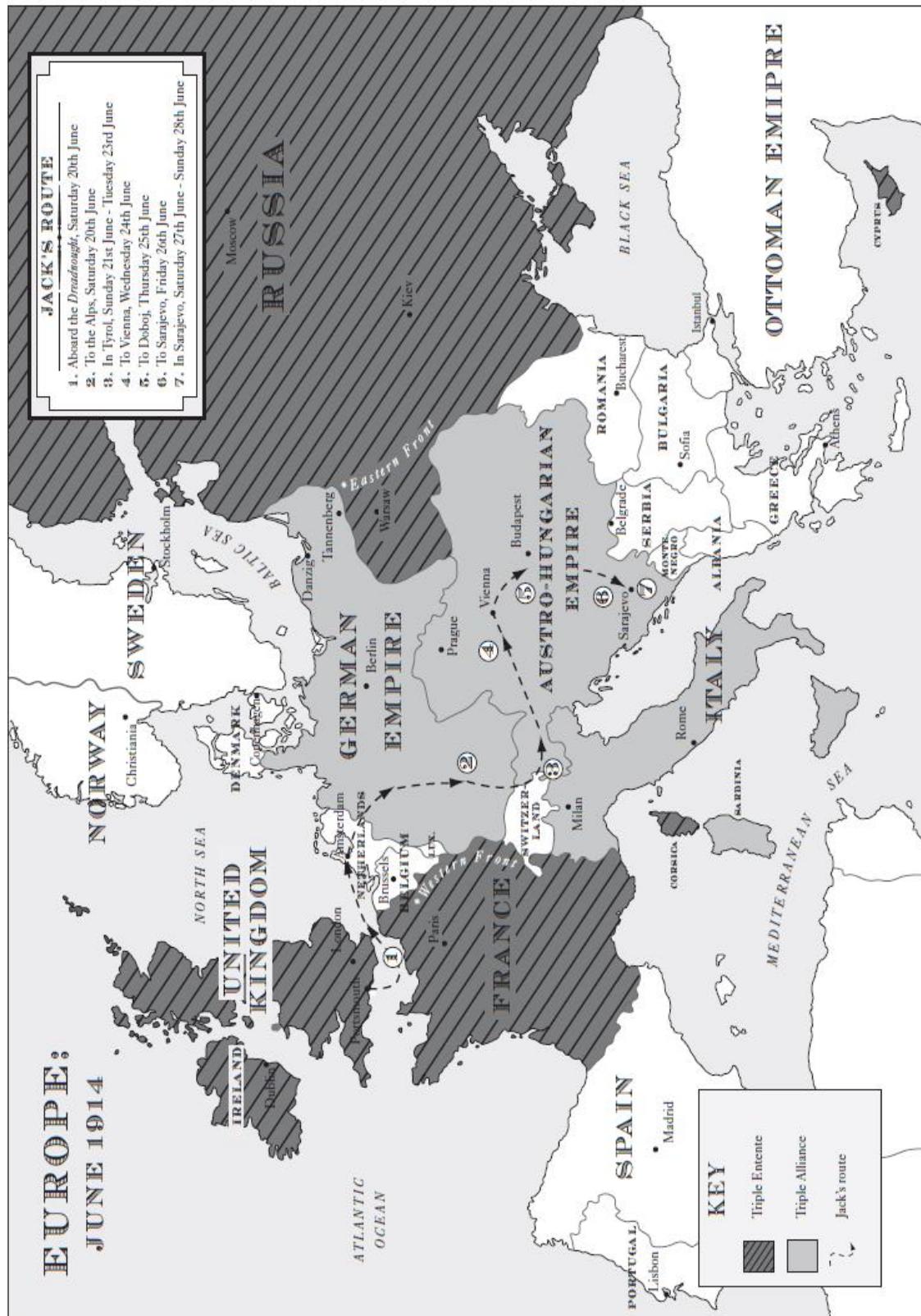
Jack Christie and his friend Angus are caught up in an event that will change the world. Should they intervene? And, more importantly, will they survive?

Join Jack on a dangerous time travel mission across pre-war Europe to the rain-sodden trenches of World War I, as the future of mankind hangs in the balance.

Choices

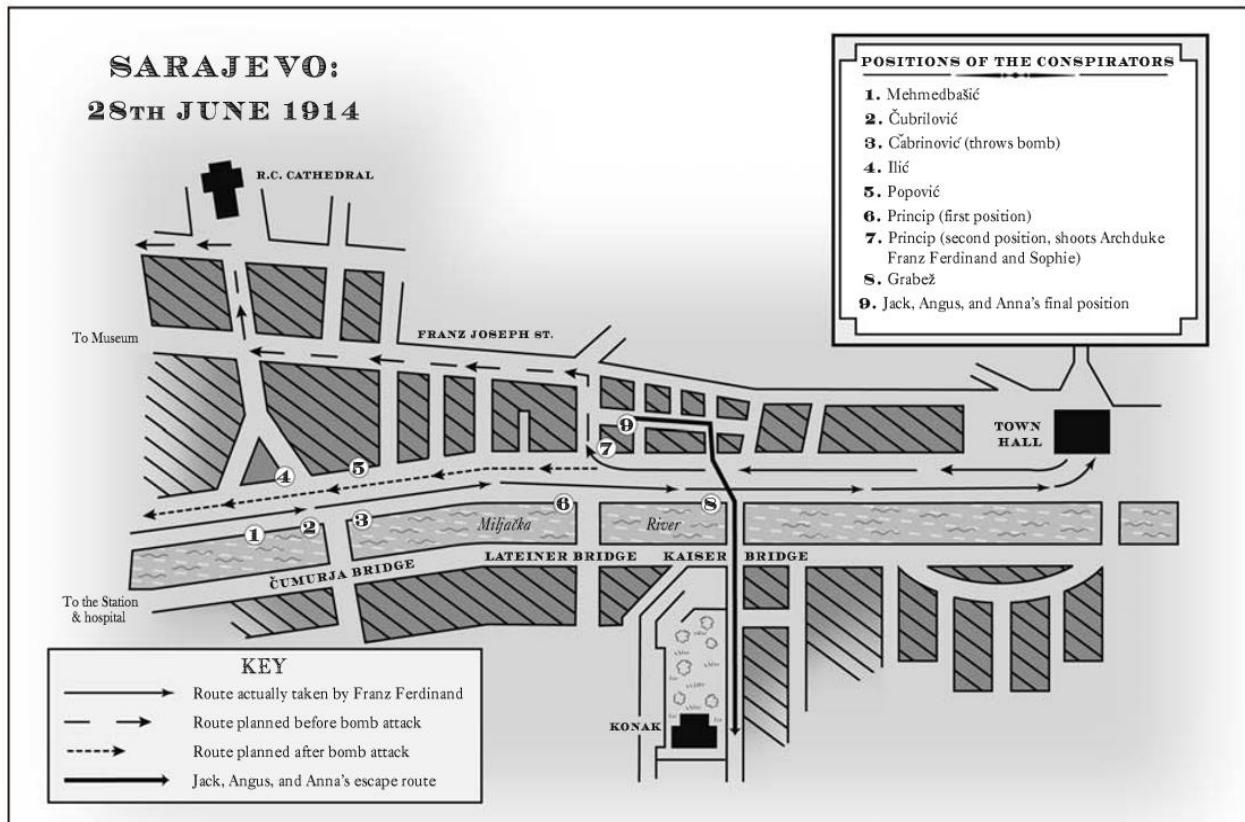
A Word from the Author

A few years ago my dad showed me some medals that his dad (my grandfather) received during the First World War. He explained that my grandfather had been injured in the war and had later lost part of his leg. Apparently, my grandfather was reluctant to speak about how he got the injuries or how he won the medals. I don't really know why. But I know what he did was brave – because I have a citation at home signed by the 'Minister of War', Winston Churchill. Anyway, unlike millions of others, my grandfather survived the war and went on to have children and live to a ripe old age – although I never knew him. It got me thinking though. He made important choices in his life – he chose to fight in the war. He chose to do something brave. Later he chose to have a family. If he had made different choices, of course, I might not be here and you would not have picked up this book. The war he fought in was also caused by people making choices. Lots of choices over many years – some important, some seemingly trivial. The war was horrific and led to many other tragic events. I wonder if people who made those choices would have chosen differently had they known what would happen? So this book is about choices. Some of the events described really happened and some of the people really existed. Other people you will meet here are made up. But they all have to make choices. You're probably going to make some choices today as well. Some will seem important and some not – although sometimes you don't really know which are the important ones until afterwards – perhaps a long time afterwards. Nevertheless, you need to try to choose well – because whatever you do, it will change the future.





The Archduke and Sophie leave the Town Hall moments before they are assassinated



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EUROPE-1914

Front Line

The shock wave from the air burst caught Jack full on, lifted him up and threw him backwards a full twenty feet, his body twisting in mid-air as he flew. Gravity pulled him back to earth, but where there should have been churned-up mud to cushion his landing, there was nothing. Instead, he was propelled into an empty space on the ground. With a crunching thud, his face, and then the rest of his body, hit the sloping wall of a large hole. As he slid down, mud filled his ears, nostrils and mouth. His helmet had already been blown free, as had everything else: webbing, gas mask and his Lee Enfield rifle. He'd only fired the stupid thing once, and that had been a mistake – one that had nearly got him court-martialled. He continued his headlong slide into the hole, mud gathering round his collar and easing itself inside his uniform. He came to rest, head first, in a pool of putrid water that had settled at the bottom of the hole. He lifted his head from the pool, spitting and coughing, and peered upwards at the lip of the crater from where he had fallen. Just then, the noxious mix of smoke and grey mist above the crater lip flashed a dirty orange and the concussion from another explosion ripped through the air. Instinctively, he dunked his head back into the cold water, seeking protection from the fury above. He waited until the icy chill soaked through to him, then scrambled his way up, so only his boots rested in the pool. He was breathing hard, but the explosions had stopped, although he could still hear the chatter of at least one machine gun in the distance.

He had been lucky. The rest of the company had been wiped out – body parts spattered about this godforsaken landscape of mud by the sudden barrage. They had only arrived at the front the night before. He cast his eye over the inside of the crater. Bizarrely, it had saved his life. But he realised that no one was going to come and get him. Somehow, he

would have to crawl back to the trench. Suddenly, on the other side of the mud puddle, he saw two bright blue eyes staring straight back at him. They shone piercingly from a mud-freckled face and locked onto him, trancelike. Like Jack, the figure opposite was caked in mud. Across the thigh of one leg, Jack could make out a large dark patch. The soldier had kept his helmet and Jack could see the familiar spike that confirmed that he was sharing the crater with a soldier of His Imperial Majesty's Grand Army of the German Second Reich. He quickly scanned the other details – the Feld Grau uniform, the black boots. But there was something strange about the uniform: it seemed loose, the cuffs were too long and the collar rose round the soldier's thin neck uncomfortably. Jack studied the face peering back at him; his German friend could not even be sixteen years old. He was white and he was trembling. It was then that Jack realised, with dismay, that within his white, fragile, boy fingers, the soldier held a large black pistol – and the pistol was trained on him. The heavy lump of black metal was comically out of proportion with the rest of the boy's frame – like when you see a child wearing his dad's boots. Jack felt panic build, sickeningly, from the pit of his stomach. The boy was as terrified as Jack was, but even at that distance, Jack could see a fragile index finger slowly squeezing the trigger of the pistol. Jack pushed out a hand in a pointless gesture of protection and screamed, but it was too late. There was an orange flash as the chamber of the pistol emptied. Jack shut his eyes and braced himself, pushing back hard into the dirt, hoping it would somehow enfold him like a thick, sticky blanket and insulate him from the impact. But the impact didn't come. He opened his eyes and looked at the boy who was now shaking even more - incredulity on his face. He held the pistol up again, this time both index fingers wrapped round the trigger and squeezed... Jack braced himself again. But nothing happened. There was a click: the gun was empty. Jack felt a wave of euphoria wash over him. The boy fumbled furiously at his belt, but the dark patch on his leg had grown ominously, and he was finding movement difficult. Jack had no weapon. Everything had been blown from him in the blast. Should he stay put or scramble free from

the crater... and run? It wasn't his decision. At that moment, a second figure loomed from behind the lip of the crater and peered in. Even at that distance, Jack could see that this new figure was stockier and heavier than the boy opposite. He moved with a confidence that came with the professional soldier's greatest gift - survival. The soldier's helmet had the same distinctive spiked silhouette as the boy's. It signified only one thing: Jack was about to die. Despite his stocky build the soldier descended the side of the crater with ease, assessed the situation and made his decision. He muttered something gruffly in German to the boy and without breaking step marched through the puddle to where Jack lay with his back pressed into the earth. The soldier reached down to something on his belt, which glistened in what remained of the daylight above. He fastened the object to the end of his rifle: a seven-inch serrated steel bayonet. The German soldier raised the barrel of the Mauser Gewehr rifle and moved the bayonet slowly towards him. Jack caught the soldier's eyes, but they showed no excitement, no fear, no emotion. His humanity had been drained from him through months of brutal war. The soldier pinned the bayonet under Jack's chin, and rested it momentarily on his throat. Jack felt the prick on his skin and prayed for death to come quickly. The soldier looked down at him, steadied his boots in the mud and, with a grunt, pushed the steel hard into Jack's neck.

Point-of-Departure

Jack groaned in frustration, turning to Angus. "I'm dead - again. This level's impossible."

"You're rubbish." Angus put both hands behind his head and leaned back in the moth-eaten armchair, grinning smugly. Jack rolled his eyes and tossed the controller over to Angus.

"Well, you try"

"Nah... this level's too much for me. Get it all the time from Dad..."

"Get what?"

Angus yawned. "Can't be bothered to tell you..."

"Tell me what?"

"Great Grandfather Ludwig..." Angus rolled his 'Rs' mockingly.

"Who's he?"

"I'll tell you - but don't say I didn't warn you. My Great Grandfather Ludwig, as we are all sick of hearing, was a German soldier - he fought in the war," Angus pointed at the screen, where Jack had paused Point-of-Departure, "that war - the First World War."

Jack was impressed. "Seriously?"

"Right. And I know that 'cos he's still on the mantelpiece back home... In a jar."

"A what?"

"A jar. Not all of him, you plonker, just a bit of him. A piece of his left tibia... whatever that is."

"A bone in his leg."

"Whatever. We've got an old photo of him as well. Part of his ear is missing."

"Why have you got that on your mantelpiece? You lot are mad."

"Dad likes talking about it – Great Grandfather Ludwig and Great Gran Dot." Angus looked across at Jack with a pained expression. "I'm going to have to tell you the whole story, aren't I?"

Jack nodded. "Great Grandfather Ludwig was a German infantryman." Angus tipped his head at the screen again, "Like that guy who just owned you in that level... Anyway, he fought in the war. He got medals and all sorts. Then one day there was a big British offensive. Ludwig's trench was about to be overrun. Apparently, he refused to budge, even though all his mates were about to retreat. In fact, he did the opposite – he went over the top to search for German survivors in no-man's-land. Apparently, he saved at least one young lad who would have died from his injuries otherwise."

"Amazing." Jack said.

"Before he got back to his lines, the Brits attacked and he was captured, although he was wounded in the process – in his leg..."

"...the bone in the jar on your mantelpiece?"

"Right. They patched him up and he recovered. In fact, it seems he developed a bit of a soft spot for the British. There is some story about how he'd met some guys, some lost British soldiers or something, out there in no-man's-land when he was searching around. Apparently, they were going to kill him but decided to let him go... I think so he could rescue his injured friend or something... I'm not sure... it's a bit hazy."

"What happened to him?"

"Met Dorothy. Great Gran Dot. She was a nurse in the field hospital. She was Scottish. They hitched up. The war ended. They got married and he never went home. Moved to Scotland with Dot and took over the old sheep farm when Dot's old man died."

"What – your house up at Rachan?"

"Yeah – our place up the road."

"So you're, like, German, Angus?"

“S’pose – eighth German or something... My surname, Jud, it’s a German name. I think. It’s pronounced ‘Yood’ – but no one knows that so everyone just says ‘Jud’. It’s easier.”

Jack smiled. “You never said anything before. It’s a good story.”

“Maybe – Dad just goes on about it a bit. I think Dad was close to his dad when he was a lad. I’ll bring the photo in tomorrow, if I remember, but maybe leave the jar at home...” Angus suddenly remembered something and looked at his watch. “Argh... Late!” He jumped to his feet and grabbed his coat, which had been discarded on the dusty cellar floor. “Sorry mate, I’ll have to leave you to it. I’ve got Pendelshape first thing tomorrow – and I haven’t started my essay. You know what the Pendelino’s like... he’ll go ballistic. I’m in his bad books anyway. He confiscated my phone yesterday.” Angus was already disappearing back up the cellar stairs to the kitchen.

Jack shrugged. “See you then...”

He picked up the controller, which was still moist from his sweaty palms, and turned back to the console. Its light winked back at him, challenging him to try again. Angus’s story had suddenly made it much more real. He felt the adrenaline in his veins and, while holding the controller with one hand, instinctively fumbled in his trouser pocket with the other for his puffer. He felt a rush of comfort as his fingers located and then encircled its familiar plastic outline. He muttered to himself, “Captain Christie’s ready – strap in.”

Cairnfield

It was four pm. Jack stood by the imposing wrought iron gates as school dispersed. He turned the collar of his blazer up and stamped his feet to thwart the biting autumn wind that whistled round the Victorian buildings. Until ten years ago the place had been empty; then they had been revived by an endowment from a reclusive benefactor. The local community was grateful that the secluded site and its surrounding parkland had been redeveloped – it brought in much needed money. All the local kids now attended the school and its reputation was growing. Jack's hands were turning pink with the cold. He rubbed them together.

“Where is he?”

His head was still buzzing from double history. They were doing the First World War. Dr Pendelshape, the history teacher, had become even more animated than usual. The guy was obsessed. Even though it was a world away, Jack could not help being caught up in Pendelshape's story. Maybe it was because he had seen some of it in the Point-of-Departure game... or because of Angus's story yesterday about his grand-dad Ludwig. He remembered the opening titles from Point-of-Departure with its black-and-white pictures of the crusty, moustached generals of the great European imperial powers and their paraphernalia of office – medals, uniforms – all the grandeur of empire. Pendelshape had explained about the new military hardware of that time. Apparently, there were howitzers that could belch a shell of Jack's size twenty miles. They were launched way out of sight and would land in a storm of shrapnel and fire that would create a hole bigger than a house. There were machine guns that could fire six hundred rounds in one minute, dismembering anything in sight. How had Pendelshape put it? That's right, he had said, “It all lay amassed and untried in that beautiful European summer of 1914 poised, unknowingly, for the

bloodiest war that mankind had ever unleashed upon itself." When he had said it, Jack had thought that Pendelshape was about to burst into tears. But Jack hadn't hung about after school to chat like he sometimes did. He got on well with Pendelshape. But he reckoned today he should really be thinking about, well, about happier things. Today was his birthday. He stamped his feet again and shivered. Suddenly he heard the pop and whine of a motorbike buzzing up the hill from the lower car park, trailing a plume of blue smoke from its 125cc two-stroke engine. Jack's heart sank. Angus had brought the bike to school again. The blue and yellow Husqvarna WRE trail machine skidded to a halt, but Angus had misjudged the kerb, and Jack jumped back to avoid being squashed by the front tyre.

"Idiot!"

Angus cut the engine and the air was suddenly still. He removed the full-face helmet, revealing a mop of straight black hair. At sixteen, Angus was a year older than Jack and at nearly six feet, he was also six inches taller. With all the sport he did, plus helping his dad out on the farm, Angus was strong and broad shouldered. He had a wide face that always seemed to be flushed from physical exertion or from being outside. Jack still had the slender frame of a boy. He had messy blonde hair that could never decide whether it wanted to be curly or straight. They were bit of an unlikely pair.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"Keep your hair on, Jackster..."

"You're not supposed to be riding that thing, you've only got a provisional..." "Well, test is only a few months away. Anyway, how else am I supposed to get to school?"

"Er, the bus?"

Angus shrugged. "It was early this morning."

"You were late, you mean."

"Who cares. We're going to your place, aren't we? Let's stop dicking around..."

Angus unclipped the spare helmet and tossed it to Jack. He grinned.

“Climb aboard, big man.” Jack remembered the last time he’d been on Angus’s bike. It was at his folks’ who had the sheep farm up the valley in Rachan. The family was machine mad and Angus had grown up with bikes. Trouble was, Jack hadn’t. He’d had a go, but lost his balance, the bike had spun off in one direction, and Jack in another, and he had ended up with his face in the dirt. Angus had laughed so much he’d nearly fallen over.

“You’re joking?”

Angus shrugged, “Well you can walk if you like.”

He snapped down on the kick-start and the engine burst into life. Jack rolled his eyes, reluctantly donned the spare helmet, climbed behind Angus and clenched his eyes firmly shut. Angus turned back the throttle and the engine wailed; he dropped the clutch and the machine jerked forward. The front wheel immediately lifted off the ground in a spectacular but completely unnecessary wheelie. Jack was taken by surprise and just avoided slipping right off the back and onto the tarmac. Once the bike had two wheels back on the road, it was too late for Jack to complain. They soon reached the main bridge out of town, which crossed the river that was starting to swell from the rain in the hills. As they crossed it, Jack could feel the temperature drop. The river acted like the cold element of a freezer as it snaked through the fading light of the border hill country. In two minutes, they would be turning into the long drive at Cairnfield. A journey which usually took him twenty-five minutes on foot had been completed in only five.

They had moved to Cairnfield with his grandparents when his mum and dad came back from Geneva, Switzerland – just before they had split up. Jack had been only six. Jack’s mum had kept the Cairnfield estate when first, Jack’s grandfather and then, later his grandmother, had died. This had left him and his mum on their own rattling round in the big old house together. His mum didn’t talk much about their life in Geneva or why they had left. Nor did she explain why she had split up from his dad soon after they’d moved to

Scotland. She had just said he was “too obsessed with work.” Jack sometimes tried to find out more, but his mum would become all buttoned up and change the subject. Jack prodded Angus as they made their way down the drive.

“Stop!” Angus pulled the bike to one side, and the engine pattered away in neutral. “Put it somewhere, we’ll walk from here. Mum’ll go bonkers if she sees me on the back of this thing.”

“If you say so.” Angus pulled the WRE behind the thicket of yews that flanked one side of the drive. They left their helmets and pressed on down the track. Soon the big white house loomed into view.

Jack’s mum was making tea and looked up as they came through the back door into the kitchen. Her hands wet, she blew her hair from her face. Carole Christie looked a lot like Jack. She had the same grey blue eyes and blonde hair. She was still slim, although her figure had thickened a little with her forty-three years.

“You’re back early...” Jack looked at Angus nervously. Angus avoided the subject and attempted his most winning smile, displaying a mouthful of uneven teeth in the process - a sight that would have traumatised a small child.

“Hello Mrs C. My cake ready?” Carole Christie looked at Angus with mock affront.

“So it’s your birthday now, is it?”

Angus started to move towards a large bowl of chocolate cake mix. “Looks tasty.” He brought a large, dirty-nailed index finger dangerously close to the sugary mixture. But Mrs Christie was too quick. She whipped out a wooden spoon and landed a swift blow expertly on Angus’s knuckles. He yelped.

Jack approved. “Nice one, Mum.”

“You’ll have to wait,” she said.

“Come back later.”

"Mum - has it arrived?" Jack asked. His Mum's smile quickly vanished and she gave him the look - a sort of grimace that passed over her face whenever the subject of his father came up.

"In your bedroom." She turned back to the worktop. In his excitement, Jack did not notice the hint of satisfaction in her voice, when she said, "But I don't think it's much to get excited about."

He ignored the comment and rushed out of the kitchen. Soon they were in his bedroom, and there it was sitting on his desk, just like all his other birthdays: a parcel wrapped in brown paper and string. He flipped it over and instantly recognised the italic writing. His heart beat faster.

"Open it." Angus said impatiently.

Based on size, the parcel looked disappointing - compared to earlier birthdays, anyway. He placed the precious package on the floor and stared at it, inspecting it from each side in turn. His mind flicked through the presents from previous years. The year before, there had been the remote-controlled aeroplane and before that, all the fly fishing stuff. Every year a present had arrived, like clockwork, and they always exceeded his expectations. These birthday presents were his only connection with his father now. Jack could no longer resist and, egged on by Angus, tore open the wrapping paper. Then his jaw dropped in disappointment as the contents were revealed.

"It's a book." Angus was horrified.

Jack picked it up and shook it. Maybe something would drop out - like a cheque for a thousand pounds or an airline ticket to some exotic holiday destination. But no. It was a book. And, worst of all, it was a textbook.

"It's a school book," Angus said with a growing sense of injustice.

Jack's heart sank. He read the title: *The First World War*.

"It's called, The First World War," Angus said. "God save us."

“I can read.”

This present did not have the ‘wow’ of previous years, but maybe it was better than nothing. Angus had already lost interest and busied himself with a particularly annoying wooden pyramid puzzle that rested on the mantelpiece and which he had failed to master even after several months of trying (it had taken Jack four minutes and twenty-eight seconds). Jack scanned the front cover and then opened the book to inspect the crisp, sharp-edged photographs arranged in three sections. They showed trenches, ships, barbed wire, ‘over the top’ howitzers, aeroplanes, tanks, maps, women in factories, generals, soldiers, medals, observation balloons, trains and more... Some pages were blurred and sepia, others were crystal clear, but together they gave Jack an instant insight into the four years of brutal war.

“Weird.”

“What?” said Angus, without raising his head from the puzzle.

“I get this history book from Dad, right, and yesterday you talked about your Great Grandfather Ludwig who was in the war, and then Pendelshape was on about the same stuff today in class.”

“What stuff?”

“You know – the First World War – all that...”

Angus shrugged, “So?”

“Quite interesting – don’t you think?”

“For a boffin like you. Doesn’t do it for me.” He looked up at Jack with a piece of the puzzle in each hand. “How do you do this stupid thing, again?” Jack leaned over, took the pieces and manipulated them expertly. In under a minute the puzzle had been done and Jack handed it back. Angus stared at it in awe.

“See – easy.”

“You’re really annoying sometimes.”

"Pendelshape was saying today that millions of people died in the war. *Millions*. And that if things had been slightly different it might not even have happened."

Angus yawned. "If you say so. For me, it's all in the past. Gone, dead, finished."

"What about Point-of-Departure? That's based in the past. You like that, don't you?"

"Yeah, but that's different – it's a game. It's real."

Jack rolled his eyes. But something about the images and the clear black text on each page of the book stirred a distant but strong emotion in Jack. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. He sometimes got a similar feeling when he played Point-of-Departure. A sort of flashback – a connection to somewhere else, somewhere different. He was transported back to a time, he was not quite sure exactly when, but he had been very young – maybe only four years old. He remembered that they had been on a family holiday. He had been vaguely aware that Dad had not had a day off from the lab for months and had been working very late. This was to be his first break in a long time. They had gone to France or Belgium and had visited Arras or some such place – a monument to the First World War. He had been aware that his father was interested in history and, he supposed, this period of history in particular. What had happened and in what sequence had remained a disconnected patchwork in his head – sometimes fragments came into greater focus when he thought back but they would evaporate, chimera-like, as he struggled to make sense of it all. He remembered visiting graves – an endless sea of white crosses – and also the grassed outline of old trench networks. He recalled a voice describing "how it was". Maybe it had been his father's voice, or maybe a tour guide's, or maybe some audio-visual show. He had not understood the words, or if he had, he no longer remembered them, but the serious, gravelled voice conjured up a strong image of the war and the plight of its young victims.

There had also been one of those short but violent summer thunderstorms. Jack remembered it being very hot and then getting wet and running along for shelter. He had heard thunder and seen lightning and remembered thinking that the raindrops were huge – big pea-sized

blobs that exploded on the tarmac. He hadn't been frightened; more curious. The images of the thunder and lightning combined in his head with what he imagined the soldiers must have endured. This had made it real to him – for a moment it was as if he had become one of them, but because he was from another time somehow he wouldn't be harmed; he would always be able to escape.

But the strongest memory of that time was waking up in the hotel or guest house or wherever they had been. He'd had his own room and the closeness of the night had woken him. He had pottered along the short corridor to his parents' room, opened the door and seen his mum and dad standing there. He remembered feeling it was strange that they were not in bed and that the bedside light was on. They were quite far apart and he would never forget the pleading expression on his mum's face. Both his mum and dad had red eyes and he felt uneasy when he realised that they were both crying. He had never seen an adult cry. Then his mum swivelled round to the open door, saw Jack there staring up at them and, with alarm, whisked him back off to his bedroom. He saw even less of his father when they finally returned after the holiday – he was hard at work at the lab. Always working. Then the move back to Scotland had come and suddenly one day his mum told him that his father had left, and that "it would just be us now".

"Hey, what's this?" Angus had finally tossed the pyramid puzzle onto the floor in disgust and it had shattered back into separate pieces. Next to the puzzle, there was a piece of folded paper that must have dropped from the parcel when Jack had ripped it open. It was a letter.

Jack,

I am so sorry that once again I can't be with you on your birthday, just as I have been sorry to miss so many important events in your life. I hope that one day I will have a chance to redeem myself and that I can make it up to you. Fifteen already! I hope you enjoy your day. This year I have sent a gift of a more 'cerebral' nature. I hope you are not too disappointed. In time, I think you will

appreciate its significance. I know that you are a great student and are destined for a great future, so I think you will enjoy it.

Love, Dad

Jack stared at the page blankly. Suddenly a wave of sadness welled up from deep within him. For a moment his eyes moistened. He bit his lip hard. He didn't like to show emotion. Especially in front of Angus.

"What does he say?"

"It's just a letter," Jack said quietly.

Angus shrugged. "Whatever. Least your dad sends you presents. My dad only ever sends me to the farm – to work."

Jack looked at his friend and put all thoughts of his father out of his head.

"Cake. Let's go."

They sat round the kitchen table. There was a smear of chocolate on Angus's top lip and on the table, there were a few crumbs where the cake had been. It looked as though the kitchen had been visited by a swarm of locusts.

Mrs Christie looked at Angus. "Any more?"

"Sorry Mrs C, I couldn't eat another thing."

"But you've only had five slices..." Her eyes twinkled.

"It was very nice, thank you, Mrs C." Angus groaned. "But I think I need to lie down."

Jack leaned over and poked Angus in the ribs. "Don't they feed you at yours or something?"

Mrs Christie said, "On you go Angus – Jack can you just help me clear away?" With some difficulty Angus rose from the table and waddled his way towards the cellar door. Jack called after him, "Try the first level again – The Archduke and the Assassin." But Angus could only offer a weary nod of his head in response.

"So, come on then, what was the present?" His mum looked at him expectantly as they started to clear the table.

Jack shrugged. "Just some book," he squeezed out a smile, "I think you were right Mum, Dad's presents are going downhill."

"Sorry about that love – that happens when you get older."

"Suppose." Jack stared into the open dishwasher. Suddenly he blurted out, "Mum, what happened to Dad – where is he now –" he immediately regretted the question, " – exactly?"

The words hung uncomfortably in the air. His mum sat down, holding a plate, a sad look in her eye.

"I don't know, love. We just kind of grew apart. That sort of thing just... happens."

"But why do we never see him... I mean most people who are separated or whatever, well... they still see their kids... right?"

She shrugged. "Not necessarily. I don't think it's that easy for him."

"Why did he leave?"

"It was... complicated." She put a gentle hand on Jack's shoulder. "He was always working. He was a bit of a machine, truth be told." She sighed. "Soon there was nothing left... for us, I suppose."

"But I thought that all ended when we left Geneva and came here?" His mum snorted. "What? It got worse! More work, more pressure, more stress. I loved him... and he loved me... and you, of course, but after a while, I figured..." her cheeks flushed, "he felt what he was doing was more important." "And then he left – just like that."

"So Where is he now?"

"I have no idea," she shrugged. "But whatever he's doing – he thinks it's important... and more important than us. And that's the problem – always was."

“But people always have problems... shouldn’t you have patched it up? Shouldn’t you have tried, I don’t know... harder?” This time she was defensive. “We did try... I tried, anyway, it’s not easy to explain.” Jack knew he was about to reach the limit in this line of questioning. He didn’t want a row, but he pressed on, more boldly than before. “Well I don’t think you tried hard enough... I never hear from him. I get a present once a year – and that’s it. Is that normal?”

“I know it’s not a great explanation, Jack, but it’s the only one I have. I’m sorry.”

The Archduke and the Assassin

It's Europe, 1914 and the continent is on a knife-edge. An alliance system of great powers has been created. Germany and Austria-Hungary on one side; Russia and France on the other. Britain has moved closer to the Russian and French camp..."

They sat in the cellar – Angus perched up on the edge of the moth-eaten armchair and Jack on a beanbag. The screen went dark and the title of the level popped up in the game's distinctive gothic font:

The Archduke and the Assassin

Jack studied two images that had appeared on the screen in front of them: old photographs from before the First World War. In the left-hand photo stood a man who looked like royalty. He had on the full-dress uniform of a cavalry officer – a dark tunic with a high gold-braided collar and cuffs, a golden sash, light trousers and a hat adorned with ribbon and plumes. The other photo, on the right, was quite different. Dark shifty eyes peered towards the camera from an unshaven face with a defiant stare. The man looked like a peasant. The bass voice-over of Point-of-Departure explained who the men were.

"On your left is Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the nephew of Franz Joseph I – Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Franz Ferdinand is the heir to his throne... a mighty sprawling empire that covers a quarter of Europe." There was a pause, then the narrator continued.

"To your right, is Gavrilo Princip – student, freedom fighter... or terrorist, depending on your point of view. Princip is a Serbian who grew up in Bosnia in a very poor family." Angus glanced at Jack. "Looks thin and pale – a bit like you."

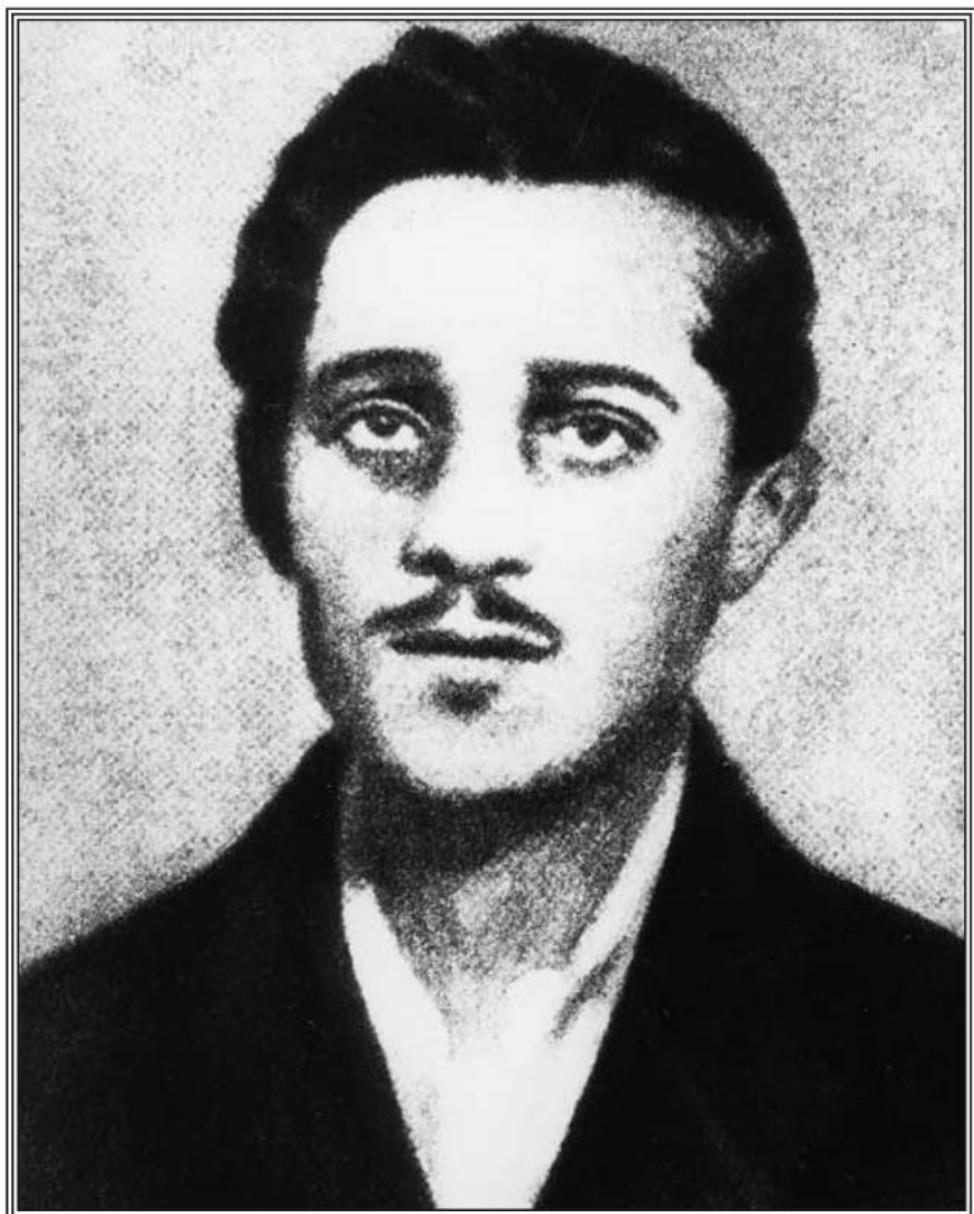
Jack ignored him.

The Archduke and the Assassin



Archduke Franz Ferdinand

The Archduke and the Assassin



Gavrilo Princip

“...Princip and his co-conspirators of the ‘Black Hand’ are planning to assassinate the man on the left, the Archduke, in Sarajevo, a town in Bosnia – part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire... By shooting the Archduke, Princip will set in motion a chain of events that will lead to the outbreak of the First World War. Eight million people will die in this war.”

The boys both gripped their controllers tightly. The narrator completed the introduction, “Your mission is to infiltrate the Bosnian Serb assassination cell, prevent the killing of the Archduke and so stop the countdown to war. In this way you will change the course of world history. Good luck.”

They spent the next hour working their way through the level, taking turns. It was compulsive gaming. They travelled across 1914 Austria in a train to Vienna. From there, they journeyed by horse, cart and even a pre-1914 motorbike to Belgrade. They dodged Austro-Hungarian imperial lifeguards, secret police and a range of other unsavoury characters. On more than one occasion their cover was blown and they were thrown back to the start of the level. Finally, they infiltrated the ‘Black Hand’ in a dusty café in Belgrade and learned of the plans for the assassination in Sarajevo, which would take place at the end of the level. If they could stop Princip before he pulled the trigger of his pistol, history would be changed forever. Much more importantly, they would move on to the next level. The great thing about Point-of-Departure was that depending on how you played the early levels, the subsequent levels would change – sometimes subtly, sometimes drastically. Sometimes the diplomatic intrigue would take a different course or the war, triggered by the assassination in Sarajevo, would be delayed or possibly even averted (although they hadn’t worked out how to do that yet).

In other scenarios, apparently, the war was successfully postponed only to turn into a much longer and even bloodier affair. It was all down to how you played the first levels

and the choices you made. Now it was Jack's turn. He held the controller in two sweaty palms. In the game, he was standing on the Appel Quay in Sarajevo next to the Lateiner Bridge. He knew that Princip was near him in the crowd – but he couldn't see exactly where. Suddenly, a car passed in front of the crowd, then a second. There were a few muted cheers as a third car passed. He caught a fleeting glance of hat feathers and finery over the heads in front of him... and then the Archduke Ferdinand and Sophie, his wife, and the pursuing motorcade were gone. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the unmistakable figure of Princip furtively crossing the Appel Quay in front of him and then disappearing into Moritz Schiller's delicatessen. Beside him, in the cellar, Angus was on tenterhooks, staring intently at the images on the screen.

"There he is!" he shouted. He jumped up and down in excitement as Jack expertly fingered the controller to manoeuvre himself towards Princip.

"Yes, I can see him," Jack said sarcastically.

"You've got to get him!"

"I know." The tension mounted. In a few minutes Jack knew that the motorcade would be returning from the Town Hall and Princip would have his final chance to shoot the Archduke – and strike a devastating blow for the Bosnian Serbs against their oppressors, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Instinctively, he followed Princip and took up position next to the shop. History was about to happen before his eyes. At that moment they saw the big headlamps and fender of the open top Graf und Stift lumbering round the bend. The car was slowing down. He could see all the occupants including, perched up high in the rear, the Archduke and, to his left, Sophie. A man was leaning over to the driver to tell him something. Suddenly only three yards away, Princip appeared. He had emerged from the delicatessen and had a sandwich in one hand. He had a look of amazement on his face as the Archduke's car ground to a halt, right in front of him. Princip dropped his sandwich and reached into his jacket pocket. Angus was standing on the armchair.

"There! Get him!"

But Jack kept his nerve. "Wait for it..." He reached into his own coat and pulled out the pistol that he had been given earlier in the game. He held it in both hands and levelled it directly at Princip, who was by now pointing his own gun into the large car.

Angus was apoplectic. "Shoot him!"

Jack pressed the button on his controller once. The pistol jerked in his hands on the screen and Princip collapsed to the ground.

"You got him! You got him!" They had completed the level. They had foiled the assassination and thereby stopped the countdown to the First World War. They had changed history, but they would not know exactly how they had changed it until the next level.

In his excitement, Angus leaped onto the armchair. The big old springs inside the chair absorbed his weight, but then unexpectedly rebounded. Angus suddenly found himself flying over the back of the armchair and towards an old bookcase that stood against one wall of the cellar. Jack turned away from the game just in time to see Angus's large frame crash headlong into the bookcase. There was an explosion of splintering wood and collapsing shelves as he made contact. Then, the entire structure started to move. With a huge crash, the bookcase, its contents and Angus landed in a heap of rubble, wood and dust.

FIRST WORLD WAR TIMELINE

28TH JUNE 1914

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb who opposed Austro-Hungarian rule.

1914

Austria-Hungary blamed Serbia for the assassination. At the time, Europe was linked by a series of diplomatic alliances: the 'Triple Alliance', consisting of the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary and Germany) plus Italy, fought against the 'Triple Entente' or Allied Forces of Britain, France and Russia, so the effects of this assassination triggered events leading to full-scale war.

1915

A race to the sea led to huge trench systems being established from the Swiss border through all of northern France. Events on a wider scale led to the conflict becoming a world war. Japan was allied to the Triple Entente Forces and the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers.

1916

The war showed further signs of stalemate, and both sides looked for a new solution. Following German successes in the east, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia was forced to step down from power and a new Bolshevik regime was established under Lenin. Russia stepped out of the war after an armistice in December 1917. German forces could then concentrate on the Western Front, but help was on its way for the Allied Forces after Germany tried to encourage Mexico to invade the United States.

1917

With World War I over, the Allies decide upon the terms of peace, a process they hope will shape the future of post-war Europe. Germany signs the Armistice.

1918

The Germans launch a final desperate offensive on the Western front designed to defeat the French and British. This offensive is defeated, however, and Germany signs the Armistice.

1919

With World War I over, the Allies decide upon the terms of peace, a process they hope will shape the future of post-war Europe. The French and British. This offensive is defeated, however, and Germany signs the Armistice.

Day of the Assassins

