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Opening extract from

Day of the Assassins

Written by

Johnny O'Brien

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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 a major event that will dramatically change the future. Should they intervene? And, more importantly, will they survive?

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

A TEMPLAR BOOK

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Choices

A Word from the Author

A few years ago my dad showed me some medals that his dad (my grandfather) had 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. It seems 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.

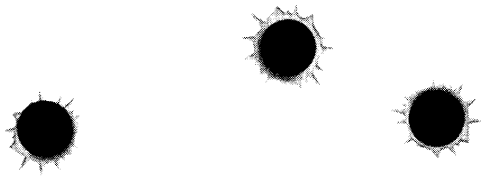
The war he fought in was also caused by people making choices. Lots of choices over many years – some important, some seemingly trivial. The war was horrific and led to many other tragic events in the twentieth century. I wonder if people who made those choices would have chosen differently had they known what would happen?

So I suppose 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, of course, 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 and choose well – because whatever you do, it could change the future.

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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 a huge empty space in the ground. With a crunching thud, his face, and then the rest of his body, hit the sloping inner 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, of course, his Lee Enfield rifle. He'd only fired the stupid thing once, and that had been a mistake – one which had nearly got him court-martialled. He continued his headlong slide down the sharply sloping hole, mud gathering around his collar and easing itself inside his uniform. He finally came to rest, head first, in a pool of putrid water which 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 just 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 a few seconds until the icy chill started to seep through to his skin, 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 – 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 were locked onto him, trance-like. Like Jack, the figure opposite was prostrate, and 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 indicated that his companion was a soldier of His Imperial Majesty's Grand Army of the German Second Reich. He quickly scanned the other details – the *feldgrau* uniform; the black boots. But there was something strange about the uniform, it seemed loose, the cuffs were too long and the collar rose around 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 a new wave of panic start to 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 pendulous index finger slowly squeezing the trigger of the pistol. Jack pushed out a hand in a vain gesture of protection and started to scream, 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 in its 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, a look of 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 started to grow 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 directly through the puddle to where Jack lay with his back pressed into the damp 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 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 attrition. 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 his friend. "So why don't 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. "You're joking?"

"No. 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 the last 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."

"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?"

"Very same."

"So you're German, Angus?"

"S'pose – eighth German or something... My surname, Jud, is 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 grandfather 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. "I'm late!" He jumped to his feet and grabbed his coat, which was discarded on the dusty cellar floor. "Sorry mate, I'll have to leave you to it. I've got Pendelshape first off tomorrow – and I haven't started my essay. You know what the Pendelino's like... he'll go ape. I'm in his bad books anyway. He confiscated my iPod yesterday."

Angus was already disappearing back up the cellar stairs to the kitchen.

Jack shrugged. "See you then..." and he picked up the controller, which was still moist from his sweaty palms, and turned back to the computer game. Underneath, the console's piercing light winked back at him, challenging him to try just one more time. Angus's story had suddenly somehow made it much more real. He felt the adrenaline in his veins and, whilst 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 Jack Christie's ready – I hope you are."