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ENTERING THE UNKNOWN

June 2003

Phil Smith sidled up to me in the corridor. 'Andrew,' he said quietly 'I think you should come and meet the brigadier.' I hesitated for a moment. I had met Phil the night before and he had seemed like a decent guy but I was puzzled. Why would the brigadier want to see me? And why now? However, before I could say anything Phil was already making his way along the corridor to a small conference room on the ground floor. I followed him.

He tapped on the door and we walked straight in. The room was whitewashed and spartan, with just four Formica-topped tables and a dozen white plastic chairs that looked as though they belonged in a garden. Brigadier Andrew Gregory was alone in the room. The first thing I noticed was his choice of outfit – a polo shirt, khaki trousers with a Guards regiment belt and desert boots. The second was that he was looking at me very intently.

'It's Major Alderson, isn't it?'

'Yes, Sir,' I agreed.

'Do you know anything about finance?'

'Well, yes,' I replied cautiously, 'I'm a former director of a merchant bank. It is quite a big field though, what is it you want to know?'

'We seem to have a problem with the Central Bank and Phil Smith suggested you might be able to help.'

This felt like trouble. I already had a job – with another brigadier altogether.

'Perhaps I could, Sir,' I said hesitantly. 'But the thing is, I'm already working for brigade HQ.'

'Don't worry about that,' said the brigadier breezily. 'Leave that to me. I shall speak to the brigade commander.'

With that he turned to Phil Smith. 'Where are the bankers?' he asked. 'When are they coming in?'

I realised I'd been ambushed. At 9.30 am I'd gone in to see the brigadier; by 10 am two rather nervous looking senior Iraqi officials from the Basra branch of the Central Bank of Iraq were being ushered in. Until a few minutes ago, I hadn't even heard of the Central Bank of Iraq. Now, just because I'd been a merchant banker in London, I'd been handed the task of sorting out an unspecified problem with a major financial organisation I knew nothing about.

Before we'd even sat down there was another tap on the door and after a brief conversation with a sergeant major the brigadier turned to us all and said: 'Gentlemen, I shall leave this in your hands – see what you can do.' With that he disappeared, taking his interpreter with him. So, not only was I expected to solve this problem, I was to do it without the aid of an interpreter. Still, I tried to look on the bright side. When I arrived in Iraq the army had told me I'd be sorting out local utilities. And to be honest I didn't know one end of a power station from another. At least as a City banker I did know something about finance – even if I hadn't quite been prepared for this meeting with two clearly important though scruffily dressed local officials.

'So,' I said optimistically, beaming across at the silent Iraqis. 'What seems to be the problem?'

The older and more senior of the two leaned across the

Formica table and looked me straight in the eye. 'You have stolen our money!' he declared.

I'd been in Iraq for just three days. It was a very different scene from the one I was used to. Since 1995 I'd worked for Lazard, the old-style blue-chip merchant bankers and advisers, part of the 'aristocracy' of the City of London. I'd helped advise on and negotiate multi-million pound deals and for several years my life had been fast and furious. My exhausting days routinely started at 7.30 am and often lasted till 10 pm. Though I was well paid for my efforts, by 2000 my enthusiasm for the lifestyle that went with the business was waning.

That year, I was involved in one of the biggest deals of my life – a multi-million pound contract with our clients, Granada. For three days I worked round the clock at my desk to help get this landmark contract through, only leaving it to go and buy fresh clothes. At 2 am on the last day, with the contract finally clinched, I drove home to my house in south-west London. Having just completed the deal of a lifetime I should have been over the moon. Instead I just felt flat.

Later that week I decided to leave early on Friday to visit my family in Edinburgh. Instead of simply saying 'OK' my boss asked 'why?' I pointed out that I'd worked for three and a half days without leaving the office that week, making a total of 35 hours by Wednesday morning, and had helped make the company a lot of money. That was a breaking point for me – the fact that I had to *ask* if I could leave early after working so hard made me angry and fed up. Why was I doing this? I knew then that I needed something else in my life.

Since university days when an injury forced me to give up rugby I'd been a member of the Territorial Army. And it was during a TA visit to Germany for a regimental ball that the

chance of a new direction arose. I held the rank of captain at the time, and the morning after the rather boozy ball I was having a much-needed breakfast in the officers' mess. I spoke with Colonel David Allfrey, the commanding officer of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards. We talked about my banking career and I told how much I enjoyed the TA. 'I've always wondered what it would be like to go on an "operational tour",' I told him as I finished off my traditional army 'fat boy's' breakfast of sausage, bacon, egg and all the trimmings.

The colonel made no comment at the time but he had clearly been listening. A few days later, back at Lazard, I received a phone call. It was the colonel's adjutant reminding me of my talk with Colonel David – and the interest I had shown in going to Kosovo. I explained I hadn't actually mentioned Kosovo or indeed anywhere specific but the adjutant was undeterred. 'We're off on a tour of duty there as part of the KFOR peace-keeping force,' he told me, 'and we're one hundred and sixty-eight people short, including thirty-one officers. The colonel wondered if you were interested in joining us?'

I was at my desk so I automatically replied in banker mode. 'OK if you can send me a proposal I'll happily look at it,' I said, as if I was talking to just another client.

The army, I soon found out, had another way of working. Three days later the army's 'proposal' landed on my desk – in the form of mobilisation papers. Technically I could probably have wriggled out of it, but could I really say no? From the army's point of view I had volunteered my services and they were simply responding to that. They had called my bluff. I said yes.

My time in Kosovo opened my eyes to another world. In Podujevo I helped set up a national park, secured clean water supplies for the local people and for a time even became *de facto* managing director of a local waste disposal company. The chaos, the uncollected rubbish, the lack of infrastructure and the sheer stench appalled me. But I also found the work

exhilarating. Making a huge difference to people's everyday lives was incredibly rewarding. But, as Colonel David observed: 'Andrew, having a merchant banker in the battle-group adds an entirely new dimension to what we can achieve. However, you're like a Labrador and must be kept firmly at heel. You do get ahead of yourself!'

There were a few moments of real drama. During trouble at a waste company when all the workers were on strike, it was my job to negotiate with the management. The manager's view of negotiation was a little at odds with my own. 'I can arrange to have you killed,' he said, staring at me menacingly. As soon as the interpreter relayed this message I pulled out my pistol and stared back at the manager.

'Let's start this conversation again, shall we?' I said. Fortunately, and with the help of my interpreter, we resolved the situation and got the company back to work.

On patrol on the border with Serbia, at that time one of the tensest military places not just in Europe but on the planet, I received a text message on my mobile. It was from my friend Jackie in the City, telling me that two planes had just flown into the Twin Towers in New York. We managed to pick up BBC World Service radio and listened in silence to an announcement from the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. He said that he had spoken to British armed forces around the world and that they were on a state of high alert. It was news to us. We may have been just a few hundred yards from the Serbian border, but we were all sitting around drinking tea. After the announcement was over I looked over to the leader of our patrol. He looked back at me. Finally I said: 'What are we to read into *that*?'

'Well I haven't heard anything from anybody,' he said thoughtfully. 'But I guess we all ought to put our helmets on.' And so we all did.

Later, I managed to speak to some Lazard colleagues in New York to check they were OK. One of them warned me to

be careful. 'The world will change now. It's suddenly a much more dangerous place Andrew,' he said. I had no idea just how dangerous it might get for me in the near future.

During my six months in Kosovo I learned some valuable lessons. The most important was that the pen is sometimes mightier than the sword. Or to put it another way, that economics is often the best route to security; the better a country's economy functions the happier the people are and the more stable the nation becomes.

I returned to Lazard as planned. It was hard to leave Kosovo, as I'd become so passionate about my work there. But I'd known all along that this was simply a sabbatical and that I had to get back to my 'real' job. To be honest I also wanted to make sure I was back in time to collect my annual Christmas bonus; I'd suffered quite a pay cut to work as an officer in Kosovo.

But I found it hard settling back into office life. In Kosovo I'd been dealing with people who had lost their homes, destroyed by the Serbs. In the City people got worked up about getting a signature on a bit of paper. I realised I'd changed as a person and that now I really had to change my life too. In 2002 I quit my job at Lazard and went off to clear my head. I've always loved skiing so I decided to spend the winter on the slopes at Chamonix in France, helping friends out with their ski chalet business, with plenty of time on the slopes.

But while I was skiing, across the other side of the Atlantic the fallout from 9/11 was continuing. It was clear that George W. Bush, with the backing of Tony Blair, was now determined to invade Iraq to destroy their supposed arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. It was equally clear that British troops would be in action in Iraq. I wondered whether I might get called up.

In fact, like most other people in the world, I viewed the unfolding crisis in Iraq from the safety of an armchair. On

20 March 2003 I watched from my skiing retreat as President Bush announced that after the failure of any diplomatic solutions to the crisis, war with Iraq had started. A series of huge aerial attacks against targets in Iraq began, and soon afterwards coalition ground forces led by the US military began to move into southern Iraq. Few people were prepared for the swiftness of the coalition victory in the so-called Battle for Baghdad. By 9 April Saddam Hussein's regime had been toppled and on 1 May 2003 President Bush declared that major combat operations were completed. British forces had led the occupation of the south and had overseen the end of the old regime in Basra and surrounding provinces. The invasion was over in under six weeks. Or at least the fighting part was.

By now I was back from the slopes and doing a TA training course on Salisbury Plain to gain promotion to the rank of Major. One weekend in May, driving back to London for the weekend, I received a phone call from a fellow Major in the Queen's Own Yeomanry, my TA Regiment.

'Hi Andrew,' he said. 'You know you volunteered to do some TA work in Yorkshire ...'

'Yes ... ?'

'I don't think you're going,' he said. He paused. 'I think you're going to Iraq.'

'Are you sure?' I said, taken aback. 'I haven't heard anything about this!'

'I think you'll find your mobilisation papers when you get back home,' he said. 'Most of the TA staff in the regimental headquarters has been mobilised.'

I was in a reflective mood for the rest of my journey home. I'd assumed that the chances of me being called up for Iraq had gone, so the news came as a genuine shock. And all I knew about Iraq at the time was what I'd seen on the television – that it was hot, sandy and dangerous. And how would I tell my mother that her son was going to be posted to such a dangerous place?