

Bat McKinley and Jake Sherman were doing what they liked best. They were excited to be deer hunting together in dense woodlands, near the small town of Clearwater, just outside of Dawsonville, Georgia. The pair, who lived in neighboring towns, had not seen each other in seven months, although they'd both grown up in Clearwater. At age 35, Jake was a supervisor at the Dawsonville Municipal Water Department. He stood six feet one, with curly brown hair, and could stand to lose a few pounds. Bat was five feet nine and 34 years old, with short black hair. A fantastic example of fitness, he was a well-respected general surgeon at Northside Hospital in Cumming, Georgia. This fine Saturday morning had clear skies, and the autumn air smelled fresh and crisp.

"How's Harriet doing?" Bat asked.

"She's great, but you know how Corbans is with all that crazy government work they do. She still likes her job and smiles when she sees me, so I cannot complain. How is Johanna?"

"She is doing fantastic. They just made her a manager down at the Super Center and are about to open the lumberyard."

"That's great news! A promotion, wow! And the kids?"

"Jim is doing fine, and Kyle's having fun in the fifth grade. He says he has a girlfriend."

"Really?" Jake asked with a chuckle.

"Well, he has been packing extra cookies in his lunch to give to her."

"I remember when your sister was that age."

"Hey! We agreed that that topic of each other's sisters was permanently off-limits. Do you want another beating?" Bat asked while raising his fist in a mock threatening gesture.

"Well, the last time we talked about your sister and my sister, let's see—"

"I recall I had to put three stitches in you," Bat interrupted. "I think that was the second time I put stitches in you."

"We got a bit out of control."

"Well, hey, we've turned into big, tough grown-ups now and can deal with stuff like that maturely."

"Yeah, it's funny, though."

"What?" Bat asked.

"Each of us losing our virginity with each other's sister."

"Well, it wasn't like there was a prettier girl in all of Clearwater than your sister."

"Same with your sister. Why did we get into such a big fight about that?"

"Probably because we care as much for our sisters as we care about each other."

"Hmm, I guess that's true," Jake admitted. "We grew up in a small town."

"Yeah, but it was wonderful."

"It was. And I wouldn't have had it any other way."

"Same here," Bat admitted.

The pair had gradually been approaching a large hill for the last ten minutes when Bat quietly asked, "Is that a buck?"

Jake raised his rifle, looked through the scope, and said, "You know, for a surgeon, you have poor eyesight. That's a tree stump."

"Look—way off to the left. There's a buck. Cover your ears."

Jake fired his rifle, and the buck suddenly lurched to the right. It ran awkwardly.

"Nice shot," Bat said with a grin. "I think you got him in the neck. Let's get a-huffing." The pair hustled toward the area where the buck had run.

Several minutes later, they found a blood trail. "I see you've been keeping in shape," Jake observed.

"Hey! I'm in surgery all day. Unlike you turd herders who get to crawl through smelly pipes looking for dentures."

"That little remark is going to cost you," Jake said in a cautioning tone.

As the pair came over a ridge, the buck was still moving, but much more slowly. "I got this," Jake said as he carefully aimed and shot. The buck fell in midstride.

"You were always a better shot than me," Bat admitted.

"You are probably going to make a sewer gas remark."

"No, really, you are a great shot."

"A genuine compliment?" Jake wondered.

"Of course," Bat said with a snicker. "I don't give out fake compliments to just anybody. I wish we could do this more than twice a year, but my schedule is crazy. Now with Johanna's job and the kids in school, it's hard just to take time off and play in the woods."

"Hard for me, too," Jake exclaimed. "We're replacing a bunch of water lines, and all the water meters are electronic. So, now I have to become a computer expert!"

"They have computer classes for people like you."

"Another remark that's going to cost you."

Bat laughed as they reached the fallen buck, and he said with a grin. "Right through the eye."

"Right through the eye," Jake repeated. "That's the way you got to do it." The pair hoisted the deer up a tree and gutted it. Jake unpacked his portable aluminum game cart, placed the gutted deer in a bag, and they put it on the cart.

"How many points?" Bat asked.

"Six. Not bad for a bunch of old farts like us. Well, let's get back. It will take a few hours to cut it up into steaks."

"No need. There is a butcher that will do it all for eighty dollars in Cumming," Bat said with a smile.

"Eighty dollars? You are getting soft, old man. But that sounds a lot easier. Beer's on me."

"Now, that's what I'm talking about! Let's go."

The pair walked in the general direction of where they had parked. Bat pulled the game cart and was whistling to the tune "Old Time Rock and Roll." Jake occasionally picked up a rock and threw it to amuse himself. Suddenly, Bat tripped and fell forward. "Nice," Jake said with a chuckle.

Bat was holding his knee and said, "Nice. Really? That's all you have to say? Damn! That really hurt."

"Hey, what's this?" Jake said, looking at the obstacle Bat tripped over. "It looks like a manhole cover."

"Given your years of working at the water department, you should know what a manhole cover looks like," Bat said mockingly.

"And yet another remark that's going to cost you," Jake said as he looked at the cast-iron object for a long moment. "What the heck?" he exclaimed. "It says DMWD." The pair moved some dirt and twigs that covered the circular metal cover.

Jake looked the object over carefully, with a puzzled expression. "Well, it's got the Dawsonville Municipal Water Department logo on the top. But it can't possibly be one of ours. Where are we?"

"We're about forty feet away from the Addams parking lot and 300 feet from the Jacob Len reservoir."

"The worst part is that I can't get any water from that darn reservoir," Jake complained. "Who puts in a reservoir, then doesn't let the nearby town use the water? Look at all that clean water flowing down there. I could send every single drop to the treatment center."

"What I want to know is, what's the deal with the manhole cover here? It seems out of place."

"The deal is that your number tens tripped over it," Jake said with a laugh.

"But it's not your cover?"

"No. It must have something to do with the reservoir," Jake concluded.

"But the reservoir is a state thing. So why does it have the DMWD logo on it?"

"Good question. Why don't we open her up and find out?"

"Can we do that?" Bat wondered.

"The manhole cover says Dawsonville Municipal Water Department. You bet I can open her up! Look. There's an old piece of iron pipe over there. It looks about the right size. We can probably use it to pry the cover off."

Bat stuck the pipe into the manhole cover access hole.

"A perfect fit," Jake commented. "How about that? Look at the pipe. It has a dent, as if somebody used it to move the cover before. That's strange."

The pair moved the manhole cover out of the way. "Rungs? Nice!" Jake said with a smile. "That's kind of odd. The rungs go way down. At least 50 feet. That's not the typical setup."

Jake dropped a rock, and they heard a thump when it reached the bottom. “No water. Nice!” Jake observed.

“Did you bring a flashlight?”

“I have my phone,” Jake replied.

“That will work. I brought mine too.”

Jake pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight function. He then took off his hunting backpack and began climbing down the rungs.

“Are you seeing this?” Jake asked as he descended. “This is crazy.”

“No,” Bat answered from the top of the shaft.

“Well, take it slow, and get your surgical butt down here.”

Against Bat’s better judgment, he descended into the darkness. At the bottom of the shaft, the area opened up. In front of them was the type of door you’d expect to see on a Navy ship, but with a strange lock.

“Stinks down here,” Bat said while holding his nose.

“This is not that bad,” Jake said with a smile.

“How many times have I said you picked the wrong job?”

“Too many.”

“Now what?” Bat asked.

“Hold on.”

Jake handed his cell phone to Bat and reached into his back pocket. “Is that a lockpick set?” a surprised Bat asked.

“Yes,” Jake answered, as he worked on the lock.

“Why?” Bat asked with a chuckle.

“I’ve been doing some evening work.”

“You are pranking your boss again,” Bat said as he rolled his eyes.

“His last prank scared me half to death! Frickin’ skeleton in my tool shed holding a fake gun. It almost made me piss my pants! It’s revenge time. Damn,” Jake added. “This is a complex lock.”

“Tell me. What is your plan?”

“Well, I was going to put his lawnmower in his office with a stuffed ape-man driving it. He’s changed his office lock since I left that potbellied pig in there. So, I’ve been practicing with lockpicks for the last three months.”

“You never change.”

The stubborn lock pinged. “Got it,” Jake said with a big grin. The pair turned the wheel, and the door opened with a creaking sound. Jake pushed the door inward slightly, and a loud click came from above the door. The pair looked up; they were staring at a shotgun barrel pointed right at their heads. Jake looked at Bat in horror. “What the hell?” he said while shaking.

Bat maneuvered his phone flashlight to inspect the gun. “It’s real, but the shell was probably a dud. What are the chances?”

“Chances enough to kill us! A dud saved our damn-fool lives. Look at that lever down there.”

Bat shifted the light from his phone to investigate further.

“If you crack the door, you will have enough room to move that lever, and the gun probably will not go off,” Bat guessed. “We dodged the big one.”

“A massive one. Now I really want to see what’s inside.”

They pushed the door fully open to reveal a small concrete room. On the right side were several pairs of neatly arranged shoes and a place to hang jackets. On the left side, ropes hung on large hooks. The middle of the small room contained a collapsible hoist system with a crank. The metal door on the far side looked like it belonged in an office.

“This looks like a mudroom,” Jake observed. “The hoists probably let you get stuff into this crazy place.”

“What do you think it is?” Bat wondered.

“It looks to me like a serious survival shelter. Probably really expensive.”

“That makes sense. Hey, there’s a light switch.”

But when Bat reached for it, Jake yelled, “Stop!” He pointed to the shotgun.

“Yeah—you’re probably right,” Bat concluded. “How the heck can they get the power down here for a light switch, anyway?”

“Probably a bunch of batteries,” Jake guessed, and inspected the weapon above them. “Hey, look at this shotgun. Do you recognize the brand?”

Bat looked at it carefully. “No,” he said. “But look at the workmanship on the gun holder.”

“Hey, look at this,” Bat called out as he held a Corbans Inc. jacket. Jake looked at the emblem in confusion. “Your wife works at Corbans, right? Do you think this belongs to one of her coworkers?” Bat wondered.

“Hey! What’re you saying?”

“I’m saying nothing.”

“So?” Jake asked with a hint of anger.

“So? Coincidence?”

“What else could it be?” Jake wondered.

“True. Well, do we dare open the door?” Bat wanted to know.

Jake shrugged as Bat slowly twisted the doorknob at the other end of the room. There was a quiet click, and Bat opened the door. Jake took a quick look inside and whispered, “It’s a hallway.”

“There’re dim lights at the end,” Bat said as he peered inside.

Looking down the narrow hallway, they saw several doors on each side and immaculate white tile covering the floor. The hallway ended at another door about 100 feet down. The concrete ceiling held long metal cable trays that carried wires of different thicknesses and colors.

About to enter the hallway, Bat turned as Jake blurted out, “Wait! I don’t think this is a survival shelter.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Look at the two flags.”

“That can’t be right. That is a Russian flag, and—is that a French flag?”

“What the heck?” Bat asked in confusion.

“A French flag? A survival shelter for the French and Russians? That makes no sense.”

“We should use our phones to take pictures,” Bat suggested.

“Why?”

“I don’t know; it seems like the right thing to do.”

The pair took several pictures of the hallway and flags. “All right,” Jake said. “Let’s think this through.”

“What are you thinking?” Bat asked.

“Look how clean this hallway is. Take your shoes off and put these shoes on.”

“Why?”

“So, your number tens don’t leave any mud tracks to let them know we were here.”

The pair changed to the clean white shoes that were near the door. “All right. Here we go,” Jake said.

“Take it one step at a time. Real slowly, now.”

Jake carefully stepped into the hallway and looked around. He pointed to a light switch, then shook his head. The pair tiptoed down the hallway one step at a time. On their immediate left, they saw a wooden office-type door, and Jake carefully opened it.

Inside was a conference room with a blackboard with Cyrillic writing on it, which must have been Russian. There was a large conference table with comfortable chairs. On the left side, a large bookshelf contained many books. To the right were storage shelves with boxes and old office equipment. The power indicator on an emergency light above the entrance door provided just enough light to see. “This is crazy,” Jake exclaimed. “Take more pictures. Get some close-ups of those books and get some shots of what they wrote on the blackboard.”

The pair used their cell phones to take pictures of everything in the room. Next, they looked into the room on the right. It contained an identical conference room, only the furniture was more modern, and there was a whiteboard covered with what appeared to be writing in French. To the left was a stack of unused computers. On the right was a large bookshelf with many books. The corner held a bronze statue of a soldier holding a book while looking stoic.

“Why do they need to have a conference way out in the woods?” Jake asked. “Some sort of secret meeting place? Maybe secret negotiations? What do you think?”

“I guess it could be for negotiations.”

“What’s the deal with that crazy statue?” Jake wondered.

“No idea. It looks out of place.”

The pair silently took several pictures, then quietly closed the door. When Bat opened the next door on the left, the noise of electrical equipment greeted them. “Pumps?” Bat guessed.

“No, generators. To power this place,” Jake answered with confidence.

“The reservoir must provide the water for the generators.”

“Do you think they put in that entire reservoir just to power this place?” Jake asked quietly in an angry voice.

“I don’t want to think about that now. Let’s take more pictures and then leave. I am getting a terrible feeling about all this.”

Silently, each man wondered what they were taking pictures of. A moment later, Bat held up his hand and asked, “Jake?”

“Yes?”

“Do you feel that?”

“Air conditioning?” Jake answered.

“Yes.” Bat looked at Jake with concern. “This is big,” he said with a shaky voice.

“Really big!” agreed Jake. “What do you think we should do?”

“Take pictures, and make sure we leave nothing behind.”