

TIMEZONE

Chapter One

Attention to Detail is Our Specialty

One Thursday afternoon Farley Johnson came home from school – and found the most wonderful box he had ever seen waiting on the porch.

It was a big, aluminum box with curved edges and rounded corners and looked almost like a silvery pillow. The box was hinged on the back and had a ridge running around the middle where the two halves clamped together.

There was something about that box . . . something . . . and, then, it came to Farley.

Dirk Travis. It was the mysterious box that had started all the trouble in *Spies Don't Get Birthday Presents*.

When Travis reached down to pick up the box, the agents from Ugrabastan pounced and, the next thing Travis knew, he was tied to the seat of passenger rocket flying across the North Pole at four times the speed of sound. And no pilot. Dirk Travis had been lucky to get out of that with his life.

Just as Farley bent down for a better look at the box . . . a hand grabbed him on the shoulder.

Farley froze, trying to remember the Ninety Deadly Escape Maneuvers in *SpyMaster Reports: the Journal of the Hidden Arts*.

Yeee-ahhhhh! was all that came to mind. The ancient, soul-freezing cry known only to Sixth-Dan Lords of the Shadow World. And, of course, to readers of *SpyMaster Reports*.

Yeee-ahhhhh! Farley tried again.

“Greetings, Agent F,” somebody said from behind Farley’s back.

“Oh Hi, Joshua.” Farley said. “I mean, Greetings, Double Jay.”

“Double Jay” was the code name Farley’s friend, Joshua Jeeters, used when he was on a spy mission. Joshua had freckles and red hair that stuck out to the side the way straw sticks out of a broom that’s gotten too old.

There wasn’t any question Double Jay was on a mission right then. When Farley turned, Joshua had his hand out, palm up, thumb and little finger making a circle while the rest of his fingers waggled up and down. That was the signal Double Jay was on a mission.

“So,” Double Jay said, “What’s with the box?”

That was just the problem. Farley didn’t have any idea what was with the box. He shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. It just sort of showed up on the porch while I was at school and . . .” Farley’s voice tailed off.

“Weird,” Double Jay said thoughtfully. “Isn’t that what happened to Commander Travis?” Whenever Joshua and Farley were in spy mode, they always referred to other spies by their ranks. It was a matter of courtesy.

“I don’t think so,” Farley nudged the box with his toe. “I don’t think a family of pigs could fit in there.”

Double Jay squatted down and put his ear against the box. “Nope,” he said. “No grunting.” Then he turned the box around and examined the label with the miniature magnifying glass he kept hidden in his pocket. “And it’s not from Alfalfastan, either.” It was a yellow label that said:

SunLite Scientific Corporation

“I bet it’s the Bone-B-Hard.” Farley thought about the horse bones piled against the wall in his room. Now that they had the Bone-B-Hard, he and Joshua could get to work on their Diorama of the Ancient World. They might even graduate from fifth grade.

As far as Farley could tell, every kid in Ms Limerick’s class had spent the last six months working on their Dioramas of the Ancient World. Every kid, that is, except him and Joshua. And, without the diorama, Ms Limerick was going to keep them in fifth grade for the rest of their lives.

She was bad that way. If you didn’t get your diorama in on time, you didn’t go to junior-high next year. It had happened to the Marlowe brothers. All three of them.

Then Double Jay had a terrible thought. “Are you *sure* this box is for you? I mean, isn’t this an awful fancy way just to send a bottle of stuff to paint bones with?”

Now that Farley thought about it, it did seem strange that SunLite Scientific would use such an important-looking box just to send somebody a dollar’s-worth of Bone-B-Hard. Then he noticed the company motto. The motto was printed on the yellow label right below the company name:

Attention to Detail is our Specialty

The box just meant they were being careful. Besides, Farley's name was on the envelope taped to the lid. "See," he said:

Farley Johnson

"Maybe they wanted to send it to some other Farley Johnson," Double Jay pulled at a few tufts of red straw sticking from his head, "and got mixed up and . . ."

That was too much, even for Double Jay, and the boys looked at each other and laughed. "I mean, *another* kid with a name like *Farley*?" Double Jay gasped and started laughing, again. Then they carried the box up to Farley's room.

Farley shoved his dirty baseball uniform off the bed to make a place for the box. His fielder's glove dropped to the floor in a cloud of orange dust from stale Cheez-Snortls. Then he peeled the envelope from the box.

A letter was inside the envelope. Printed across the top of the letter were the words, **EYES ONLY:**

EYES ONLY: F Arledge Johnstone

"Oooh, EYES ONLY." Double Jay was impressed. EYES ONLY meant that Farley was the only person in the world who was allowed to see what was in the envelope. They knew that from *A Spy Has His Secrets*.

Then Double Jay noticed the way Farley's name was spelled. "You're not F Arledge, are you? I mean," Double Jay squinted at the letter, "it's not like Farley is just some kind of nickname and F Arledge is your *real* name or anything, is it?"

Farley wrinkled his nose. Even if he *had* been an F Arledge, which he wasn't, he never would have admitted it. F Arledge was an even worse name than Farley. Then he brightened up. "You *know* how much trouble people have spelling my name," and read the letter.

It turned out to be just about the coolest letter the boys had ever seen. What it said, was:

WARNING

POSSESSION OR USE OF ANY M2-A4a HIGH-SECURITY SHIPPING CONTAINER BY ANY PERSON NOT HOLDING A CONTINENTAL-COMMAND (OR HIGHER) LEVEL SECURITY CLEARANCE IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED BY FEDERAL LAW AND DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE REGULATIONS.

ANYONE IN POSSESSION OF THIS M2-4a HIGH-SECURITY SHIPPING CONTAINER WITHOUT A CONTINENTAL COMMAND (OR HIGHER) LEVEL SECURITY CLEARANCE IS INSTRUCTED TO

IMMEDIATELY REPORT THE LOCATION OF THIS M2-A4a SHIPPING CONTAINER TO THE DEFENSE SECURITY AGENCY.

SEPARATE COMMUNICATION TO FOLLOW BY CIVILIAN CHANNELS.

“See, I *told* you, Farley said. “SunLite Scientific was just being careful.

He hoped he was right. They really needed the Bone-B-Hard.

Chapter Two

A Very Scary Box to Open

It turned out to be more like Box-B-Hard.

“This is worse than shrink-wrap,” Double Jay said and turned the box around, looking for some way to get it open. A couple of Electro-Cola cans rolled off the bed and rattled on the floor.

Joshua must have bumped something on the box, because a panel slid open to reveal a built-in keyboard. It looked like the keyboard on a calculator, except there wasn't anything to multiply or divide or add or subtract with. There were just numbers, and a single button marked **ENTER**.

The boys stared at the box for a minute then, very carefully, Farley reached out and touched a little bump next to the keyboard. And the panel closed with a soft click. SunLite Scientific must use just about the coolest boxes in the world, Farley thought. When he touched the bump again, the panel opened back up.

Farley pushed a couple of keys on the keyboard. Green numbers appeared on the screen.

He pushed some more.

More numbers appeared on the screen

He kept pushing keys until the screen was filled with numbers.

“What do we do now?” Joshua wanted to know.

“Press the ENTER button, I guess.” Farley pressed **ENTER** and a flashing error message appeared.

*** INVALID ACCESS CODE ***

the message said, followed by:

*** CONFIRM ACCESS CODE AND RE-ENTER ***

“Coo-wull,” Double Jay said. “It’s just like in *I Spy for the Good Guys*.”

Farley punched in another line of numbers.

“SOOooooo,” Double Jay looked thoughtful. “How are we supposed to figure out the code?” One thing both boys knew, you could always figure out a code if you looked for clues.

Farley rolled the box over. “No clues on the bottom.”

“What’s that noise?” Double Jay said.

Farley rolled the box right-side up and, this time, he heard the noise, too. It was a kind of a rusty noise coming from beneath the box.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Double Jay kicked through dirty clothes as he began to back away from the bed.

In some rooms, backing away from the bed was just a matter of a few steps. In Farley's room, making your way anywhere, backwards or frontwards, was an adventure.

Farley's dad said it was more than an adventure, it was archaeology because there was no telling what kind of things you might kick up. Ha. Ha. And *Ha*, Farley thought. He tried not to encourage Dad when he got in his comical moods.

Farley took a deep breath and picked up the box. Whatever the something was, it rustled again.

Golf balls bounced across the floor as he kicked his way to the dresser. But the box just made a soft clunk when he set it down. Whatever had made the rustling sound was still in the bed.

Farley kicked his way back over to the bed and, very slowly, in case there was a snake, pulled down the blanket.

All that turned out to be under the blanket was a tangled-up sheet. with the corner of a piece of paper sticking out. The paper tore in half when Farley tried to pull it loose.

"I *told* Ms Limerick I'd done my arithmetic homework, but would she believe me? Noooo she would *not*. And, now . . ."

"And, now, you're going to have to copy it over before you can turn it in," Joshua finished for him.

"No way I'm going to copy this over," Farley snorted. "If Ms Limerick doesn't trust me any better than that, she can just do without my arithmetic homework."

Joshua looked impressed. Most kids would never defy someone as scary as Ms Limerick that way.

“I mean,” Farley said, “trying to make me hand in my homework doesn’t even make sense. The whole point of school is so we can learn to be grownups and Ms Limerick wants to look over our shoulders about every little thing. How is that going to turn us into grownups. The only way to *be* grownup is to *act* grownup. And that means telling Ms Limerick grownup-to-grownup when I’ve finished the homework and leaving it at that.”

To show the discussion was finished, Farley leaned over the box and punched in a couple of more numbers. Then he pressed **ENTER**, again.

And a light came on.

It was a bright, yellow light the boys hadn’t noticed before.

And that wasn’t all. A message began to scroll across the screen:

*** WARNING ***

*** THIS IS SECOND ACCESS-CODE ERROR ***

*** CONFIRM ACCESS CODE ***

The yellow light started to blink as the message continued:

*** THIS M2-4a HIGH-SECURITY ***

SHIPPING CONTAINER IS PROTECTED BY

A WEASEL SECURITY SYSTEM

A THIRD ACCESS-CODE ERROR

WILL RESULT IN

MELTDOWN OF THE ENTRY APPARATUS

AND ACTIVATION OF A SQUEAL LOCATOR DEVICE

“What do you think,” Farley asked in a quiet voice, “a Squeal Locator Device is?”

“I bet it has something to do with global positioning satellites,” Double Jay said.

“And global positioning satellites always have . . .”

“*Laser battle stations,*” both boys gasped at the same time. They knew all about laser battle stations from *Chester MacDevitt, Space Spy*. One false move and a space-laser would cut right into Farley’s house.

The boys were still backing away from the box when a crackly noise came from the porch steps. It was exactly the sort of crackly noise porch steps might make if they were being disintegrated by a space-laser.

They froze in horror while the crackly noise began to move across the porch toward the front door.

The crackly noise rang the doorbell, then moved back across the porch and down the steps and out onto the sidewalk.

It was the mailman.

He had left an envelope for Farley, only Farley’s name had been spelled wrong, again. But, by then, both boys knew that F Arledge Johnstone was really Farley Johnson. SunLite Scientific paid attention to detail.

The message inside the envelope must have been the SEPARATE COMMUNICATION TO FOLLOW BY CIVILIAN CHANNELS. It said:

THE FOLLOWING ACCESS CODES UNLOCK M2-4a HIGH-SECURITY SHIPPING CONTAINER NUMBER 00018:

PRIMARY ENTRY SEQUENCE: II29674

SECONDARY ENTRY SEQUENCE: 4567342100

TERTIARY ENTRY SEQUENCE: 2675472

Back in Farley's room, the boys examined the box as carefully as they could. You have to be careful if you want to check out a box without touching it.

81000 turned out to be stamped into the aluminum right next to one of the hinges on the back. The boys saw it with the little, hand-held mirror Double Jay pulled out of his pocket.

"Eighty-one thousand . . ." Joshua said. "You mean there are eighty-one thousand other . . ."

"Eighty-thousand, nine-hundred and ninety-nine," Farley said. "There must be at least eighty-thousand, nine . . ."

"The mirror," Joshua said. "We're looking in a mirror. The number is zero zero zero eighteen, just like it in the letter.

Zero zero zero eighteen or not, there was no way the boys were going to touch the keyboard, not after what happened to Red Rowllins in *Even Spies Don't Know All the Tricks*. That's when the container started beeping.

And something else happened. The yellow light turned red and a new message scrolled across the screen:

*** DEFENSIVE COUNTDOWN BEGUN ***

IN NINETY SECONDS WEASEL WILL INITIATE MELTDOWN

AND ACTIVATE SQUEAL PROCEDURE

YOU HAVE NINETY SECONDS TO BEGIN INSERTING PRIMARY ENTRY SEQUENCE

The boys hardly had time to digest that before the message scrolled again:

*** DEFENSIVE COUNTDOWN BEGUN ***

IN EIGHTY SECONDS WEASEL WILL INITIATE MELTDOWN

AND ACTIVATE SQUEAL PROCEDURE

YOU HAVE EIGHTY SECONDS TO BEGIN INSERTING PRIMARY ENTRY SEQUENCE

And, almost before they could think:

*** DEFENSIVE COUNTDOWN BEGUN ***

IN SEVENTY SECONDS WEASEL WILL INITIATE MELTDOWN

AND ACTIVATE SQUEAL PROCEDURE

YOU HAVE SEVENTY SECONDS TO BEGIN INSERTING PRIMARY ENTRY SEQUENCE

The boys were too numb with fear to do anything but watch as the screen scrolled, again.

SIXTY SECONDS

It said. And

FIFTY

And

FORTY

“The *letter*” Joshua shrieked. “Look at the *letter*. The code is in the letter.”

THIRTY

The first number was a . . . it was hard to see, the paper was shaking so hard in Farley’s hand.

TWENTY

“It’s a *one*,” Joshua screamed. Red hairs were sticking out from the side of his head like an electrocuted squirrel. “Push the *one* button.”

Farley reached out slowly for the **1** as the message scrolled again:

*** DEFENSIVE COUNTDOWN BEGUN ***

IN TEN SECONDS WEASEL WILL INITIATE MELTDOWN

AND ACTIVATE SQUEAL PROCEDURE

YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS TO BEGIN INSERTING PRIMARY ENTRY SEQUENCE

More seconds ticked by.

Just as the boys were sure there wasn’t even one second left, and the laser battle station was about to fry Farley’s bedroom . . .

He pushed.

The beeps stopped beeping.

The red light stopped blinking.

The warning message vanished and a solitary **1** appeared on the screen.

Farley pushed the **1**, again. He had never moved so carefully in his life.

Then the **2**.

And the **9**.

And kept pressing until he had the entire code on the screen.

It said **1129674**.

Farley checked the number three times to be sure it was right, then reached out to push **ENTER**, and . . .

What if he were wrong?

“Read it backwards,” he said. And handed the message to Joshua.

“What?” Joshua wanted to know. He was shaking so hard he didn’t look as if he could read anything, right then.

“Read the number backwards so I can be sure we’ve got it right.”

“Okay,” Joshua said in a very small voice. “Four.”

Then, “seven.”

Then, “six,” until he’d read the whole thing: “Four, seven, six, nine, two, one, one.”

Farley was thinking about asking Joshua to count the digits to make really, really sure, when the red light began to blink, again. They didn’t know what that meant and they didn’t want to find out. Whatever it meant, it wasn’t anything good.

“Push **ENTER**,” Joshua shrieked.”

Farley stabbed the key.

The numbers disappeared and the light became a steady, comforting, red.

And a new message scrolled by:

PRIMARY ENTRY SEQUENCE ACCEPTED

INITIATE SECONDARY ENTRY SEQUENCE NOW

There's nothing like not being fried to death by a space-laser battle station to perk up your confidence. Farley pressed the **4** and then the **5** and then the **6** until he had the entire **4567342100** in place. The red light hadn't even begun to blink before he pushed the button.

SECONDARY ENTRY SEQUENCE ACCEPTED

INITIATE TERTIARY ENTRY SEQUENCE NOW

And, then, he almost blew it.

He would have, too, if Double Jay hadn't insisted on reading the numbers backward just to be sure. "Big X always says the difference between being right and almost right is the difference between being alive and betraying your agency," Joshua said.

If there were one thing Farley hated, it was being reminded of what Big X always said, even if he were the Puppet-Master That All Spies Fear, But None Can Name. Still, Farley knew Double Jay was right, and checked the numbers as Joshua read them off.

And, when he did, it turned out he'd typed **2675427** instead of **2675472**.

The boys were too frightened to even touch the container for fear they might jiggle the ENTER key. But they didn't have any choice. The red light started to blink again.

Farley typed the entire code number from scratch and made sure he had it right.

Then he pressed **ENTER**, and . . .

The light went off.

And the numbers disappeared from the screen.

And a new message scrolled by:

TERTIARY ENTRY SEQUENCE ACCEPTED

And the container opened with a little sigh like an elevator door.

Chapter Three

The M6A1 Combat Acceleration Device (Prototype, Individual)

Two pieces of styrofoam were inside the box. They were held together by rubber bands and, packed on top, was a very official-sounding memo to F Arledge Johnstone, Major General, U S Army.

“Wow,” Double Jay said. “A secret rank.”

Farley and Joshua knew about secret ranks. All the spies had secret ranks. So *what* if they’d spelled Farley’s name wrong. A Major General could straighten that out in no time. Major generals were . . . well they were *major*, Farley knew that.

“I bet it was that belt buckle you sent off for,” Joshua said. “I mean, they don’t go around making spies out of just *anybody* and then giving them secret ranks.”

What a Joke, Farley thought. The ad in the back of *True Spy, the Magazine for the Freelance Intelligence Officer*, had shown this really great-looking belt buckle with all sorts of secret stuff like a poison-pill holder, and a wire you can strangle your enemies with, and a secret camera. Farley had waited weeks.

Then, what finally came was a junky, little plastic thing with an imitation camera and a piece of string that broke the first time he tried to strangle somebody. And there

hadn't been any poison pills at all. The directions just said, "Place poison pill in holder." But when Farley went to the school nurse and asked for a bottle of poison pills . . . Farley didn't even want to *think* about that anymore.

"Don't you see?" Joshua said. "The belt buckle was just so they could find out your *name*. This is *way* cool."

The memo didn't say anything about belt buckles, though. It was from somebody called DIR TECHCOM, and what it said was:

GENERAL JOHNSTONE:

PER ORDERS 17 MAY, WE HEREWITH ENCLOSE THE M6A1 COMBAT ACCELERATION DEVICE (PROTOTYPE, INDIVIDUAL) FOR ONE (1) MONTH'S FIELD-TESTING UNDER COMBAT (SIMULATED) CONDITIONS.

ALL TESTS TO BE CONDUCTED IN STRICT ACCORDANCE WITH PROCEDURES SET OUT IN FM 21-173 (RESTRICTED USE ONLY) LATEST EDITION.

AT CONCLUSION OF TESTS AND, IN NO EVENT, LATER THAN 16 JUNE, THE M6A1 COMBAT ACCELERATION DEVICE (PROTOTYPE, INDIVIDUAL) WILL BE HAND-CARRIED THIS OFFICE IN ACCOMPANYING M2-A4a HIGH-SECURITY SHIPPING CONTAINER NUMBER 00018. SUITABLE TRANSPORT WILL BE PROVIDED.

DIRECT ALL INQUIRIES THIS OFFICE BY MESSENGER. DO NOT REPEAT DO NOT REFER TO TESTS OR M6A1 COMBAT ACCELERATION DEVICE (PROTOTYPE, INDIVIDUAL) OVER BROADCAST OR WIRE COMM SYSTEMS.

There was one other thing, too. At the bottom of the memo, somebody had left a handwritten note:

Frank, for God's sake take care of this thing. You've got the only one in the world and I don't think there's ever going to be another.

See you in August.

Best – Len

“Why’s this guy calling me ‘Frank’?” Farley wanted to know.

“Maybe it’s like in *The Spy who Forgot Who He Was* when Roscoe Wobberly got his tongue caught in the light socket and it erased his brain,” JJ said.

“Roscoe Wobberly,” Farley said. “If there is anybody I do *not* want to be like, it’s Roscoe Wobberly.” Farley removed the rubber bands and pulled the pieces of Styrofoam apart.

“I don’t know,” Joshua said. “Things worked out okay for Roscoe by the end of the book. He even got the . . .”

But Farley had stopped listening. He was staring at what was inside the Styrofoam and, whatever it was, it wasn’t a bottle of Bone-B-Hard, that’s for sure. In fact, it wasn’t a bottle at all. Not that Farley had ever actually seen any Bone-B-Hard,

but he was pretty sure it must come in bottles. How else could you paint it on bones if it didn't come out of a bottle? Instead, it was a plastic gizmo that looked like a cell phone – only a cell phone with a dial where the screen should have been, and was camouflage green, and seemed very military.

And there was one more thing. At the bottom of the container was a very thick instruction book and a shipping order. The funny part was, the shipping order wasn't from SunLite Scientific, at least not exactly. The name printed on the shipping order was:

MEDUSA

A Confidential Division of

The SunLite Scientific Corporation

"This is getting cooler and *cooler*," Double Jay crowed. "First, you get a secret name and then a secret rank. And, now, there's a secret company." Even Chester MacDevit hadn't run across a secret company.

At the top of the shipping order was a drawing of a lady with snakes where her hair was supposed to be. It was a very familiar looking lady.

"Hey, isn't that Medusa?" Joshua asked. Ms Limerick had told them about Medusa. Medusa was so ugly, just looking at her was enough to turn a person into stone.

"Don't you think that's a weird sort of picture for a company to use?" Farley asked. There was something about that face with the snakes curled around it that gave

him the creeps. “I mean, wouldn’t a company, want a picture of somebody that would make people like the company, not something that would . . . ?”

“Unless it’s the kind of company that makes weapons,” Joshua answered.

He was right about that. A company that makes weapons would want something scary. And what could be scarier than Medusa’s face? Medusa’s face would make a great weapon. Farley began to wonder just what an M6A1 COMBAT ACCELERATION DEVICE (PROTOTYPE INDIVIDUAL) was supposed to do.

“Maybe it turns people to stone,” Joshua said. “That would be so cool to turn people to stone.”

Farley thought about the order form he’d sent in. He had a copy of it, somewhere. Maybe he should check to see what he had really ordered, and began to kick his way over to the closet. The form was in there, somewhere.

It turned out to be under a pair of gym shorts, and was addressed to SunLite Scientific, just as Farley remembered. He couldn’t find anything about Medusa on it anywhere.

I am definitely going to have to wash those gym shorts, Farley thought to himself. Then he read the order number off the form while Joshua checked the number against the one on the piece of paper that came with the container. The order number was 011-56802-5011xx. Even reading the number aloud, it took the boys a moment to figure out the difference but, there it was. SunLite Scientific had sent them order number 011-58602-5011xx.

Somebody had had gotten their six and their eight backwards.

“Wow,” Joshua muttered. “Somebody hasn’t been paying attention to detail.”

Then Farley had a really scary thought. “Maybe,” he said in a quiet voice, “F Arledge Johnstone isn’t a secret name after all. Maybe F Arledge Johnstone is a real general somewhere, and somebody at SunLite Scientific wasn’t paying attention to detail and read the number wrong and . . .”

“And,” Joshua finished for him, “Somebody is going to be in serious trouble.”

The thing was, the boys stared at each other, that somebody might turn out to be them.