

THE HISTORY MYSTERY KIDS #1

# FIASCO IN FLORIDA



By  
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CHAPTER ONE  
BLOWING UP HISTORY

My dad says it was the day he blew up history.

But that's not exactly what happened.

It was a cool fall evening in New York, and the National Museum was opening a new exhibit on United States history. My dad, Professor Abner Jefferson, had helped put it all together, so he invited me, my little brother Toad, and my best friend Henry to the big event.

My name is April, by the way. I'm almost twelve years old, I like shopping for cute clothes with my mom, and I play basketball for my school's team. I also do the high jump for

the track team. I love going to see movies, and I just read *Pride and Prejudice* for the third time. So, is hanging out at the museum my idea of a good time? Believe it or not... it kind of is.

“Remember, April: you promised me food,” Henry said as we pushed through the heavy wooden doors at the front of the museum.

“You’ve only reminded me fifty times,” I said.

“It’s just that sometimes you promise me food just to get me to come places, and then boom, no food.” He waved his hands above his head for effect.

“My dad assured me there would be a large buffet of Big Macs, french fries, and hot apple pies.”

Henry’s eyes lit up, and the corners of his mouth turned upward into a smile. Then the smile faded. “You’re messing with me, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Henry, I’m messing with you. It’s a museum. They’ll have drinking fountains and

old people food like carrot sticks and cold shrimp.”

I looked back at my little brother, Toad. He was twenty feet behind us.

“Toad, why are you so slow?” I asked.

“I’m not slow, I’m short-legged,” he said. “It’s a fact that speed is based on stride length and stride frequency. I bet you anything that my stride frequency is better than yours. It’s just that since you’re older than me, you have a much longer stride. I have to move my legs twice as fast just to keep up with you.”

Henry shook his head. “What eight-year-old in America talks like this?”

“The same kid who knows every single subspecies of frog in the Western Hemisphere,” I said.

The three of us followed the crowd into the museum’s main exhibition hall. The recent renovation had given the museum a new look by mixing the old dark wood with a sleek and modern sensibility. My dad called it a blending

of late nineteenth century with early twenty-first century, and he and the museum director hoped it would help encourage young people to give the museum a try.

That made me wonder if my dad and the museum director had ever met any young people.

At the far end of the hall was a huge sign that read, “The United States,” and underneath it was a map of America. Dad had told me all about it. The map was actually a puzzle, with one piece for each state, and each piece made out of fine crystal.

Dad stood in front of the sign, pacing nervously. He was dressed in his standard outfit: an old tweed blazer and rumpled brown corduroys. As usual, his dark curly hair was sticking out three different ways, and his glasses hung crookedly from his nose.

But as soon as he spotted us, he smiled and waved.

He cleared his throat and addressed the



crowd. “Thank you so much for attending the grand reopening of the National and our new exhibit on American history. Knowing the beautiful and often complicated history of our country helps us live more humanely in the present and better in the future.”

He pulled a thick, brown leather book from the pocket of his blazer. “But before we begin, I have a special treat for you tonight. I am going to, for the first time ever, open this book, a book that I’ve traced to the Revolutionary War.” He held it up for everyone to see. It looked, well, old.

“You may not believe me, but I truly have not yet opened this book. I found it as part of my research, and I am ninety-nine percent certain that it comes from the library of Paul Revere himself. What does that mean? Is it possibly a book of great historical importance? Does it shed light on some aspect of that time period that we don’t yet know?

“Or is it more probable that this book is

something of little consequence—say, a grocery list, or a list of chores Paul’s wife wanted him to complete on Sunday instead of watching the Patriots play.”

Dad smiled, and the people laughed at his terrible joke.

He continued. “The truth is, I don’t know what’s inside—so we’ll just have to find out together. As I always like to say, ‘History takes time.’ So I thought waiting would be fun... for all of us. Now, are you ready to make some history together?”

Dad took a big breath.

Henry leaned in toward me. “The odds of the Big Mac and fries being inside the book are...?”

“About the same as the odds of you being quiet at an important moment,” I replied.

“Do old people really eat cold shrimp?”

“Shush,” said Toad. He turned and gave Henry the evil eye.

“Wow,” I said. “Now even *Toad’s* more mature than you.”

My dad put on his rubber gloves and carefully ran his hand along the spine and cover of the old book. He was an expert at handling these kinds of things delicately. He'd told me more than once that an old book can completely fall apart in your hands if you don't handle it properly.

He took another deep breath, gently grabbed the cover, and carefully opened it.

You could feel the whole crowd leaning in, trying to get a peek at whatever my dad was seeing. But all I did was watch my dad's eyes. They opened ever so slowly. Then he furrowed his brow.

He slowly turned a page.

Then another.

Then another and another and another.

And then, finally, he closed the book, cleared his throat, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Uh-oh," I said.

"Uh-oh?" said Henry.

"Ah, ladies and gentleman, this is... well,

odd, and more than a little embarrassing. It appears this book, which now I'm positive dates back to the colonial period is... well, empty."

"Empty?" more than a few people said in unison.

He ran his fingers through his hair again. "Yes. All the pages are blank. Which... doesn't make much sense." He looked over at the museum director as if not sure what to do next.

The director had his head buried in one hand, clearly dying of shame.

And so my dad was left up there alone, twisting in the wind.

I felt so bad for him.

And because I felt bad, I didn't notice the light. But Toad did. He tugged on my arm and pointed at the book.

"It's glowing," he said.

At least ninety-nine percent of what my little brother says is ridiculous, so I'm used to ignoring him. But this was too weird to ignore.

I looked.

There *was* a light coming from inside the book. Toad was right: it was glowing. Other people started noticing it as well. Some were pointing.

Finally, my dad looked down. His mouth fell open. He put his hand on the edge of the book and opened it back up.

Beams of light shot from the book in every direction.

My dad placed his hand into the light. That's when everything started shaking. San Francisco has earthquakes; New York City does not.

Yet we were *definitely* having an earthquake.

The building, and everything in it, shook. Toad screamed. Henry said something about being "too hungry" to die. Guests ran every which way. But I couldn't take my eyes off my dad. The glass map behind him shook, and individual states fell to the ground. There was a loud *boom*, followed by an intense flash of light, like a giant camera flash.

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And suddenly, the shaking stopped, and the light was gone.

And so was my dad.



## CHAPTER TWO

# A DESPERATE ESCAPE

“April!” Toad shouted. “Where’s Dad? Where’d he go?”

I ran past Toad, squeezed through the crowd, and jumped onto the stage. The book was closed. Dad was nowhere to be seen.

Henry came up alongside me. “April, what is going on?”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “He was right here. Then the book lit up, and everything started shaking.” I looked up at the big crystal map of the United States. “The states continued to fall off the map, and then... and



then Dad was gone.”

I looked around, and then it hit me: something was missing. And I didn’t mean Dad.

I studied the map. Sure enough, some of the crystal state puzzle pieces had fallen off. Five, by my count. But when I looked below it, on the table and on the floor, I couldn’t find any of the missing pieces.

Not one.

Not anywhere.

Where could they have gone?

I looked at the book again. Then I slowly lowered my hand toward it.

Toad stopped me. “The book did it, April. The book sucked him up.”

“That’s impossible,” I said.

“But it’s true. You saw it!”

I knocked his hand away and set my finger on the cover of the book. And the second I touched the old leather, I felt... something. Like a vibration. Like the book was....

It didn’t make sense.

“April,” said Henry. “I’m going to give you a ten-minute pass on getting me food if you’ll explain what’s going on here.”

A few policemen appeared at the far end of the hall. The director of the museum raced over to them and waved his arms around, motioning to, well, everything.

I pressed my finger deeper into the cover. “This book,” I said. “It feels like it’s alive.”

“I told you,” said Toad.

“The book’s *alive*?” said Henry. “Like arms, legs, and a mouth alive?”

I pressed down harder, and I saw tiny vibrations float across the cover like ripples in a pond.

“Not that kind of alive, Henry. Something else.”

I started to open the book, but Henry stopped me. “You can’t open it, April. You saw what just happened. Plus, on the off chance there is food around here, I’d really rather not jeopardize my chance to eat it.”

Footsteps approached, and I snapped up my head. Standing in front of me was an old man in a dark suit and a skinny black tie. He was flanked by two other men dressed almost exactly the same way. He took out a badge.

“Special Agent Jones with A7, the Federal Division of Antiquities. Miss, you need to take your hand off the book and step away.”

The two guys with him stepped closer. They looked tough—like they meant serious business.

But something about their being here wasn't right. “Um... how exactly did it take federal agents only fifteen seconds to get here?”

“Yeah,” said Henry. “And another thing: is there any chance that ‘antiquities’ is a fancy word for ‘donuts’? And if so, is A7 like a special donut delivery service?”

Special Agent Jones growled at Henry. “What are you, eleven?”

“Eleven and a half to be precise, but occasionally, people think I'm twelve. There's this one girl at school—”

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“Stop talking!” roared Special Agent Jones. “You wouldn’t be the first eleven-year-old I’ve put in jail, so zip it—and step away from the book.”

Henry turned to me. “Did he miss the part where I said I was eleven *and a half*? I felt like that was an important detail.”

The two other agents spread out to the sides, surrounding us. Special Agent Jones was only a few feet from us, and he was slowly closing in.

I pressed my whole hand down on the book. A hot-and-cold shiver went up my arm, like I had just gotten a jolt of electricity. And while my hand and arm tingled, I studied Special Agent Jones. There was something about his eyes... Something that made me uneasy.

“Guys,” I whispered. “Toad was right. Dad got sucked up by this book. We know it. We just don’t want to *believe* it. And what’s more, somehow this Special Agent Jones knows it, too. Toad, do you want to find Dad?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Henry?”

“Well, I would prefer to find an all-you-can-eat buffet, but—”

Special Agent Jones lunged toward me. There was no more time.

I opened the book.

Beams of light shot out, like before, and everything started to shake. I grabbed Toad and shoved his hand into the light.

“Henry!” I yelled. “Put your hand in now!”

Henry stuck his hand into the light as well.

Special Agent Jones screamed, “No!”

And then something happened that I can’t really explain. The sounds of the museum vanished. The people around us froze. It was like I was looking at a picture.

The world in front of us *folded back* like the page of a book.

Everything went black.

And I started to fall.



### CHAPTER THREE

## CANNONBALL: RUN!

I screamed for Toad. He screamed back. Henry screamed about donuts. We were all falling in total darkness, screaming, and I had no idea what was happening.

We fell and we fell and we fell.

Then, without warning, we landed.

Faint light appeared from somewhere high above me, and the first thing I noticed was that the floor beneath me wasn't a floor. It was stone. I pressed my hands over its rough exterior and let my fingers drag through the grooves. The museum didn't have a floor like this.

Then I heard a *whoosh* overhead, and the sounds of men screaming.

The light suddenly brightened. I realized it was moonlight; a cloud must have just moved aside to let it through. It illuminated the scene before me. And it was not the scene I was expecting.

We weren't in the museum.

We weren't right outside the museum.

I was pretty sure we weren't anywhere *near* the museum.

We were on some sort of stone roof. I'd been on plenty of the rooftops of New York City, and this didn't look like any of them. This looked more like... no, it didn't make sense.

I heard another whooshing sound and instinctively ducked my head as something sailed overhead. I heard a loud crunch behind me. That's when the soldiers came running by. They were dressed in those funny old-time uniforms—long blue-and-white coats and funny hats—and waving equally old-timey



rifles, the kind with knives on the end. Why were they dressed like that?

And that wasn't the only weird thing. It suddenly occurred to me that, other than the moonlight, there were no other lights. No other buildings. No towering skyscrapers.

I was definitely *not* in New York City.

Toad was to my left, crawling toward me. Henry was to my right, looking around in bewilderment. When I heard another whooshing sound, I instinctively grabbed for Toad and covered him up. Something flew over our head once again.

“Was that a *cannonball?*” asked Henry, his voice cracking like the eleven-and-a-half-year-old he was.

I looked around. This place looked like a castle. No, wait—not a castle. This was a fortress! The walls had ramparts, and this roof wasn't a roof, it was a walkway. It ran along the interior of the four walls. In the middle of the four walls, at least thirty feet below us, was a large courtyard.

One of the soldiers came running straight toward us. He was screaming in Spanish and waving his arms. I didn't know enough Spanish to understand what he was saying.

"Henry, a little help here," I said as I pulled Toad closer.

Henry's Spanish was excellent. He spoke to the man, then turned back to me.

"He said it's not safe up here."

I heard an explosion far away and more shouting. "And what could possibly give him *that* impression?" I said.

"Hey," said Henry, "sarcasm is *my* thing. Don't go stealing my thing. Now come on—this guy said we would find shelter down those stairs with the others."

I grabbed Toad's arm, but he shook off my hand.

"Stop!" he said. "Where's Dad? Where's the museum?"

I didn't know. And worse, I couldn't possibly guess.

I heard the whooshing sound yet again, followed by screams. I tackled Toad just as another cannonball sailed over our heads. This one hit the inside of one of the fortress walls behind us. The cannonball made a horrible crunching sound as it impacted with the stone.

“I want *Dad!*” Toad said through chattering teeth. “I want him *now!*”

I cupped my hands around his face. “And I do too, Toad. But right now, Dad isn’t here, and I don’t even know where we are. What I *do* know is that we need to get away from these cannonballs. You hear me?”

Toad nodded. A tear ran down his cheek. Then he pointed to the ground. “But we better take that.”

I looked down.

It was the book. The book from the museum.

Wherever we were, the book had come with us.

“This doesn’t make sense,” I said. “When Dad got sucked into the book, the book stayed

behind. Now the same thing happens to us, but the book comes with us?”

Another cannonball whizzed over our heads, and we all threw ourselves to the ground.

Henry looked at me. “Seriously? You’re trying to reason with a magical book? Think we could wait until we’re *not* being used as cannonball target practice?”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Toad and I followed Henry as he ran down a nearby stone stairwell. The stairs took us down to the courtyard, where several more soldiers were running around shouting at each other. They paid us no mind.

Henry looked around and held up his hands. “Where do we go?”

A cannonball came into the courtyard and slammed into the fortress wall less than twenty feet from us.

“Not here!” I yelled.

We ran through an opening into the inner part of the fort, where everything was dark and

creepy. We heard a voice speaking English.

“In here.”

A door was half open, and a pair of eyes was calling to us.

“It’s safe in here,” the voice said, again in English. It sounded like a boy.

The three of us pushed through the door and into a room lit by two old-looking lamps hanging in the corners. Straw was scattered around the stone floor. The air smelled like wet dog.

The person who’d called to us was indeed a boy. He looked to be about my age, with dark messy hair and light brown skin, but he was wearing awfully weird clothes. Come to think of it, *everybody* I had seen so far was wearing weird clothes. These clothes felt more like, like....

The boy wedged his foot into a crack in the stone wall of the room, then pulled himself up two feet to peek outside through a small opening.



And I remembered the book in my hands.

I stood underneath one of the lamps and studied the cover. Something was different about it. When Dad had shown it to me for the first time the other day, the cover had been fairly plain. Thick leather. Small decorative lines outlining it. No words. And certainly no shapes.

But now there *was* a shape. A very particular shape carved into the very center of the front cover. I ran my fingers over it. The indentation was at least a quarter-inch thick. And the shape was unmistakable.

It was the state of Florida.

I opened the book warily. No light shot from it this time. Nothing around me shook. But the book had definitely changed. At the museum, Dad had said the book was empty—but it wasn't empty now.

A map of Florida was on the first page.

# Florida



On the second page were the words, “The Florida File” along with a bunch of facts about the state.



# The Florida File

**Florida is the southeastern-most US state, with the Atlantic on one side and the Gulf of Mexico on the other. It has hundreds of miles of beaches. The city of Miami, Florida, is known for its Latin-American cultural influences and notable arts scene, as well as its nightlife, especially in upscale South Beach. Orlando, Florida, is famed for its theme parks, including Walt Disney World.**

**State capital: Tallahassee**

**Population: 20,612,439**

**Population Rank: 3rd**

**Area: 65,755 Square Miles**

**Area Rank: 22nd**

**Meaning of Name: Land of Flowers**

**State Nickname: The Sunshine State**

Apparently the empty book (correction: the empty *magical* book) had turned into a book about Florida. What could it mean?

I looked back up at the boy. He was still up

on the wall, looking through the little window.

“Are we in Florida?” I asked him.

He turned his head. “Of course we’re in Florida. Did one of those British cannonballs hit you in the head?”

Toad was trying to climb up the wall and see whatever the boy was looking at. Henry came over beside me to look at the book.

“Florida?” Henry whispered. “How the heck are we in Florida?”

“This book must have sent us here. I guess?”

“But why? And much more importantly—how? And maybe most importantly of all, do you think that book can fix me a sandwich?”

I looked at the boy’s weird clothing again. Thought about the way the soldiers were dressed. I was certain people did *not* dress like this in Florida. They also didn’t fire cannonballs. In fact, I was pretty sure no one had attacked *anyone* with a cannonball for at least a hundred years.

I caught my breath. That was it! We had traveled back in—

There was a thunderous boom against the wall where the boy and Toad were peeking through the window. They both fell off and landed on the ground.

“Toad!” I shouted. “Are you okay?”

To my surprise, he was actually grinning. “That was fun.”

The boy stumbled to his feet. “Fun? After a couple weeks of British cannonballs, *I* don’t think it’s much fun at all.”

I grabbed Henry and pulled him closer.

“Cannonballs, Henry. *British* cannonballs. And the weird way everyone is dressed? The fact that we’re in some kind of weird stone fortress? Do you know what all this means?”

“That I’m not getting a Big Mac and french fry buffet anytime soon?”

“No—well, yes, that’s also true. But Henry, forget about food for a minute. This book...” I looked him in the eye. “I think it’s a time machine.”