

CHAPTER 1



Anyone in Paradise Beach would tell you that if one of their 313 residents was going to be struck by lightning – struck out of the clear blue sky on his birthday – that person would be Nathaniel Harlow.

Because wasn't it Nate whose hound dog was snatched up by a tornado, doghouse and all, never to be seen again? And wasn't it Nate who never, ever, in the history of his eleven years on God's green earth, won a coin toss or found a prize in the bottom of his Cracker Jack box?

Bad luck seemed to dog Nate Harlow's heels like his long-lost hound. Scrawnier than most, hunch-shouldered against the bad luck that rained down upon him, that boy was pure unlucky.



Nate awoke that spring morning of his eleventh birthday with an unaccountably light and fluttery feeling in his chest. He lay beneath his covers and listened. He heard his grandpa snoring on the couch in the living room of their tiny trailer. He heard the mockingbird singing its heart out in the magnolia tree outside his bedroom window. He heard the hum of the refrigerator and the steady *thump thump thump* in his chest. He did not hear anything that might account for the tiny flicker of hope fluttering like a moth in his heart.

“But it *is* my eleventh birthday,” Nate declared to the mockingbird. “It’s the *eleventh* of April on my *eleventh* birthday. That must mean something.”

Nate did three things every morning after listening to the mockingbird.

First, he slipped his lucky rabbit’s foot from beneath his pillow. His grandpa had given it to him on his fifth birthday, not long after Nate came to live with him. The foot, which had once been blue as the sky and covered with fur, was now brown and nearly rubbed bald.

Next, he touched the photo of his mother and father on his nightstand and said, “Good morning. I still miss you.”

When Nate was four, his parents, who'd never, ever drunk a drop of alcohol, were struck head-on by a drunk driver and killed. That was the first time Nathaniel Harlow would learn that life can change in a flash.

And lastly, Nate slipped the camera his grandpa had given him for his ninth birthday into his pocket.

Was the unluckiest boy in Paradise Beach a budding photographer, headed for fame and glory? Not exactly. Nate took pictures — lots of pictures — but of only one thing: single shoes mysteriously separated from their mates. One flip-flop in the middle of State Road 102, a work boot lying lonely and forlorn on the side of Highway 98, a tennis shoe — just one — washed up underneath Henderson Pier. He used to pick up these orphaned shoes and bring them home with the hope that, somehow, the lucky day would come when he would miraculously find the long-lost shoe, reuniting the pair. That is, until their little trailer was overflowing with shoes.

Nate pulled on his shorts and padded into the living room. His grandpa sighed and snorted in his sleep.

He started a pot of coffee on the stove for Grandpa and fixed toast and a glass of milk for himself. The light, fluttery

feeling in his chest held firm even though the milk had soured and the toaster burnt his toast. Again.

After all, wasn't it good luck that his birthday — his *eleventh* birthday — fell on a Saturday for the first time ever? And wasn't it good luck that his grandpa didn't have any fishing trips booked on his deep-sea fishing boat, the *Sweet Jodie*, and had promised to take Nate and his best (and only) friend, Genesis Beam, to play Goofy Golf?

"Maybe my luck is changing," he'd told Gen the night before. "My birthday has practically never, *ever* been on a Saturday, *and* it's my eleventh birthday on the eleventh day of the month."

"It's just the Law of Probability," Gen had said as the first firefly of the evening winked on and off. Genesis Beam did not believe in good luck or bad luck; she believed in the Law of Probability and answered to the Higher Power of Logic.

"Yeah, but Grandpa doesn't have any fishing trips booked either," Nate had pointed out.

"*No one* has had a Saturday fishing trip booked in a month of Sundays, you know that."

It was true: A run of bad luck had left the charter boats and their crews high and dry.

“With an average of fifty-two Saturdays in a year and your being alive eleven years, that’s 572 Saturdays. Your odds of having a birthday fall on a Saturday are guaranteed.”

“But —”

“It’s odds, Nathaniel, not luck, just like everything else. Here, I’ll prove it,” Gen had said. She flipped a quarter high in the air and slapped it on the back of her hand. And as she’d done a million times before, she’d said, “Call it.”

Nate sighed. “Heads.”

She had pulled back her hand. “Tails,” she announced. She flipped the coin again. “Call it.”

“Do I have to?” he had asked. Gen glared from behind her thick glasses. “Tails,” he said.

“Okay, so it’s heads. That doesn’t mean anything.”

Nate swatted a mosquito.

For the next hour, Gen tossed the coin and said, “Call it,” and he had.

Nate was wrong every time. *Fifty-three* times.

And like always, she had said, “There must be something off about this coin. If you toss a coin one hundred times, the odds are you’ll get somewhere around forty and sixty heads. If you toss a coin twice, the chance of getting heads both times equals one-half times one-half, which equals one-fourth. And the chance of getting heads three times in a row equals —”

“But I was wrong fifty-three times!”

“For all practical purposes, that’s impossible,” Gen said, digging another coin out of her pocket. “The Law of Probability dictates —”

He sighed. Sometimes it was hard having the smartest girl in all of Franklin County as your best friend.

But even Gen doubted herself on that cloudless day of Nathaniel Harlow’s birthday.



“Run on down to Gen’s place,” Grandpa said after he finished his second cup of coffee. “I’ll load up the cooler with sodas and such.”

Nate banged out the screen door. “Oh, and tell Mrs. Beam I got a mess of fish for her,” Grandpa called.

He trotted down the road of the Sweet Magnolia RV and Trailer Park, the thick, sweet scent of magnolia dogging his heels. The crushed oyster shells gleamed white in the morning sun and crunched under his red tennis shoes.

“Morning Nate,” Miss Trundle called from the wooden steps of her trailer. She waved her arm; the flesh beneath her arm waved too.

The boy stopped to pet one of her fifty million cats. “Hi, Miss Trundle. Today is my birthday.”

“I know.” She beamed. “You’re eleven now. Such a big boy! Why, it seems like only yesterday when you came here to live with your granddaddy after your parents passed, God rest their souls.”

“Yes ma’am,” Nate said. And before Miss Trundle had a chance to go on about what all *else* seemed just like yesterday, he sprinted on down the road.

At the end of the trailer park, Mr. Wood called from his porch, “Happy birthday, Nate!”

He skidded to a stop on the oyster shells. “Thank you, sir. How are you today?” Mr. Wood’s ancient Chihuahuas, Toots and Monk, barked behind the screen door.

The old man rubbed his knee. “My trick knee’s acting up. Must be a change in the weather coming on.”

A salty, fishy breeze from the Gulf of Mexico tickled the wind chimes in Mr. Wood’s tree. Mr. Wood had chimes made of just about everything: bottles, seashells, tin cups, old forks and spoons and knives — all hanging from pieces of driftwood.

Nate glanced up at the sky, blue and cloudless as could be. “I don’t know about that, sir. It looks pretty clear to me.”

Mr. Wood waved the boy away. “Well, you run on now and have a big time on your birthday.”

And he did. He left the oyster shell path and cut through the piney woods until he hit the red clay road leading to The Church of the One True Redeemer and Everlasting Light. The double doors of the white wooden church stood open, the voices of children tumbling out. He took the steps up to the church doorway two at a time. “Hey Gen,” he called into the mayhem.

“Nate!” Two identical little girls in identical sundresses squealed at the exact same time. They raced each other down the long aisle from the pulpit to the front doors. They flung

their arms around him, their scrawny black arms plucking at his shirt and squeezing his hands. “Happy birthday, Nate!”

He looped an arm around each shoulder and grinned. “Thank you Ruth, thank you Rebecca.” Nate may have been considered a bit on the puny side, but when he was with Ruth and Rebecca, he felt ten feet tall.

The girls grabbed his hands. “We’ve been waiting all the livelong day for you,” Ruth said, bouncing on her toes.

“We made you a card, and Mama made something special too,” Rebecca said.

The twins dragged him past the worn pews, behind the pulpit, and up the steep side stairs to the living quarters of the Beam family. The smell of vanilla and chocolate filled the stairwell.

“Nate’s here, Mama,” Ruth announced. “Can we eat the cupcakes now?”

“Please?” asked Rebecca.

Mrs. Beam smiled. “Happy birthday, Nate.” Then she shot a look at the two six-year-old girls hopping foot to foot. “And no, you may *not* have cupcakes now.” The twins’ brown eyes filled with sorrow.

“It’s Nate’s birthday,” Gen called from the couch. “He gets the first one.”

Ruth handed the boy a huge construction paper card decorated with hearts and kittens by the artistically inclined twin. “I drew you a masterpiece for your birthday, Nate! Do you like it?” Ruth twirled and spun out of the room before he could answer.

Rebecca tugged on his hand. “I wrote you a poem for your birthday,” she whispered shyly.

Nate opened the card and read:

Roses are red, the sky is blue.

We sure are lucky

To have a friend like you!

Nate grinned. “Thank you, Rebecca. It’s the best poem anyone has ever wrote for me.”

“*Written*,” Gen corrected as she came into the kitchen. She handed a bag to Nate. “Happy birthday.”

Nate pulled from the bag a book titled *Secrets of Florida’s Loggerhead Turtles*. He grinned and ran his hand over the

cover. "This is great, Gen. We can study it together since the turtles will be coming soon."

"I've already read it three times and have it pretty much memorized," Gen said with a shrug. "But I'll help you with it."

Footsteps pounded up the stairwell. Two identical little boys, two years smaller than the twin girls, raced into the kitchen. Yes, Mrs. Beam had had *two* sets of twins in a row. Gen would tell you the odds of that happening were one in seventy thousand.

"Is it cupcake time yet?" asked Joshua.

"Leviticus, Joshua," Mrs. Beam said. "You wash those filthy little hands of yours before you think about eating anything."

"Aw, Mama," Leviticus groaned.

"You listen to your sweet mama, son," a voice as big as God's said. Reverend Beam filled the kitchen. He laid his big hand on Nate's shoulder. "Happy birthday, young man."

Nate looked way, way up into the face of the reverend Beam and smiled. "Thank you, sir." Next to his grandpa and

Genesis, Reverend Beam was pretty much his favorite person on earth.

“Haven’t seen you and your grandpa in church lately,” Reverend Beam said as he always did.

“No sir,” Nate answered as always. “But Grandpa says we’ll be coming soon as we can. The pompano are running now, and Grandpa’s always busy.” Which they both knew was wishful thinking.

The reverend laughed a laugh as rich as the chocolate on the cupcakes. “And next the mackerel will be running, and then it’ll be red snapper season, and then . . .” And it was true. The fishermen on the Gulf of Mexico marked the seasons by the run of the fish.

Nate had, in fact, asked his grandfather one Sunday morning why they, unlike pretty much everybody else in Paradise Beach, rarely went to church. After all, there were churches of every stripe and even a brand-new synagogue in their little town. His grandpa had put the last bait bucket in the back of the old green pickup. He’d squinted up at the sun and said, “We do, boy. We worship with Mother Nature herself at The Church of the Holy Mackerel.” Still, Nate was

happy that when they did go, it was to The Church of the One True Redeemer and Everlasting Light.

Mrs. Beam placed a yellow candle in the exact middle of the biggest of the chocolate-frosted cupcakes. Carefully, she lit the candle. “Make a wish, Nate,” she said.

He stared at the candle.

“Wish for a unicorn!” Ruthie said.

“Wish for a kitten.” Rebecca smiled.

“A robot!” Levi cried.

“A bicycle!” Joshua hollered.

“Hush now,” Mrs. Beam said. “It’s Nate’s wish.”

Gen rolled her eyes. She didn’t believe in birthday wishes, and Nate wasn’t too sure he did either. He’d just about given up wishing on stars and he’d never once found a four-leaf clover. There was the lucky rabbit’s foot, although Gen never failed to point out luck had not been on that rabbit’s side. He figured good luck had only visited him once in a blue moon. Still, he decided as he took a deep breath, it couldn’t hurt, could it?

He closed his eyes and rubbed his thumb on the little rabbit’s foot. *Please, please let something lucky happen today.*

Everyone watched wide-eyed as Nate unleashed a long, strong breath. Carried on that breath was 1) the wish that he'd have good luck just once in his life and 2) the knowledge that not only had his birthday wishes never come true, but the candles' flames had *never* gone out, no matter how hard he blew.

But this time, on Nate Harlow's eleventh birthday on the eleventh of April, a wavy line of smoke replaced the dancing candle flame.