

# The Year the Swallows Came Early

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## chapter one Coconut Flakes

We lived in a perfect stucco house, just off the sparkly Pacific, with a lime tree in the back yard and pink and yellow roses gone wild around a picket fence. But that wasn't enough to keep my daddy from going to jail the year I turned eleven. I told my best friend, Frankie, that it was hard to tell what something was like on the inside just by looking at the outside. And that our house was like one of those See's candies with beautiful swirled chocolate on the outside, but sometimes hiding coconut flakes on the inside, all gritty and hard, like undercooked white rice.

Things that look just right come undone quicker than the last day of summer. And one day, it happened right in front of me. The horoscope Mama read to me that morning should've been enough warning: *Expect the unexpected*. I'd raised my eyebrows and smiled, thinking the unexpected might be finally discovering a way to chop onions without crying or finding a dollar on the street, something unexpected, but in a good way.

It wasn't.

Officer Miguel surprised Daddy and me, stopping us as we were walking out of the *Swallow's Shop and Ferry* that day on our way into town. I walked with Daddy on his way to work every Saturday because I had no school bus to catch then.

"Mitch?" the officer asked my daddy. "There's a problem." He stood on the main corner of town, like he'd been waiting for us. Like he knew we'd be there at this time on this day.

"What problem?" I asked. I looked up at Daddy thinking he must've forgotten to pay another parking ticket.

"I can't be late for work. I just started a new job at the hardware store," Daddy told the officer. "I'm sure this can wait." He took my hand quickly like he suddenly remembered he was late for an appointment, and we started across the street.

"But -" I turned to look back at Officer Miguel.

“Let’s go,” Daddy told me, pulling my arm just a little.

“You better take a look at this,” Officer Miguel ran up to us fast waving some papers, leaving his patrol car parked on the street.

Daddy sighed and stopped on the opposite sidewalk where someone had drawn a small bird flying over a tree using gray chalk. His left foot covered the leaves of the tree and half the bird. He squeezed my hand hard, like he was trying to decide what to do. But then he let go softly, and his hand fell to his side.

“What’s going on?” I asked him.

But he didn’t answer. Instead, he watched the sky for what seemed like a million minutes, and just then, it seemed perfectly stitched to the horizon in the west where the cumulus clouds made shapes - like he was he was looking for an answer. Like he was waiting for the clouds to form the words, *Say this...* Finally, he pointed to the side of the road without looking at me or telling me anything.

So I walked there, knowing he wanted me to by the way he pushed his lips together. He held his arm high and stiff, like a command to go to my room.

Maybe it’s true there’s no such thing as a sign from above, but as I stepped onto that curb, I felt something. Even worse, I noticed Mr. Tom, a homeless man, suddenly standing up the street looking like he knew something, too. Like he was saying, *Groovy Robinson, be ready, because things could be changing.*

My hands became sweaty. I waited while Officer Miguel showed Daddy the papers, trying to steer clear from Mr. Tom. I crossed and uncrossed my arms a million times. They had a mind of their own. Finally, I pushed my hands deep into the pockets of my jean skirt to keep them still.

I’m here to tell you I listened the best I could, but every time Officer Miguel talked it was too hushed.

Daddy was louder and angrier than I’d ever heard him. And he kept taking little steps backwards. And I kept thinking that he should not be talking to that policeman like he was.

Then I saw his shoulders slump down. He got into the backseat of the police car while Officer Miguel stuffed his handcuffs back into his pocket, like he decided it wasn’t going to be necessary to use force.

Mr. Tom covered his face with his hands and sat down on the curb.

I ran over to the car as fast as I could, blinking tears back into my eyes. I wondered what he could've done to make Officer Miguel put him in his car. I told myself, *Don't cry, don't you even think about crying. Who cares if they have to take him away. He'll be back after everything gets straightened out.*

"I can't go into this right now, Groovy," Daddy told me through the crack in the window. His eyes shrank to the size of tiny dots, and his face turned stiff. Quiet floated between us, the kind that makes people uncomfortable when there's nothing to say.

Then he seemed to change his mind about talking, and with a sad voice he said, "Sometimes, when you figure out the answer to a problem – something you *know* you need to fix, it's too late. You know what you have to do, but you've run out of time." His eyes looked at me, but like I wasn't there. "Groovy, listen to me," he put his hand on the window, his fingers smudging the glass. "Things can start out on track, but end up different. I'm sorry." And he looked away before I could say anything.

"Groovy, is your mother at work today?" Officer Miguel asked me.

"Yes, sir," I answered, but it didn't sound like the normal me.

"So she knows where you are then?" He looked me over good, like he was trying to decide if he should call my mama. But everyone knew I mostly took care of myself on weekends. And Mama worked right up the street anyway, not more than fifty steps north.

"Yes, she knows where I am," I said, like half of me was saying the words and the other half was thinking, *Excuse me, Officer Miguel, but you must have the wrong man.*

Frankie came running out from the *Swallow* where he'd been helping out his step brother, "Is everything okay?"

"He's taking my daddy," I told him.

The police radio in the car called out instructions. I could hear it saying Daddy's name with a blurring sound of numbers that sounded like some sort of code.

"Groovy, I'm going to have to leave with your father now," Officer Miguel told me. He looked sad as he wrote in a small notebook and then flipped it closed. Being one of two policemen who lived in our town, he knew everybody's business.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said. "You should go see your mother. Tell her I have your father."

I nodded that I understood.

Frankie grabbed my hand and held on tight. Looking back now, I know he did this to keep me from falling down.

Frankie's like that.

"Maybe we should sit over here," he said, walking me to the yellow wooden bench right outside the *Swallow's* front door as we watched the police car drive off quickly. It turned the corner with only the back of my daddy's head showing through the rear window.

"Do you know why the police are taking him away?" Frankie asked finally, trying not to talk too loud, trying to be sweet to me.

"No," I answered. I had no idea. It was true Daddy seemed to get the kind of bosses who ended up firing him. And that just this week, his job selling houses had gone bad. But people hardly ever went to jail for getting fired, and he always found a new job sooner or later.

Mama didn't like him always changing jobs. Sometimes she said things about him that I wouldn't repeat to any one. Like we were better off with him not around all the time. And that closet skeletons and trouble summed Daddy up.

I thought we all lived in a straight forward Betty Crocker kind of way. But she thought it might be a good idea for Daddy to try living in an apartment for awhile. That in the long run, a Cancer – her- and a Sagittarius – him-couldn't stay together.

I didn't pay attention to her when she talked like that. I'd say, "I'm not listening, I can't hear you," with my hands pressed over my ears to keep the sound out. I knew she didn't always see things the way Daddy did.

They couldn't even agree on my name.

It was Daddy who'd started calling me Groovy, instead of my given name, Eleanor Robinson. Mama had given me the name Eleanor Robinson after her grandmother, on account of her being a famous writer of science fiction novels. Mama said it would be good luck for me because luck skipped to every fourth generation in our family.

Then one day when I was two years old, Daddy took me to work with him because Mama's hair salon didn't allow toddlers running about. While he was fixing cars at the gas station, which was his career before selling houses, he used to play the radio real loud. He said I danced all day, stopping only at lunchtime to eat oyster crackers. From then on he called me Groovy. Even now, Mama only calls me Eleanor when she's trying to impress someone. Like a teacher.

Daddy always did things like that. Things like changing my name without Mama's permission. And now I was gonna have to tell Mama that the police had taken him away. Something else she wouldn't like.

"I've never known anyone who's gone to jail before," I could barely say it. But I figured that's where they were taking him.

"Me neither," Frankie answered.

The morning heat curled around us. I felt my T-shirt sticking to my skin and the air pressing down hard.

Mama called this earthquake weather, and she went around flushing all the toilets in our house to make sure there was fresh water in the tank in case we needed it in an emergency. Because according to her, when the temperature rose above 80 degrees, and it wasn't even summer yet, the ground got restless.

"About that, Mama," I said to her every time she brought it up. "Miss Johnson told us that there's no such thing as earthquake weather, that earthquakes just happen on their own." But Mama would always roll her eyes and tell me Miss Johnson hadn't had enough life experiences to understand the forces of nature.

Mama was so afraid of earthquakes, and that one would come before she'd had the chance to wash her hair and apply her makeup for the day, that she kept a box filled with pink foam curlers, and free samples of cosmetics and hair products under the kitchen sink. All this so we would be ready for the Big One when it came, and the whole state of California separated from the rest of the U.S., floating off on its own.

I didn't worry much about those quakes the way she did, being born in California and used to them since I was a baby. I'd tell her, "A little shaking, no big deal."

Unlike Mama, who at 16 moved here from Louisiana, where all the ground does is slowly sink deeper below sea level every year. They couldn't even bury people after they died in Louisiana where she came from because sooner or later, they'd float back up to the surface. Instead, they built little houses for them and kept them on top of the ground, safe and sound.

"Do you want something to drink?" Frankie asked in his helpful voice because it was so hot. He knew what people needed before they did. For a person in sixth grade, he's pretty smart. Once, a customer came into the *Swallow*, and Frankie said, and I quote, "You look like you could use an Orangina and one of Luis' tacos. That customer looked right at Frankie amazed because what Frankie said was exactly what he wanted, right then and there.

“Yeah, but no thanks,” I said, getting up. “I have to go.”

“If you’re gonna tell your mom, I can come with you,” he stood up straight and stiff, like he was comparing himself to someone else to see who was taller.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “I should tell her by myself.”

And I started running as fast as I could up the hill thinking that this had to be some kind of mistake. And Mama and I would straighten it out right away.