





Chapter 1

An Unusual Conversation



“Daisy, don’t dawdle!” called her mother as Daisy Dawson ambled out into the sunshine and stopped to pick up a worm that was stranded on the path. “Miss Frink said you were late three times last week!”

Daisy smiled to herself as the worm wriggled in her hand.

Late three times.

That meant she had actually been on time twice.

Not too bad.

She tipped the worm into the flower bed and watched it burrow through the crumbly earth. Then she stood up, hitched her backpack over her shoulder, and skipped down the garden path.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” she said, dusting her hands together and swinging around the gatepost. “Daisy Dawson is on her way!”

The day was warm, and the sky was china blue. Bees buzzed among the foxgloves, and Daisy wandered down the lane, humming a little tune to herself.

Suddenly, from the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a beautiful yellow butterfly stuck in a spider’s web. As she crouched down to take a closer look, a black spider emerged from beneath a leaf and began crawling across the web toward it.



“Oh, no, you don’t!” said Daisy, cupping her hand protectively around the struggling insect. As the spider scuttled back to its hiding place, Daisy scooped the butterfly out of the web and carefully pulled some sticky strands from its wings.



“There you go,” she said. “Back in the world again.”

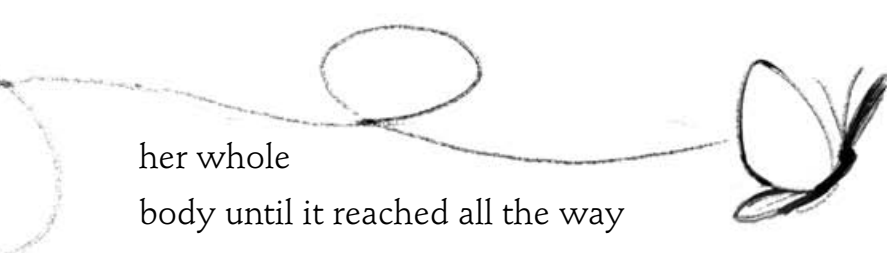
Then she smiled and opened her palms toward the sky.



The butterfly was still for a few moments. Then, very slowly, it spread its wings and fluttered gracefully up into the air. Daisy shielded her eyes against the sun and blinked as the butterfly swooped low past her face, brushing her cheek gently with the tip of its wing. Then it rose once more into the warm air and flew high into the treetops, growing smaller and smaller until finally it was lost from sight.

As Daisy watched it fly away, her cheek began to tingle as though something was sparkling beneath her skin. She touched a hand to her face, and a delicious warm feeling fizzed along her fingers, tumbling like a wave through





her whole
body until it reached all the way
down to the tips of her toes.

“That’s strange,” she whispered.

Just then, somewhere among the white blossoms of an apple tree, a blackbird began to sing. Its sweet music floated down through the spring sky and, to her astonishment, Daisy realized that she could understand exactly what the blackbird was singing about. The notes spun softly around her like strands of silk, weaving a song about clouds and apples, sunshine and stars.

Daisy gasped in surprise and shook her head.

“Now don’t be *silly*, Daisy,” she told herself. “Pull yourself together. Birds can’t talk.”

It was then that she remembered where she was supposed to be. Only yesterday,



Miss Frink had told her not to be late again.

Pulling up her backpack, she twirled around and wandered slowly onward toward school. Across the meadow, she could see the white mare tugging at tufts of grass in the shade of the beech tree. Daisy leaned on the gate and peered into the shadows of the tumbledown barn, trying to see if the old stray dog was around. She liked to share a bit of her lunch with him on the way to school. Ham sandwiches were his favorite, and she had made an extra one just in case.

“Rover?” she called, opening up her lunch box. “Rover, come and see what I’ve got for you!”

A large, grumpy-looking bloodhound stuck his head through a hole in the bricks, blinking and sneezing in the bright sunlight.

His fur was the color of sandstone, and his serious brown eyes stared out from folds of baggy skin that hung down around his face. As he padded toward her, his long floppy ears swung back and forth, flapping up dust from the dry ground.

When he reached the gate, he stopped and looked at her expectantly.

“Good morning,” he said in a deep, gravelly voice. “What’s on the menu today?”

Daisy was so shocked that she dropped her lunch box and put a hand up to her mouth.

This cannot be happening, she thought. She shut her eyes tightly for a moment or two, then opened them again.

The dog was still there, looking straight at her.





“Ex-excuse me,” Daisy said uncertainly, still unable to believe her ears, “but did you say something to me?”

“Of course,” replied the dog. “It would have been rude not to.” He paused for a moment as if deep in thought, then said slowly, “Wait a minute. . . . Do you actually understand what I’m saying to you?”

“Yes,” replied Daisy. “I think I do.”

The dog made a noise somewhere between a bark and a laugh.

“This,” he said, “is amazing!”

"But you understand me as well," said Daisy. "So that's pretty amazing too."

The dog cocked his head to one side.

"Dogs always understand what humans say," he replied.

"No, they don't," said Daisy. "Take my aunt Kathy's dog. He never does anything she tells him."

The dog's brow crinkled like a little plowed field.

"That doesn't mean he doesn't *understand* her," he said. "He probably just doesn't want to do it."

"Oh," said Daisy thoughtfully. "I see what you mean."

"There you go, then," said the dog.

There was silence for a moment while the two of them thought about this. Then the dog said, "My name's not Rover, by the way. It's Boom." Seeing the puzzled look on

Daisy's face, he added, "I was born on the Fourth of July, you see."

"Really?" Daisy said, smiling. "That must have been a shock for you."

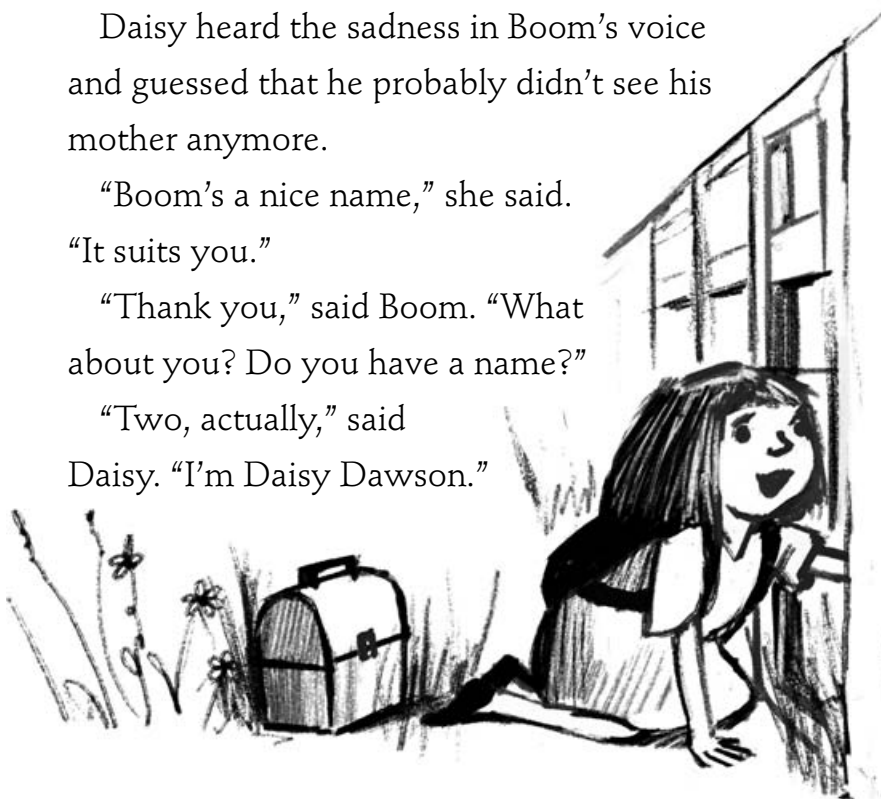
"It was," agreed Boom. "The first things I saw when I opened my eyes were a thousand fireworks exploding above me. Huge blazing stars of red, green, orange, and gold. My mother said it was the whole world celebrating my birthday."

Daisy heard the sadness in Boom's voice and guessed that he probably didn't see his mother anymore.

"Boom's a nice name," she said. "It suits you."

"Thank you," said Boom. "What about you? Do you have a name?"

"Two, actually," said Daisy. "I'm Daisy Dawson."



“Well, Daisy Dawson,” said Boom, “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance at last.”

“Likewise,” said Daisy, and she stuck her arm through the gate.

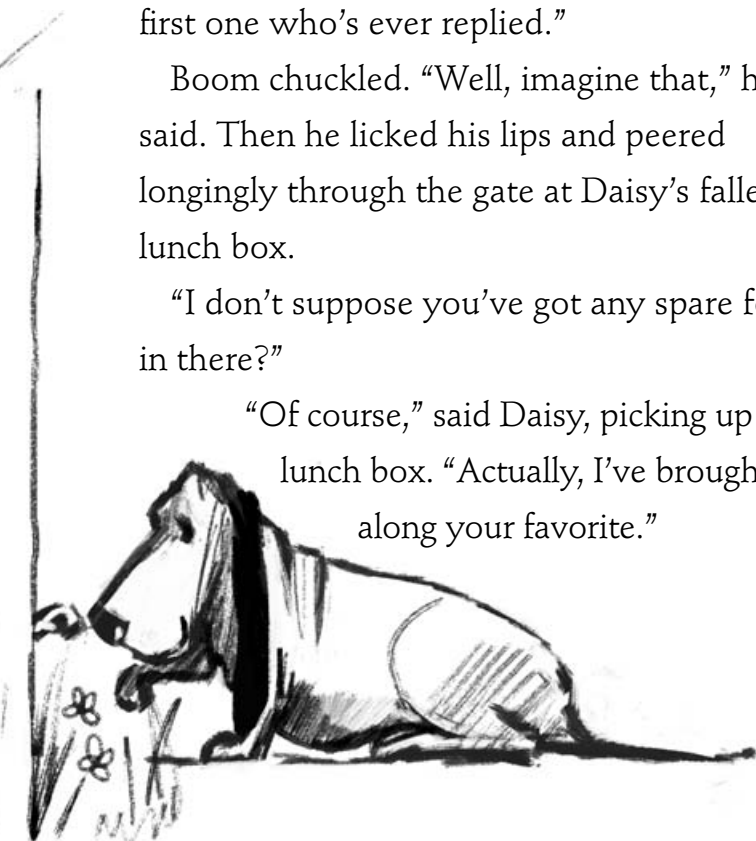
Boom put his soft paw into her hand. As Daisy shook it, he asked, “Am I the first dog you’ve ever spoken to?”

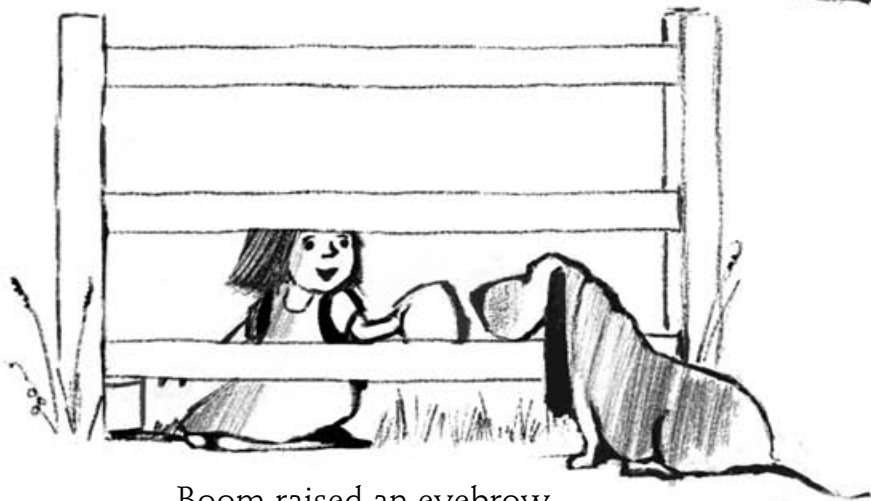
“Not exactly,” said Daisy. “I mean, I’ve spoken to lots of dogs before. But you’re the first one who’s ever replied.”

Boom chuckled. “Well, imagine that,” he said. Then he licked his lips and peered longingly through the gate at Daisy’s fallen lunch box.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got any spare food in there?”

“Of course,” said Daisy, picking up the lunch box. “Actually, I’ve brought along your favorite.”





Boom raised an eyebrow.

"Not *ham*?" he asked.

"Honey-roasted," said Daisy, producing a sandwich with a flourish. "Extra thick."

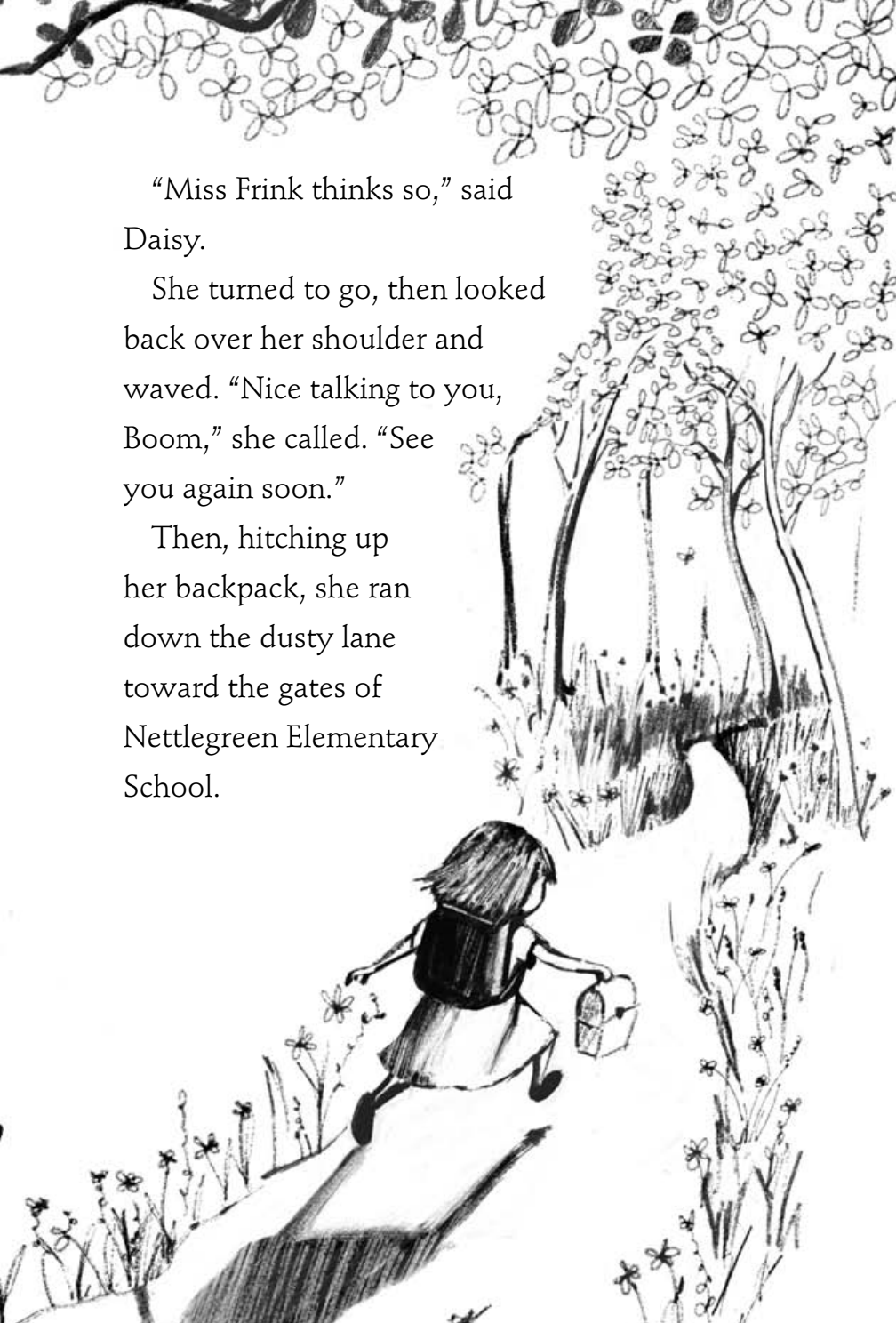
"You," said Boom, "are an angel from heaven."

Daisy giggled. "Tell that to Miss Frink."

Then she looked at her watch and remembered.

"Oh, my goodness," she exclaimed. "I'm going to be late for school!"

"Is that bad?" asked Boom through a mouthful of sandwich.



“Miss Frink thinks so,” said Daisy.

She turned to go, then looked back over her shoulder and waved. “Nice talking to you, Boom,” she called. “See you again soon.”

Then, hitching up her backpack, she ran down the dusty lane toward the gates of Nettlegreen Elementary School.