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Opening extract from

A Dog Called Flow

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Chapter One

I Need a Dog

The day had started happily.

"I want a dog," Oliver told his parents at breakfast. "I really want a dog."

"Well I really want an elephant!" Sally butted in.

"You've already got an elephant!" said Dad, pulling Sally's ponytail.

"No, I haven't!"

"Yes, you have. Over there!" Dad pointed to the old tin trunk by the window where Inkypuss lay in a smug hug of catty sleep.

"That's Inky, and she's a cat!" said Sally.

"No she isn't," said Dad. "I'll prove to you that she's an elephant, shall I?"

Great, thought Oliver. Dad was in a good mood. Perhaps he should ask again about a dog sometime after school? Somehow when Oliver talked with Dad these days the fun wasn't there

as it was with Sally. With Oliver conversations got serious. But perhaps tonight…?

"Now to begin with, Sally, what colour are elephants?" asked Dad.

"Grey," said Sally.

"And what colour is Inkypuss?"

"She's mixed. Black and white mixed."

"And what do you get if you mix black and white?"

"Grey, but…"

"Exactly!" said Dad. "There you are then!"

Oliver's gaze wandered through the small panes of the kitchen window to the craggy sunlit fellside beyond. Only a week and a day until school broke up, and then the summer holidays. It would be brilliant if he could have a dog. He only half-listened to Dad and Sally.

"But elephants are big!"

"Ha, but just imagine that you are a mouse, Sally."

"OK, I'm a mouse. So what?"

"So Inkypuss comes around the corner. Is she big, or is she small?"

"Big, but …"

"No buts. Told you so. She's an elephant!"

"But she hasn't got a trunk!"

"And what, Sally Clever Clogs Pilkington, is that thing that she is sleeping on at this very moment?"

"A trunk, but …"

"There you are then. Totally proven. We don't need an elephant because we've got one already. Now get ready for school, you two."

I wonder how he'll argue against a dog, thought Oliver? I'll find out this evening.

Then he and Sally had gone to school and everything had gone horribly wrong in a way that was all too familiar.

Oliver sat alone in the classroom. Everyone else had had lunch in the hall, but he was still



at his table, paper in front of him, pen in his hand, a tight muddle in his head. That muddle was stopping him from writing what he had to write. He couldn't join the others in their lunchtime freedom, not until he'd finished the work. He could see a ghostly reflection of his face in the window. A stupid face, he thought as he saw the round head topped with scruffy brown hair, round eyes, wide mouth in a thin unhappy line, and a slightly squashed-looking nose. He'd give anything for a sharp foxy face and red hair like Craig's. Even glasses or a brace on his teeth would make him look more interesting.

And then the ghostly picture of Oliver was joined by some ghostly voices. At first Oliver didn't take any particular notice of the mutter of voices that came through the thin wall from the school office next door, but then he heard his name mentioned. He froze still on his chair and listened hard. He recognised the talking voice as his mother's. His fingers were suddenly cold and clammy. Who was she talking to about him? Mum was the school secretary and lots of people came into the office who might talk with her. But he relaxed a bit when he heard the other voice and it wasn't the voice of Mrs Cox, his teacher. It must be Alison Tyson, Craig's mum. She was a school dinner lady and a friend

of his mum's. He could just make out what Mum was saying.

"Mrs Cox does her best, I know, but she's so old-fashioned. She says that Oliver is such a nice boy" and "so helpful when it comes to tidy-up time," but she still insists that he is backward as far as work is concerned. It's such an awful word, isn't it – backward? She thinks that I'm a silly doting mother who won't face the truth when I tell her that I think he's really a very bright lad." Then Mum's voice went quieter and Oliver had to listen hard to hear the next bit.

"But there certainly is something wrong; something holding him back."

Then it was Mrs Tyson's voice.

"Mrs Cox retires next week. Perhaps he'll get a more helpful teacher next term. If he's keen to learn, he might still be able to catch up with the others."

Then it was Mum again.

"Well, I wonder? He used to be so keen in the Infants' class at his old school, but now he seems to have given up even trying. It's heart-breaking really. There he is at ten years old, struggling to read the books that Sally brings home from school. And she's only five! It's not just his schoolwork either. Only this morning it took him a good half-hour to get his school things together, and I'd bet that he's still forgotten half of what he needs!"

Oliver put his fingers in his ears. He'd heard it all before, sometimes to his face and sometimes in conversations he wasn't meant to hear. But he didn't need to hear it. He knew it all for himself. He *was* "backward", just as Mrs Cox said. He didn't blame her for saying that.

She was right. After all, just as Mum had guessed, here he sat because he had forgotten something. His pencil case. Now he had to write out "I will not forget to bring my pencil case to school" five times over. Craig could have done that in two minutes and been back outside playing with the others. But somehow Oliver's brain, his hands, the pen and paper all seemed to make it impossible for him.

His school dinner lay on a tray on his desk beside his work. It was going cold and rubbery. Oliver wasn't hungry anyway. Mrs Cox had said that he was to have the lines correctly and neatly done by the end of lunchtime. If not, she would have to "talk to your parents again about your sloppy attitude and sloppy results, Oliver! After all," she had added, her three chins all wobbling, "it isn't a difficult task for a boy of your age!" But to Oliver it was. So impossibly difficult that he was sweating and felt sick with the effort of trying to write. He looked down at the smeared messy lines that he had written so far, and he didn't

know whether or not they were correct. "Could do better," his school reports always said. What Oliver wanted to know was how? How, how, how could he do better?

Suddenly all the other children tumbled out of the hall door to run free in the playground on the other side of the window. Their dancing grey shadows mocked Oliver as they moved across the wall and across him. A big pale boy came up to the window. He pressed his nose white against the glass and used his fingers to pull his face into an ugly monster shape. He shouted, "Potty Pilkington! Potty Pilkington! His dad's a potter and he's just potty! Olly the wally!"

Some of the other children in Oliver's class, and even some of the younger ones, pressed up against the glass too. Oliver felt like the gorilla he had seen in a zoo that banged its head on the wall all day long, and people laughed at it. Now they were laughing at him. And Craig was there too, laughing with the others.

Oliver knew that it was easy to be horrible when you did it as part of a crowd. He had done it to the student teacher last term. His whole class had ganged together and got noisier and naughtier until the teacher had burst into tears. But he hadn't thought that Craig would ever do that to him.

Oliver had admired Craig ever since Oliver's family had moved to the valley a year ago. Craig was brave and funny and bright, and Oliver wished very much that they could be special friends. He knew that Craig must think him stupid and dull, and so he had never yet dared to invite him home to play after school. Still, he liked to hope that it might happen one day. The jeers went on and on, and Oliver clenched his fists.

"Potty Oliver Pilkington! I bet he still uses a potty!"

They all laughed again, and Oliver felt his ears burn red. Did they somehow know about the wet sheets in his bed last night? How could they know? In a fury of embarrassment, Oliver suddenly picked up the plate of flan, chips and peas, and he hurled it at the children at the window. Pudding followed. Then, without waiting to see what sort of a mess he'd made, or to see whether they all laughed at that too, he ran.

Oliver ran, slamming doors behind him and not caring who saw him, but he ran fast and far in order to escape.

Beside the school ran a path that went up through a heavy-scented tall tangle of rhododendron plants. Their big green leaves and huge mauve flowers hid him instantly from the school and the road, but he still ran on,

slamming through a kissing gate and up on to the open fell.

There Oliver stopped at last. He stood still, just panting and letting the warmth of the sun and the breeze of the wind soothe him. He could see the sea from up here. It was several miles away, but on a clear day like today he could look right down the valley towards the flat marshy estuary. The sea beyond was slate grey, and out on the horizon was the dark shallow whale-hump of the Isle of Man. Further up the coast the great steaming cooling towers of the nuclear power station poured columns of white cloud into a sky that was otherwise cloudless. It was perfect weather to be up on the fell.

The fell itself was rough ground of steep shale and gentler sloping grassland where sheep grazed, taking no notice at all of Oliver. The path zig-zagged up the slope around boulders and bracken towards the mountain tops, but Oliver liked to leave the path and be really alone. He could explore streams and watch buzzards hovering and swooping on their prey for hours on end and be sure not to meet anybody. Up here he was above and away from the confusions of school and home. Up here he could sort himself out. Sometimes he cried, sometimes he sang, sometimes he went silently and sometimes he

talked to himself. Now he surprised himself because out on the fell, walking free, that tight need to cry that had knotted his chest at school eased, and his thoughts turned back to his longing for a dog.

I *need* a dog, he thought. A dog to be his companion on these walks over the fells. A dog to play games in the river with. A dog to be at his side and look fierce if anyone came and threatened him. A dog who would love him loyally and uncritically. A dog who would obey his word and never mind what Oliver could or couldn't do at school. He'd asked for a dog so many times before, but now he really ached with the need for one.

Oliver went home at normal going-home from school time, but his family knew all about his school dinner throwing, and his running away. It was not a good moment to ask for a dog. As he stepped through the kitchen door, his mother started.

"Well, Oliver! What have you got to say for yourself this time? Already in trouble, and you go and damage school property, and then break the law by running away from school! I told Mrs Cox that you would explain and apologise on Monday morning, but I want an explanation from you right now!" She was shouting, and then her face crumpled and her voice went quiet. "Oh, Olly, I

just don't know what to do with you any more!"

Sally stood beside Mum, clasping and unclasping her hands. She hated these Oliver-rows almost as much as Oliver did. Then Dad came banging in from the garden.

"Where the hell have you been, Oliver?" As he leaned over Oliver and shouted, spit flew out of his mouth.

"Your mum came home in tears, and I've been searching for you half the afternoon when I should have been working. I'll be up most of the night to catch up now!" Then, when Oliver didn't respond, "Where *were* you? We were worried!"

"I was up on the fell. And please, Dad, Mum, please, *please* can I have a dog?"

"Do you really think," asked his mother, holding Oliver by the shoulders and shaking him slightly, "Do you really think that you are responsible enough to look after a dog when you can't even look after yourself?"

Dad just shook his head and pointed firmly towards the stairs.

"Up to your room, Oliver. And the answer to the dog question, once and for all, is a very definite 'No'!"