

AMANDA MITCHISON

CROGG

HE FAILED ONCE. HE WILL NOT FAIL AGAIN.

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About the Book

It began with the bowl.

When Wilf sees it in the local museum, he's strangely mesmerized - and he knows he has to take it. Sneaking out with it under his jacket, he spots two men in dark suits heading purposefully inside, and something tells him to run.

When he wakes up the next morning, there's someone in his room: Crog.

Dressed in rags, with black stubs for teeth and a grisly rope around his neck, Crog was tasked three thousand years ago with protecting the bowl from those who wish to harness its power. He failed once. But he won't fail again.

Minutes later, the doorman at Wilf's apartment is lying dead, and the suits are closing in. Wilf, Crog and Wilf's sister Ishbel are suddenly on the run - and those who want the bowl are only one step behind.

CROG

The title 'CROG' is rendered in a bold, distressed, metallic font. The letter 'O' is a solid circle containing a black silhouette of a person running. The letters have a grainy, textured appearance with some white speckling and a slightly weathered look.

AMANDA MITCHISON

RHCP DIGITAL

For Shosh

cròg, -òige: hand, clutch, claw or fist.

Làn mo chròige de'n òr bhuidhe:

My fist full of yellow gold.

From Edward Dwelly's Gaelic-English Dictionary

CHAPTER 1

SOMETIMES YOU JUST have to get out. Wilf felt stale and bored. His thumbs ached from the console and he'd drunk too many sports drinks with 'go faster' stripes on the side. A packet of BBQ-rib crisps was repeating on him.

So he went outside. But outside was stale and bored too. He trudged along the river, with a grey sky overhead and the tower blocks of London tilting down at him. He skirted a rotten gangway that melted down into the water. Underfoot it was horrible. That was the thing about Wapping: neither dry ground nor water; just pebbles and slime and mud. Mud and builders' boards. And more mud.

The Thames slid slowly past, a few fluffed-up ducks on the surface. One duck had a trail of fluffed-up ducklings behind her.

Wilf stared at the black water. Lucky ducks - able to fluff up like that. He couldn't do that - he didn't have feathers; he didn't have much in the way of clothes either - just his biker's jacket with the aluminium foil in the lining to trick security sensors. He didn't do hats or scarves. And he only half did jeans - they were hanging down around his crotch, so his bum was freezing.

Soon he'd had enough. A small flight of steps brought him up onto the road. He scanned the landscape for a good warm newsagent's. He needed a cigarette, or at least a packet of sweets. But there was nothing.

He walked on, taking an underpass and coming up in a clearing among the tower blocks. The area was paved, with a few shrubs and a fountain in the centre. On the far side stood the museum.

Did the museum have a café? At least it'd be warm. And it would look good – give him something to talk about when Mr Robertson asked him if he'd been spending his time productively.

Wilf crossed the square and entered through a revolving glass door.

The museum had fourteen interconnecting rooms, but no café. And there was nowhere to sit down – the only chair was taken by a snoozing security guard, a great sausage of a man with little bracelets of fat at his wrists. Wilf was the only person there – the place was silent, and the rustle of his aluminium foil sounded loud.

He wandered through into the first room.

Wilf quite liked museums. Even if the exhibits were pointless, the security arrangements were always interesting. And this museum had recently had a glossy makeover. There was two-centimetre-thick reinforced glass, high-output alarm sirens, micro movement detectors with small blinking red lights. It must've cost a bomb.

Wilf turned his attention to the display cases, which mostly, according to the blurb in the entrance hall, housed finds from Britain's coastal waters. And there was an awful lot of stuff – everyone who'd ever crossed the Thames seemed to have thrown something in. Even policemen were guilty of littering: there was an entire case given over to old watermarked truncheons.

As he went from room to room, the displays receded back through the centuries: fragments of china, broken clay pipes, old buttons, an Anglo-Saxon bone comb with most of the teeth missing. What could you do with a toothless comb? It was all rubbish really. Ancient rubbish.

Wilf moved on, passing bronze helmets and swords. He stumbled into the next room, only half noticing a large red banner overhead mentioning new acquisitions. Then something startled him. He stopped, and he looked.

Standing in the very middle of the polished floor was a large glass case. And inside this case was just one thing – a small wooden bowl with a thin, serrated gold rim and a small chip on one side. That was all. There was nothing else – only this one beautiful bowl.

Wilf walked up to the case quietly, as if the bowl were listening. He read the label, which said that this was a very recent find from an excavation on the shores of Loch Etive, on the west coast of Scotland, led by the late Professor John Williams of Glasgow University. Below was a small newspaper cutting: the bowl, it seemed, had arrived at the museum that very morning. So hardly anyone had seen it – possibly just Wilf and a few museum staff; and, of course, the late Professor Williams. And why call him ‘late’? That was stupid. The dead were dead, weren’t they? Not *late*.

Wilf stood very still. As he rested his gaze on the bowl, he felt a thick wave of silence break over him. The wood was darker than mahogany and very smooth; it had a silky sheen. There was no decoration except for the gold rim and the natural markings of the wood – three very faint growth rings. The rings banded the bowl like tropics around a globe; the wood must have come from the very centre of the tree.

Wilf studied the bowl. Yet, just for a moment, the bowl seemed to evade him and he caught a glimmer of two round, deep-set eyes – his eyes, of course – reflected back at him in the glass. He must get more sleep.

He looked again.

The bowl really was the perfect size. And the shape was just right too: the sides were not too steep, and the bottom not too shallow. If he were out walking in the mountains and he knelt down and cupped his hands to drink from a stream, then this was exactly the size of bowl his hands would make. And the little chip on one side was just like one of the cracks there would be in between his fingers.

This bowl . . . Simple. Beautiful. Perfect.

And it said *Take me!*

His pulse quickened. He felt alive. The afternoon no longer stretched out before him. Now he had something he wanted to do, even if it meant disappointing Mr Robertson.

Wilf looked hard at the bowl.

The bowl glowed back at Wilf.

Take me!

This wasn't his first time. A lot of things in life said *Take me!* to Wilf. And Wilf, being a kindly soul, usually tried to oblige. Before his last conviction he'd liberated countless car radios and items of jewellery as well as some top-of-the-range vehicles.

But with this bowl, it was different. This was not remotely sensible. The bowl would be completely traceable. Zero resale value. Yet this was something he simply had to do.

Should he? Shouldn't he?

It wasn't his fault. The bowl just seemed to pull him in.

Wilf's eyes flitted around the display case.

Hold on!

The little red light of the motion detector was no longer flashing. He checked the security camera in the top corner of the room and could clearly see that the internal shutter was down. This too had been deactivated!

That was odd. Maybe the system was still being tested, or having a few start-up glitches. But it was as good as an invitation. Why was he waiting?

For just a millisecond he wrestled with his conscience. *Wrestle* wasn't really the right word. For Wilf was a big, tall Year Eight, and his conscience was a mere puny, knock-kneed Year Six. So no contest really.

Wilf glanced behind him, thrust his hand into his jeans pocket and brought out a small silver pen. He quickly unscrewed the top. Inside was a miniature carborundum-tipped drill. He pressed the drill head against the glass and slid back the release switch on the motor.

The drill made a screeching noise as it bored its way through the glass. Even though he had to press hard, Wilf found himself smiling. This really *was* a good gadget.

He drew the drill round, making a circle in the glass. His breathing was completely steady, his movements fluid. He felt light, as if he were dancing.

He pushed the circle of glass into the case, shutting his eyes and wincing as he did so. No alarm sounded. No siren. There was no stopping him now. And he even had time for a little joke. He took up the drill again and added two more little circles up above, so that the hole gained Mickey Mouse ears.

Wilf thrust his hand through the hole and, in a soundless instant, grabbed the bowl. A little surge of fire crept up his spine.

The bowl was as light as a biscuit.

He opened his jacket and slipped it into the largest of his internal pockets. The bowl had no electronic marker tags, so for once he didn't need the foil lining he'd so carefully sewn in. All the same, the aluminium might protect the bowl if he had to do a runner.

He didn't need to run. And he never ran, not if he didn't have to. Instead he strode briskly - very briskly - towards the exit.

He was smiling when he came to the main hall. His fingertips, his face, his body, his mind - everything tingled. He felt fantastic! He always felt fantastic when he'd turned a good trick. Particularly if he'd carried it out with style. And today had been a polished performance - the Mickey Mouse ears were such a nice touch.

As he passed by, the fat security guard snuffled in his sleep.

There was still no alarm. Still no siren. It was all *too* easy.

Wilf pushed at the revolving door, and saw two men in suits hurrying up to the front steps. He went in, and at the same moment, they entered from the other side. He

pushed; they pushed. The mechanism jammed and the turnstile halted.

And so now Wilf was stuck in his glass cubicle. A fly in amber. The two men in the other cubicle looked thin and wiry and not entirely clean. Yet the suits were sharp and clearly expensive.

One of the men was smoking a cigarillo. He pushed against the door – and Wilf saw the muscle down the side of his face harden with frustration. There was something not quite right about the men. They were not museum sorts. Too watchful. Too pent up. Slightly creepy. Not normal mortals. Security detail for some Russian oligarch? Mercenaries? Police? And why a cigarillo? No proper person smoked those.

Wilf looked out at the square. The sky had darkened and hail was bouncing on the paving stones. That was quick – he'd only been in the museum a few minutes.

The turnstile still wasn't moving; he was stuck. Wilf took out his mobile and fired off a quick text to Fred, a useful friend and rival with whom he kept up a little tally. He tapped, *Dun a quality job! Way out of yr league!* and pinged it off.

Suddenly uncomfortable, he lifted his gaze. The two men were staring at him through the glass partition. So Wilf looked down at his feet, and at their feet. The man nearest to him was wearing shoes made of an exotic leather covered in small, regular bumps. What was it? Peccary? Toad? Iguana?

If only the door would move! Wilf focused on the shoes. Expensive, and vulgar. He knew the men were still looking at him. But why shouldn't they look at him?

Now, he could tell, they were *examining* him. And he wasn't a museum exhibit. Or a museum sort, either.

Wilf was only one metre away from them. Only one metre. He *must not* sweat!

Scared? He had to face them.

He turned and gave them a wide, sleepy smile. The man furthest from him – he had dark hair sweeping back from his forehead with a badger’s streak of white to one side – lowered his gaze to fiddle with an extraordinary round, shiny silver thing that looked like a mobile; it opened and closed like a starfish. The nearer man – hard grey eyes and a stubby snout of a nose – went on staring. *I’d call him ‘Snout’,* thought Wilf. *Badger and Snout.*

Wilf’s mobile gave a tiny electronic cough, as if it were clearing its throat. And at the same time, with a judder, the revolving door started moving round again.

As Wilf stepped out into the square he caught the sweet, slightly musty smell of cigar smoke. The hail beat down on his shoulders.

Strange how the weather had changed – you shouldn’t get hail in May. Strange too about the alarm being switched off. And why were the security cameras not working? Why the sleeping warden? And those men . . . Police? But he’d heard no sirens, no alarms. And they’d come too quickly – normally you had at least ten minutes before anyone showed up. And he’d been so near them he could see the pores in their skin. That wasn’t right. Not right at all.

For Wilf, all this strangeness came together in one most unusual sensation – a jolt of fear. And the fear pinched him in the knees, so that on the bottom step he stumbled.

But he was curious. He wanted to know more. He needed to find a vantage point and see who these men were. Of course, later he wondered why he didn’t just go straight home. But he didn’t. He always had to go too far, always had to push his luck. Mr Robertson was right. That was, and always would be, his downfall.

CHAPTER 2

WILF TOOK THE nearest exit, heading east out of the square. Once out of sight of the museum, he turned into a hotel car park, ducked under the barriers, and doubled back to where the road joined the far end of the square. At the corner, he hid behind some dustbins. The hail pinged loudly – as if a giant were drumming his fingernails on the metal lids.

From here Wilf could see the museum entrance – but he was not too dangerously near. Or so he thought.

He peered round the bins. Nothing. Nobody at the entrance. Nobody on the steps. No sound of an alarm. No sirens. No police cars.

The revolving door flicked round, and out came the two men. For a second they stood there. One of them, Snout, scanned the square, while Badger looked down at the silver thing in his hand.

Wilf's phone gave another tiny cough.

Badger nodded towards the bins. He and Snout leaped down the steps three at a time. They hit the square running.

Wilf clambered out from behind the bins. He dashed back down the road, now slippery with melting hail.

They weren't particularly big men, but they were fit. And in an open space they'd outrun him in minutes.

He vaulted the barricade into the hotel car park. He passed a nice lime-green Jaguar XF Concept – no time now to take it. And the colour would stand out.

He didn't have much time. He had to think of something.
Think!

But he couldn't think, so he just ran.

Now they were not far behind. Not far at all.

At the end of the car park there was a bicycle with its security chain looped round some metal fencing. That wouldn't take too long. He got out his favourite gadget, flicked on the motor and pressed the drill bit down against the padlock. The drill swivelled and swirled, going round slower and slower. It was running out of juice.

Wilf breathed angrily. Definitely *not* his favourite gadget any more.

The drill came to a stop.

He glanced up. Badger was at the barrier, but Snout was in the car park, running towards him.

Maybe sixty metres away? Or less.

Wilf tried the drill once more. Dead.

Forty metres now. And he was still tinkering away like an idiot!

He tugged at the padlock. Maybe the drill had already done enough damage? For a moment the lock juddered. Then it clicked open.

He pulled at the chain; it caught against the railings. Again he tugged, and this time it came free.

Snout was only five metres away now, and putting on a last catch-up spurt of speed. There was only one thing now that Wilf could do. With a force he didn't know he had, he threw the chain and it flew through the air, a snake of metal that hit the legs of the running man.

Those few shavings of a second while Snout groaned and fell were just long enough. Wilf swung his leg over the bike. Head ducked down, he pedalled like crazy. He was away! Through the car-park entrance and on up the road, weaving round cars and bucking the bike up onto pavements and down again.

Soon his hands were freezing; the hail was still pelting down, stinging his face and setting off car alarms. The bike seat was far too low, but Wilf didn't care.

He came out onto a main road. Had he lost them?

He looked back. No one behind him. But he knew it wasn't over. Police and security detail always had wheels. They'd be making for their unmarked car. Maybe they were already taking a loop round and charging back down the road towards him. Or maybe they were lying in wait.

Up ahead, a silver Mercedes suddenly stopped just before the roundabout. Cars were beeping and swerving round it.

Wilf braked too. He could just make out two men sitting in the front of the car. Were they *his* men, Snout and Badger? It seemed likely, but he couldn't be sure, as his view was blocked by the neck rests. Luckily, however, the office block to his right had a mirrored front. Wilf looked in the glass - it presented a perfect profile of the silver Mercedes. But the reflection showed an *empty* silver Mercedes. There was no driver, even though the car was moving, and no one in the passenger seat.

What was going on? A second ago he'd seen the backs of their heads, and now there was no one. People don't just disappear. And cars don't drive themselves - even a Mercedes.

Maybe it was the hail? Or the mirrored glass wasn't right? Or his nerves were getting the better of him? But there was no time now to worry about anything. Wilf made for the pavement and, standing on the pedals, juddered down the steps to the underpass. The tunnel stank of urine but he didn't care. He just sped on through and swerved up the ramp on the far side.

He came up on the east side of the roundabout. Instantly horns blared and brakes screamed and the Mercedes sped through the traffic, cutting across cars and bumping slow drivers out of the way. Now Wilf didn't need any mirrored office front. He could see only too well. It *was* Badger and Snout in the front seats. Badger was driving straight towards Wilf - straight *at* him. The car would surely break the railings like matchsticks.

To one side Wilf saw a gap between the buildings and a line of bollards cordoning off a pedestrian precinct. He dived between the bollards, passing café tables and rows of plants in big pots.

He was riding high now. Grinning inanely, he thanked God for the bollards and for the bad weather that had emptied the precinct of toddlers and slow-moving old ladies with little dogs, all of whom he would certainly have ploughed straight into.

Wilf raced on. He came to a narrow alley littered with piles of cardboard boxes and huge metal crates. He'd taken this route several times before and he glanced up. The metal barrier at the far end was down, blocking access to vehicles. So no nasty surprises.

Yet.

His phone coughed again. He glanced up. At the end of the alley he could see the silver nose of a car that had just pulled up by the kerb.

The Mercedes.

He swivelled the handlebars round. Back he went, down the alley, and left past the café. He threw the bike down by the bollards, and flattened himself against the side of the building. He looked out. No silver Mercedes.

Yet.

Instead there was a black taxi with its FOR HIRE light on. Just waiting to save him. Only he wasn't the first to spot it – a middle-aged man in a suit had marched out the café and was nearly at the cab. But that wasn't a problem. Wilf ran up and tapped him lightly on the arm.

'Excuse me, sir,' said Wilf in his party best voice, 'but you've left your card at the till.'

The man gave a start of surprise, thanked him and turned back towards the café.

Wilf got into the taxi. 'Canary Wharf, please.'

The taxi driver took a road that bridged West India Quay. He was driving above two grey-green blocks of water.

Wilf sank back into the upholstery. They'd be onto him again soon. Canary Wharf was the right place, for he knew all its emergency staircases and anonymous concrete backways. He'd confuse them. Split them up. Funny that he'd not heard a siren yet. These men were smart. How did they know he was going to take that alleyway?

His mobile gave another little cough . . . *That's* how they knew. The mobile. They'd been tracking his movements. *They* weren't stupid. *He* was stupid.

He wound down the window. Still no silver Mercedes. But there was no time now to take out the SIM card. He just flung the phone out of the window. It was quite a drop down into the quay and Wilf heard no splash, nothing.

Just a tired sigh from inside the cab.

The cab driver looked at Wilf reproachfully in the rear-view mirror. 'You don't have any money on you, do you?'

Wilf looked shocked. 'Of course I do!'

Of course he didn't.

CHAPTER 3

WILF WAS STILL half asleep. The light hurt. He kept his eyes closed. Already he knew that something was wrong.

There was a smell. A ripe, sewagey smell. A smell that might be OK on a farm. Only Wilf didn't live on a farm. Wilf lived in central London. He was in bed, at home in his father's luxury flat on the sixth floor of Wilmot Towers.

So something was not right.

Wilf woke up a little more. Eh? What was this? He was not alone. There was a presence in the corner of his room. A presence that he could just tell was watching him. Who was it? A friend on the run?

The presence made a squelching sound.

Then it coughed.

Wilf opened one eye. Crouched there was a muddy, bedraggled boy dressed in a brown jerkin. He had skin the colour of an old pub ceiling and brown hair that hung down in long, wet tendrils. He was stroking the windowpane. Wilf shut his eyes again. He felt outraged. It was yet another waif and stray. How on earth had he snuck into the building? What was Jenkins thinking letting someone like that through? *And* at this hour? And why did they always have to come to *him*?

Wilf felt on the ground by his bed for a packet of cigarettes. The packet was empty. What a rubbish morning. He rolled over towards the wall. But that was a bad move – for his back and thighs ached horribly from all the pedalling yesterday.

And now there was this strange boy. And the smell.