

Praise for Matt Johnson

"I thoroughly enjoyed *Crow 27*. Matt Johnson's detailed research, in-depth knowledge and ability to tell a brilliant story combine to create an important work of fiction. A must read." – **Johnny Mercer**.

"Emergency or armed services, no matter the uniform, if you served or know someone who served, you should read this story." – **Chris Ryan MM**.

"A gripping read I can thoroughly recommend. I read this book with great interest; it has a real aura of reality and illustrates the difficulties faced by an investigating officer in such circumstances." – **Lord Stevens**, former Commissioner, Metropolitan Police.

"Think *Where Eagles Dare* meets *Zero Dark Thirty*. A chillingly-real, rollercoaster read." - **Damien Lewis**.

"Matt Johnson truly nails it in a twisting, turning and authentic story capturing the culture of abuse surrounding female soldiers. I feel honoured at having had the opportunity to read this." – **Jane MacSorley**, Producer, BBC Panorama Documentary '*Bullied to Death*' and 2021 Audible Podcast '*Death at Deepcut*'.

"From a writer at the top of his game. Johnson is a natural." – **Matthew Hall**, Writer of '*Keeping Faith*' and '*The Coroner*' series.

"Terse, tense and vivid writing. Matt Johnson is a brilliant new name in the world of thrillers." – **Peter James**.

About the author

Matt Johnson served as a soldier and Metropolitan Police officer for twenty-five years. Blown off his feet at the London Baltic Exchange bombing in 1993 and one of the first officers on scene at the Regent's Park bombing in 1992, Matt was also at the Libyan People's Bureau shooting in 1984 where he escorted his mortally wounded friend and colleague, WPC Yvonne Fletcher, to hospital.

Hidden wounds took their toll. In 1999, Matt was discharged from the police suffering with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. While undergoing treatment, he was encouraged to undertake writing therapy where he described his experience of murders, shootings and terrorism. One evening, he sat at his computer and started to weave these notes into a work of fiction that he described as having a tremendously cathartic effect on his condition. The result was the best-selling thriller *Wicked Game*, a novel nominated for the CWA John Creasey Dagger and which became the highest rated debut novel on Amazon UK in 2016. In 2018, Matt was voted at No.22 in the WH Smith reader survey to identify the all-time best crime writers, worldwide.

Also by Matt Johnson; -

Wicked Game

Deadly Game

End Game

Follow Matt at www.mattjohnsonauthor.com or on Twitter: @Matt_Johnson_UK

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Matt Johnson

Crow 27



'Inside the wire, we make the rules.'

Dedicated to the memory of

Captain Tina Lee Jones, Royal Logistics Corps

(18.01.1977 – 17.01.2019)

And to the inspiring memories of Privates Sean Benton, Cheryl James, James Collinson and Geoff Gray, also of the Royal Logistics Corps, and to their families, friends and supporters who continue to seek the truth about their deaths, to obtain justice, and to experience closure.

And for Anna, who taught me a young soldier's bravery isn't exclusive to the battlefield.

Desolate is the Crow's puckered cry
As an old woman's mouth
When the eyelids have finished
And the hills continue.
A cry
Wordless
As the newborn baby's grieving
On the steely scales.
As the dull gunshot and its after-rale
Among conifers, in rainy twilight.
Or the suddenly dropped, heavily dropped
Star of blood on the fat leaf.

From *Life and Songs of the Crow*, by Ted Hughes.

Chapter 1

June 2004. Munster barracks, Germany.

'What a way to spend your last day.' Corporal Ellie Rodgers stared dejectedly at her reflection in the window of the NAAFI storeroom. A shiver ran down her spine. The wind had picked up, the rain rattling angrily against the panes as if determined to break through. Behind her, the door from the bar area opened and a tall figure in a grey windcheater appeared. It was Ron Murphy, her Sergeant.

'You ready, Scouse?' he called.

'He'll never come out in this.' Ellie said over her shoulder, half hoping, half praying the job was off.

Ron closed the door behind him. 'It's perfect cover,' he said. 'At least that's what the boss reckons. The last few nights there were too many people around.'

Resigned to her fate, Ellie turned and stretched up to retrieve her coat from the nearby rack. This was her final rodeo, her last operation with SIB – the Special Investigation Branch of the Military Police – and her role was a simple one. She was the decoy, the tethered goat left exposed in the hope she might lure an active sex attacker into the open. She'd been undercover for several weeks, assuming the role of a flirty, civilian assistant working behind the NAAFI counter. To help maintain her cover, the team had also arranged for her to live in temporary accommodation just outside the wire; a walk of about half a mile. Her route home had been planned. She was to use a short cut, one that traversed a woodland area women tended to avoid, particularly when it was dark. Tonight, given the rain, taking such a route might seem an attractive option for someone trying to get home as quickly as possible. It was a ruse they hoped the attacker would fall for. If he did, he'd be in for a shock.

Ron shook his head, and grinned.

'What's so bloody funny?' she asked.

'You trying to reach coat hooks designed for tall folks,' he said. 'They should supply steps for hobbits like you.'

Slipping into her anorak, Ellie swung a playful elbow towards Ron's chin that he easily avoided.

'I'm not letting that connect,' he said, as he smiled again. 'I've seen what it can do.'

Ellie laughed. 'Comms check done?' she asked.

'Roger that. The arrest team can hear everything we're saying,' Ron winked as he carefully pulled her coat straight, made sure her transmitter was concealed and then fastened the zip. The gentle pat on her head at the end of his final check was warm, almost parental. He was concerned, she could see it.

'I'll be fine, Ron,' she said. 'Don't worry.'

'Just being careful, Scouse. You might be a tough little fucker but you'll be on your own. We'll be close by at all times, I promise. If he appears, we'll be on him in seconds.'

Ellie wrapped her hand around the small microphone on the collar of her anorak. 'If he shows, you'll have to pull me off him first,' she said. 'He's getting some summary from me for what he did to those girls.'

Ron grinned and, with a final good-luck nod, headed off into the night, leaving her to lock up. This was the time when their lead investigator had suggested Ellie would be at her most vulnerable. The NAAFI – the Navy, Army and Air Force Institute shop – was the only place on the camp that stayed open so late. With nobody else around, an attacker could force his way in at the last moment, lock the doors and prevent a quick rescue.

As the security door swung to and the padlock clicked into place, Ellie held her breath. Nobody appeared. Heart in mouth, she turned, faced into the rain, and gazed into the darkness. The only light was

from the accommodation blocks opposite, the adjacent trees and shrubs throwing a shifting network of shadows, any one of which could conceal a prowler. From an open window came the steady beat of rap music. Inside their rooms, young soldiers would be socialising, watching TV, cleaning kit, doing the things squaddies normally did during their evenings. Warm and safe, some would be sleeping before a guard duty while others prepared for the morning inspection. Someone, perhaps one of those soldiers, might be watching her right now, waiting for the moment he would pounce.

She took a deep breath, turned away from the NAAFI and began the walk to her quarters. She avoided the shadows but then scolded herself for doing so. She wasn't accustomed to being scared. A drunken bully of a father had seen to that. He'd hardened her up, although not in a kind way, and not as a result of any fatherly aspiration to help prepare her to face the world. Danny Rodgers would arrive home on a Saturday night after watching his beloved team, to either take out his anger on his family if they'd lost or, if they won, keep everyone up late, shivering and huddled on the settee, listening to his boasts and tall stories. Her mother, Pat – the human shield who stood between her husband and his petrified children – had eventually found the courage to escape with them to a refuge. In the months that followed, they had endured threats, bricks through windows, assaults on their mother, family court hearings and, finally, a sense of relief when their father was sent to prison.

But that was years ago. Now, she was in a different world. Now, she could fight back and take on men like her father, the kind who saw violence as an acceptable way to treat their wives and children. Now, she was a red-cap; she was Corporal Ellie Rodgers, 110 Provost Company, 1 Regiment, Royal Military Police, and this was her last rodeo because in just three days she was going to be doing something her mother and step-father were proud of and her natural father would never see. She was going to start training at RMAS, the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. She was going to be an officer.

'Better luck next time, Rodgers.' Ellie smelt the whisky as she turned from where she'd been standing at the bar of the Sergeants' Mess.

She'd been alone with her thoughts, reflecting on the disappointment of a failed surveillance operation. After half an hour, when Ron Murphy emerged from the darkness with news they were going to call it a day, she'd wanted to carry on. To her frustration, Ron wouldn't be persuaded. They would withdraw and re-convene in the Mess for a de-brief. She'd dumped her surveillance kit in her room, followed on as quickly as she could and, as she'd walked in the door, she'd been met by the whole team, lined up and grinning. The instruction to attend a de-brief had been a ploy, what they'd really had in mind was a bevy, a little party to celebrate a mate's forthcoming promotion.

The camp adjutant, a Major, was standing beside her. 'Hopefully, sir, yes,' she replied, awkwardly. 'It bothers me he's still out there, though.'

Behind the Major, she could see the Sergeants' Mess was now crowded. Her peers were stood in small groups chatting and the drink was flowing freely. 'Can I buy you a drink?' the Major continued. 'I hear you've passed OSB and you're due at Sandhurst on Monday.'

Ellie held up her empty glass and mumbled a thank you. It was her third, and in less than an hour. And, if she knew the lads, there would be many to follow.

Someone was shaking her arm.

She was warm, cosy, and in a car. She remembered now. Ron Murphy had offered her a lift. He'd tried to insist she sleep it off at the Mess, but she'd been adamant; she needed her clothes and personal stuff from her room in the civilian quarters. One more night in temporary digs wouldn't matter, in any event.

Senses returning, she thanked Ron for the ride, watched him drive off, and then half-walked, half-staggered through the rain to the door of her room. Rummaging through her coat pockets, she finally located her key and let herself in. She didn't bother with the light, too

much effort. Shoes kicked off, anorak on the floor, and then bed – that was all that mattered. Her head was spinning. How many shots had she downed? She wasn't sure. Too many, that was for certain.

Thank God that's over, she said to herself as she slipped into unconsciousness. No more investigating the misdemeanours of her fellow soldiers, no more sucking up to junior officers still wet behind the ears. She'd show them.

When she woke, the room was still in darkness. It felt like she had only been asleep for a few minutes. For a moment, she wondered what might have disturbed her. Then she felt the draft on her face. It was gentle, but it was there. Had she left the window open? No, definitely not. The door clicked shut. You stupid cow, she told herself. You're so pissed-up you left the door to your room open. Some kind soul must have just pulled it shut.

She closed her eyes just as a voice cut through the darkness and she instantly realised this was no kind soul doing her a favour. It was an intruder, and he was close; so close she could smell the dampness of his clothes. 'Thought you'd been clever, did you?' he hissed.

Ellie froze. And for the first time since those awful nights at the hands of her father, she felt afraid.

Chapter 2

Wednesday 21 September 2005, Cardiff Coroner's Court.

'Inspector Finlay.' Floria, my police military liaison, called to me from across the street. 'They're coming out.'

With the inquest concluded, journalists and photographers had gathered in strength behind a line of temporary steel barriers, ready to hurl questions at the first people to emerge through the doors to the Coroner's Court. A loud voice from a security officer announced the emergence of the victim's family. 'Keep clear of the steps, please.'

I kept my distance from the throng, choosing a less crowded area where I'd have a better view. I wanted to observe the family whose daughter had been the subject of the inquest. I was scheduled to interview them the following day because the team I was working on in London had recovered two stolen rifles during a raid on a drug-dealer's home in London, one of which had been in their daughter's care at the time it was taken. I was hoping they would be able to throw some light on how the original theft had happened.

Bill Grahamslaw, the Commander in charge of my team, had sent me to Wales for two days, three at the most, and then he wanted me back. He'd decided to send me for a couple of reasons, an old friendship with Wendy Russell, the local Assistant Chief Constable, and the fact I'd once been a soldier. Bill reckoned that made me a perfect choice to speak to witnesses inside a military barracks. He was also aware that my wife, Jenny, was away from home enjoying a 'girlie break' with our daughters at her sister's place on the Norfolk coast.

'You're the ideal bloke to spot something a civvie wouldn't recognise,' he'd explained. 'And besides, a couple of days in a quiet backwater will give you some time to study for the Chief Inspector board.' I'd laughed out loud when he said that. It was a lumber. He knew it, I knew it. The only thing we agreed on was I should get it sorted quickly.

My escort for the duration of the trip was Sergeant Floria McLaren. Floria was young and looked smart in uniform. As she came and stood alongside me, I noticed she was attracting glances from the attendant journalists.

'It's the Davenports,' she said, as a couple appeared at the top of the court steps.

I recognised the father, Michael, from recent TV interviews and articles in the newspapers. Stood to his left was a woman I took to be his wife. On his other side wearing a dark suit and white cravat, her fair hair tied back in a tight bun, was the family barrister. A set of papers tied with red ribbon was tucked beneath her left arm. Michael held a large, framed photograph of his daughter in Army dress uniform. Although he stood straight with his shoulders pulled back, he looked drawn and I noticed the dark indicators of lost sleep around his eyes.

'I've arranged for us to see them tomorrow, sir,' Floria said.

'Won't their home be surrounded by reporters?' I asked.

'Not unless there's been a leak,' Floria replied. 'The MOD has kept their home address private.'

As I nodded to show I understood, the barrister raised her hand. The effect was immediate. With the exception of the incessant clicks of camera shutters and the distant drone of traffic, the street outside the court fell silent. From behind the barrier, a sound-man pushed a boom-mike forward.

Michael Davenport began to speak and, although he trembled with emotion, his voice remained strong and clear. Suicide, he proclaimed, in a rich West-Wales accent, was a verdict that defied all the evidence the Coroner had seen. It was perverse, he said, and not a conclusion anyone who knew his daughter and appreciated what she was like should have come to. 'People like Angela don't shoot themselves,' he asserted. 'Not when they have so much to live for and are doing so well in their chosen career. A Jury, independent of pressures from politicians and the Ministry of Defence, could not

possibly have reached this verdict.' He spoke slowly and deliberately, making sure everyone could hear. 'Prince Albert Barracks must *not* be allowed to go the way of Deepcut. The fight will go on, even if we force a public inquiry.' The reporters lapped it up.

No sooner had Michael Davenport finished speaking than the questions began. Did he have any comment on the similarity to the other deaths? Did he think the Army had failed in its duty of care? Were the family intending to sue the MOD? The barrister fended off all the questions with polite, if somewhat bland, responses.

'That'll put the cat amongst the pigeons,' Floria said, leaning into me.

'The verdict or the mention of a public enquiry?' I asked.

'The bloody verdict,' she replied. 'How the hell can a Coroner say that poor kid shot herself? Nobody saw it ... she didn't leave a note. For Christ sake, who the hell would shoot themselves through the eyebrow?'

'A Coroner can only make a decision based on the available evidence,' I said.

'Is that a dig at the RMP?' she snapped.

'No more than it is at my people, Floria,' I said. My comment had been clumsy. The media reports on Angela Davenport's death had been in the papers at the same time as the results of an official inquiry into the events at a similar barracks in Surrey, where both civilian and military police had been criticised.

'Ok ... but spouting that kind of opinion won't win you many friends around these parts, sir,' Floria replied, tersely as she indicated her car. 'Shall we go now?'