HAWK

A **MAXIMUM RIDE** NOVEL

JAMES PATTERSON
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PROLOGUE

I solemnly promise this one thing to myself: I swear that this is the last day, absolutely the *very* last day, I will *ever* wait for those heartless bastards: my parents.

I leaned back against the corner of this building, the fading gray stucco chipped and pitted and slowly coming off. Five years ago it had been a bank; now there were no banks anywhere. I don't know why. Now the only things this building is good for are squatters, who'd broken in through the heavy glass door; looters, who'd taken anything of value from it; and me. I used it to prop myself up during my daily pointless wait. Today I was extra mad at myself for being the gullible smack that I am. We're talking way gullible. Why else would I be *here*?

"Hawk." The ragged homeless woman shot me a quick worried glance as she hobbled down the street with surprising speed.

I nodded at her. "Smiley." So-called because she'd lost a lot of her teeth. You hang out on a street corner long enough, you get to know the natives. I'd been hanging out here every day—we're talking *every single fricking day*—for *ten years*.

Every day at five o'clock, whether it's raining, blistering hot, freezing, snowing, wind blowing, whatever. Every day from five to five thirty. I was here.

And, like, *why*? Such a good question. One that I ask myself a hundred times every day, when I pretend not to notice what time it is, when really, it's ticking in my head, down to the minute. Like a bomb I keep playing with, every day, one that I actually want to explode. Because if it did, maybe this time, I really wouldn't go.

So why do I keep doing it?

The answer's always the same: because they asked me to. My parents.

And you know, I can remember just about every face I've ever seen. I'm like a *super recognizer.* I should work for the government, I'm not kidding. Not this government, obvs. But *some* government, somewhere. Anyhow, a million faces, good, bad, and ugly locked away in my mind-vault, and yet…

Yet I don't remember them. Mom and Dad. I remember my father's hands, standing me on this street corner. For some reason I feel like we were afraid. I could feel a tremor in his fingers, tight in mine. I think I remember this so clearly because my hands were clean and haven't been since then. One of them said, "It's five o'clock now. Stay here for half an hour, till your watch says five thirty. A friend of ours will come get you—or we'll be back. Promise."

I don't remember the voice, whether it was soft and warm, or harsh, or desperate, or whispered. I don't even know if it was my mom or dad that said it.

I lost my watch years ago. Actually, it got broken in a fight.

Along with my nose, that time. Other things have been broken and bruised since then, and I've got the scars to prove it. The one thing that hasn't broken yet is my spirit. But a few more days of keeping this lonely watch on this crap corner might do it.

My parents' muted voices, the fogged-out faces—that was *ten years ago*. No friend ever came. My parents never came back. Remembering that makes me laugh at myself.

What kind of a pathetic idiot waits on the same corner every day from five to five thirty for their whole life? Or at least ten years of it? The biggest idiot in the world.

This was the last, very, very last time.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

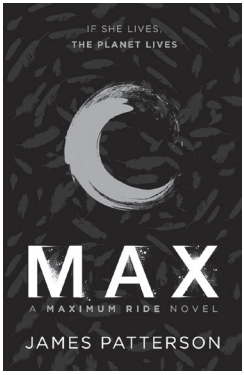
JAMES PATTERSON is one of the best-known and biggest-selling writers of all time. His books have sold in excess of 385 million copies worldwide. He is the author of some of the most popular series of the past two decades – the Alex Cross, Women's Murder Club, Detective Michael Bennett and Private novels – and he has written many other number one bestsellers including romance novels and stand-alone thrillers.

James is passionate about encouraging children to read. Inspired by his own son who was a reluctant reader, he also writes a range of books for young readers including the Middle School, I Funny, Treasure Hunters, Dog Diaries and Max Einstein series. James has donated millions in grants to independent bookshops and has been the most borrowed author of adult fiction in UK libraries for the past twelve years in a row. He lives in Florida with his wife and son.

GABRIELLE CHARBONNET is the co-author of *Sundays at Tiffany's*, *Crazy House* and *Witch & Wizard* with James Patterson, and she has written many other books for young readers. She lives in South Carolina with her husband and a lot of pets.

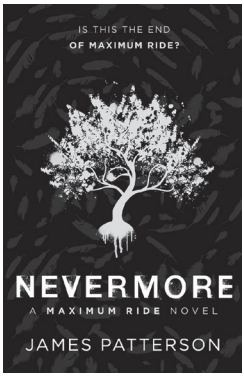
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