

**MAX**

**A Maximum Ride Novel**

James Patterson

The James Patterson Pageturners

*Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment*

*Maximum Ride: School's Out - Forever*

*Maximum Ride: Saving the World and Other Extreme Sports*

*The Final Warning: A Maximum Ride Novel*

*The Dangerous Days of Daniel X (with Michael Ledwidge)*

*Max: A Maximum Ride Novel*

Other Novels Featuring Maximum Ride

*When the Wind Blows*

*The Lake House*

For previews of forthcoming books by James Patterson and more information about the author, visit [www.jamespatterson.com](http://www.jamespatterson.com).

*Dedicated to Joshua Chamberlain Perry.*

## Prologue

There.

Devin raised his right arm and focused his sight directly over his wrist. It took less than a millisecond to calculate the trajectory—he didn't have a built-in computer, but his IQ of 220 served him well.

He breathed in and out slowly, getting ready to squeeze the trigger in between breaths, in between heartbeats. His sensitive nose almost wrinkled as the ever-present smog that hovered over the Los Angeles basin filled his lungs. He hated to think what the pollutants were doing to his brain cells, but some things were necessary evils.

There.

His light eyes perfectly tracked the objects flying overhead: one, two, three, four, five, six. Seven? There was a small seventh object, unexpected, but quickly determined to be unimportant. Actually, all of them were unimportant. All but one. The one in front.

He knew they had raptor vision. He himself had merely extraordinary eyesight. It was good enough. All the same, the gunsight attached to his wrist provided him with crosshairs that made missing an impossibility. He never missed.

That's why they saved him for extra-special missions like this one.

Many, many others had already failed at this task. Devin felt utter disdain for them. To kill one birdkid--how hard could it be? They were flesh and blood—ridiculously fragile. It wasn't like bullets bounced off them.

Once more Devin raised his arm and sighted his prey, catching her neatly in the

crosshairs, as if they could pin her to the sky. The flock flew in a large arc overhead, perfectly spaced, the one called Maximum in front, flanked by the two large males. Then a smaller female. Then a smaller male and the smallest female, in a row after him.

Finally, a smallish black object, not birdkid shaped, struggled to keep up. Devin couldn't identify it—it hadn't been in his dossier. The closest thing he could imagine was if someone grafted wings onto a small dog or something, as unlikely as that was.

But Max was the only one he was concerned with. It was Max he was supposed to kill, Max whom he kept catching in his sights.

Devin sighed and lowered his arm. This was almost too easy. It wasn't sporting. He loved the chase, the hunt, the split-second intersection of luck and aim that allowed him to exercise his perfection, his inability to miss.

He looked down at where his right hand had been. One could get used to having no right hand. It was surprisingly easy. And it was so superior to have this lovely weapon instead.

It wasn't as crude as simply having a Glock 18 grafted to his amputated limb. It was so much more elegant than that, so much more a miracle of design and ingenuity. This weapon was physically a part of him, responsive to his slightest thought, triggered by almost imperceptible nerve firings taking place in the interface between his arm and the weapon.

He was a living work of art.

Unlike the birdkids, flying in traceable patterns overhead. Devin had seen the posters, the advertisements. Those naïve, do-gooder idiots at the Coalition to Stop the Madness had organized this whole thing, this air show, this demonstration of supposedly

“evolved” humans.

Wrong. The birdkids were ill-conceived accidents. He, Devin, was truly an evolved human.

The CSM zealots were wasting their time—and everyone else’s. Using the birdkids to promote their own agenda was a typically selfish, shortsighted thing to do—manipulating and taking advantage of lesser creatures in order to “save” even lesser creatures. It was a joke.

A joke that could not be perpetrated without this flock of examples. And the flock could not exist without its leader.

Once again Devin raised his arm and closed his left eye to focus through the sight attached to his wrist. He angled the Glock a millimeter to the left, and smoothly tracked his target as she arced across the sky.

One breath in, one breath out. One heartbeat, two heartbeats, and here we go . . .

# Part One

## Chapter One

“And a-one, and a-two—” Nudge said, leaning into a perfect 45-degree angle. Her coffee-brown wings glowed warmly in the afternoon sunlight.

Behind her, the Gasman made squealing-brakes sounds as he stopped moving his wings, brought his feet down, and slowed his flight drastically. “Hey! Watch gravity in action!” he yelled, folding his wings back to create an unaerodynamic eight-year-old, his blond hair blown straight up by the wind.

I rolled my eyes. “Gazzy, stick to the choreography!” He was sinking fast and I had to bellow to make sure he heard me. “This is a paying job! Don’t blow it!” Okay, they were paying us mostly in doughnuts, but let’s not quibble.

Even from this high up, I could hear the exclamations of surprise, the indrawn gasps that told me our captive audience below had cottoned to the fact that one of us was dropping like a rock.

I’d give him five seconds, and then I’d swoop down after him. I wasn’t sure about this whole air-show thing to begin with, but how could I refuse my own mom? After our last “working vacation” in *Ant-freaking-arctica*, my mom and a bunch of other scientists had created an organization called the Coalition to Stop the Madness. Or the CSM. Basically, they were trying to tell the whole world about the dangers of pollution, greenhouse gases, dependence on foreign oil—you get the picture.

Already, over a thousand scientists, teachers, senators, and regular people had joined the CSM. One of the teachers who’d joined had come up with a traveling air show

idea to really get the message out. I mean, Blue Angels, Schmue Angels, but *flying mutant birdkids*? Come on, who's gonna pass that up?

So here we were, flying perfect formations, doing tricks, air dancing, la la la, the six of us and Total, whose wings had pretty much finished developing. He could fly, at least, though he's not exactly Baryshnikov with wings. If Baryshnikov had been a small, black, Scotty-type dog.

By the time I'd counted to four, the Gasman had snapped out his wings and was soaring upward again, happiness on his relatively clean face. Hanging out with the CSM folks had some benefits, chiefly food and decent places to sleep. And of course, seeing my mom, which I'd never be able to get enough of, after living the first fourteen years of my life not even knowing she existed. (I explained all this in earlier books, if you wanna go get caught up.)

"Yo," said Fang, hovering next to me.

My heart gave a little kick as I saw how the sun glinted off his deeply black feathers. Which matched his eyes. And his hair. "You enjoying being a spokesfreak?" I asked him casually, looking away.

One side of his mouth moved: the Fang version of unbridled chortling.

He shrugged. "It's a job."

"Yep. So long as they don't worry about pesky child-labor laws," I agreed. We're an odd little band, my fellow flock members and I. Fang, Iggy, and I are all fourteen, give or take. So officially, technically, legally, we're minors. But we've been living on our own for years, and regular child-protection laws just don't seem to apply to us. Come to think of it, many regular grown-up laws don't seem to apply to us either.

Nudge is eleven, roughly. The Gasman is eight-ish. Angel is somewhere in the six range. I don't know how old Total is, and frankly, what with the calculations into dog years, I don't care.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Angel dropped down onto me with all her forty-one pounds of feathery fun.

“Oof! What are you doing, goofball?” I exclaimed, dipping about a foot. Then I heard it: the high-pitched, all-too-familiar whine of a bullet, streaking past my ear close enough to knock some of my hair aside.

In the next second, Total yelped piercingly, spinning in mid-air, his small black wings flapping frantically. Angel's quick instincts had saved my life. But Total had taken the bullet.