

CITY OF THE DEAD

JAMES PATTERSON

AND

MINDY MCGINNIS



JIMMY PATTERSON BOOKS
LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
New York Boston London

PROLOGUE

Who goes back to the city that tried to kill her? An idiot, that's who. But this idiot has wings, and I've spent most of my life learning how to fight. I guess that's supposed to be some sort of primal thing—fight or flight. There aren't a lot of people who learn how to do both at the same time. I'm one of them.

But I'm still an idiot.

Last time I saw Max—my mom—she told me that there will always be a war somewhere, and wherever that was, her and the Flock would be there to fight it. Given that she had two bullet holes in her at the time, the speech was pretty darn moving. I told her I'd be right there next to her, but that had lasted about as long as a pretty sunset... which in the City of the Dead means *not long*.

The pollution is better than it used to be, because the new Hope for Opes centers shut down the dope factories. But I still have to fly pretty high to get to clean air. That's where I am now—up. It's the only place I can get away from the Council, the people who are running the city

now that McCallum and the Six Families are gone. Max and Fang—my dad—had me stay behind with my own little flock, kids from the Children’s Home that I’d grown up with and looked out for. Calypso, Rain, and Moke.

But sometimes I even gotta get away from them, so I glide over here to the Marble Tower and watch the sunset, the warm rays getting choked out by the still-lingering smog. This is pretty much my own quiet time, and I can get kinda pissy if the Council needs me, or even my own group of orphan kids. The only person allowed up here with me is my trained raptor, Ridley.

Her head turns, eyes unblinking as her talons dig into my shoulder. She sees something she doesn’t like, which means I probably won’t like it, either. I follow her gaze, squinting in the dusk to see a fast-moving shadow tracing the edge of the Fallow Forest, which is just weird. Nobody goes in there. That place is overgrown and impossible to move through . . . plus I’ve heard more than a few scary stories about it. Not exactly bedtime stories either, because I didn’t have a mom or dad to tell me those. More like nightmare stories about things that live in there.

Things like I’m seeing right now. I shift and Ridley moves with me, both of us extending our wings as we take off, cutting the distance between us and the shadow. In the last of the evening light I can see that it’s a creature on all fours, back hunched, a tail zigzagging in the grass behind it. I dive for a closer look and it stands up on its back two legs—like a human. I hit the skids, letting an updraft grab my wings as Ridley lets out a distressed *caw*,

right into my ear. She knows as well as I do—nothing and nobody goes into that dark, overgrown wreck of a woods. Nothing human, anyway.

Yep, like I said, I'm an idiot for agreeing to come back here.

But maybe Max and Fang are idiots, too. Because they didn't have to leave the City of the Dead to find the next war.

Looks like there's a new one brewing right below me.

CHAPTER 1

I've never been much of a morning person, and seeing the Council first thing doesn't improve my mood. The Council was formed after McCallum was overthrown, and the thug families of the Six went down with him. I know that bullets and bragging are no way to run a city, but I don't think that boring meetings at six in the morning are the way to go, either.

I'm yawning and have a knuckle in my eye when somebody says my name. I look up to find that every adult in the room is looking at me—and I don't know what the question was. Or even who asked it.

"Um..." I play for time, scanning faces, hoping one of them seems friendly.

They don't. Not a single person is glad I'm here. I bet they're all wishing I was Maximum Ride, the hybrid hero, sitting in this chair. Not her daughter, a gangly fifteen-year-old who was left behind to speak on her behalf... even though I never know what to say.

“Yes,” I finally decide on a word to use. I’m trying to keep it positive.

“Yes,” a woman with steely-gray hair repeats, looking over her glasses at me. “The question was, which vehicles should we be relying on? Gasoline, diesel, or electric-powered. And your answer is... yes?”

“Yes to all,” I say, determined to stand my ground even though I don’t know what I’ve put my foot in. “I mean, it’s kind of dumb to want my feedback on that. I just fly everywhere.” I spread out my wings to illustrate, and one of the men rolls his eyes before shuffling his papers.

“*Kind of dumb* or not,” he says, “Langford is required to ask for your input, as you speak for the hybrid population.”

Langford, that’s the woman’s name. I can never remember because I just mentally refer to them in my head by the nicknames I made up. Bad Haircut. Worse Breath. Really Big Gut. Of course, for all I know they might think of me as Bird Girl, so maybe I should shut it.

“I saw something go into the forest last night,” I say. Everybody looks up, twelve pairs of eyes just boring into me. So much for shutting it. Oh, well. Go hard or go home. “It wasn’t human,” I add.

“Wasn’t human?” Langford asks. “Could you be more specific?”

“Well...” I stretch my legs out, resting my black boots on the table. The man next to me pulls one of his papers out from underneath them. “I’m here to speak on behalf

of the hybrids, right? Well, I think that's what I saw last night. Another type of hybrid."

There's a minor uproar. The guy beside me immediately launches into an argument with the woman to his right, saying that there's no proof that there are more hybrids. "She's just a science experiment gone wrong," he says, hooking his thumb back over his shoulder in my direction.

"We don't know that," another woman, one with long blond hair argues back. "The scientific exploration that created Maximum Ride and others like her was a secret, and could have been carried out in any number of places. We simply don't know what's out there."

I'd rather be referred to as an *exploration* than an *experiment*, but I don't have time to share my preferences. At the head of the table, Langford rises to her feet and slams down her sheaf of papers, bringing all the voices in the room to a screeching halt.

"Is this what happens when I don't bring coffee?" she asks, and the tension in the room evaporates into polite laughter.

"Now," she glances down at her notes. "I think we've agreed solar power is our best bet for the moment, but that some of the panels need repair. Holden, that's your area."

The guy I think of as Worse Breath nods. *Holden*, I remind myself. His name is Holden. Langford refers to her papers again.

"And as far as weapons resources go, we'll need to contact former members of the Six Families and see if any of them would be willing to share."

I snort. I don't mean to, but it slips out. I can't imagine my old friend Pietro, or any of the former bosses of the city, letting anyone know where their weapons cache is. Especially not the Council.

Langford ignores my snort, and clears her throat. "As for the question of, ah... a monster in the woods..."

Laughter erupts again, not as nice this time.

"Well...I think that speaks for all of us," Langford says, tossing me an apologetic look.

A familiar burn starts in my gut, making its way up to my throat, where I know some really nasty words are going to come out if I don't get a hold of myself. I'm fuming as the Council members get up and start streaming out the door. Max and Fang left me behind again, just for this. To be mocked by a bunch of people who couldn't win a knife fight if they had a gun. Nobody in here probably knows the first thing about pressure points, or how to choke someone out, either.

Why am I even here, in a boardroom at the top of a huge building? I belong down on the streets, getting my hands dirty and my face dirtier. My mom and dad made a mistake, asking me to be their stand-in for the Council. Nobody here takes me seriously. And no one is willing to listen.

"Hawk?" I look up from sulking to see that Langford has hung back. "Has anyone ever told you that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar?"

"Who the hell wants to catch flies when you can swat them?" I ask, and she gives me a smile.

JAMES PATTERSON

“I’ll see you at the next meeting, Hawk,” she says, smacking my boots off the table as she leaves.

“If I bother to show up,” I say under my breath, but then I spot a yellow square of paper on my boot. Langford must have stuck it there.

I’m about to crumple it up and leave it for trash when I see there’s writing on it.

You’re not wrong. There’s something in the woods. I’ve seen it, too.

CHAPTER 2

Something is tickling my face and I swat it away.

“Not now, Ridley,” I mumble, rolling back into my pillow. But the feather follows me, this time inching its way right up my nostrils.

“Hey!” I swat at it. Only after I manage to thump myself in the face do I hear a familiar laugh.

“Nice,” I say, sitting up to see my mom perched at the foot of my bed, her wings unfurled. “There are better ways to wake someone up from a nap.”

Maximum Ride fluffs herself, a few stray feathers falling. “Well I could just smack you around a little bit,” she says. “It’s not nice, but it’s effective.”

“Ha,” I scoff, sitting up and pulling my sticky T-shirt away from my skin. I’d come back from the meeting in a crap mood, and fallen asleep in my clothes. “Effective like the Council, you mean? I don’t know why you want me there. I’m just expected to sit and be quiet in the meetings. No one ever listens to what I have to say.”

“And what’s your tone like?” Max asks. “Do you

have a weapon and are you threatening anyone when you speak?”

“Um...” I actually have to think about that one. There was an incident involving a switchblade and Holden that I’d rather not tell her about. But judging by the way her eyebrows go up, I’m guessing she already knows.

“Hawk,” she sighs, coming to sit on the bed next to me. “I know you don’t like being left behind—”

“Again,” I cut her off. “Being left behind, *again*.”

She goes on, ignoring me—just like everyone else.

“I talked it over with your dad, and Fang and I agree that having you with us right now is just too dangerous.”

I pull a pillow onto my lap and wrap my arms around it. “What are you guys even doing?” I ask.

“We’re trying to reform the prison that McCallum had me held in,” she says, her eyes going dark at the memory.

“So why can’t I be there, helping you?” I ask, but she shakes her head.

“No dice,” she says. “It’s not a friendly place, and I don’t just mean the guards. There were so many factions fighting for control within the prison population, too. Right now, we’re still trying to sort out who we can trust and who we can’t.” She pauses for a second, considering. “Also sorting out the death threats and trying to decide which ones actually mean it.”

“You’re getting death threats?” I ask. “But you’re Maximum Ride! Everyone loves you!”

She pulls a face at that. “Not necessarily. McCallum did a good job of smearing my reputation—and your

dad's—before we put him down. It'll take years to get everyone to believe we actually are the good guys."

I can't argue. Still, at least in a prison the bad guys are behind bars. As a kid, I lived on the streets without any kind of protection for a long time.

"I can take it," I say, shoving my chin out. "Let me come with you."

But Max just shakes her head and gets up, tucking her wings back in as she paces my room. There's plenty of space to do it in; the Council set aside the best suites near the top of this fancy hotel for themselves as soon as they came to power. As a representative, I got one, too. It's just about the only reason I keep showing up to meetings.

"Hawk, look at what you have here," she says, her thoughts following mine. "A warm bed, running water, clean sheets...and a great view." She goes to the window, her wings reflexively opening again at the sight of all that sky. They spread wide, lustrous and large. Maximum Ride is a breathtaking sight...but also kind of a punch in the gut when she's your mom. How am I supposed to live up to having superheroes as parents?

"Yeah, I'm spoiled," I say, looking past her wings to the view. "But I'm also bored."

"Bored isn't the worst thing," she says, turning back to me.

"What is?" I shoot back.

"Dead," she says.

I groan and fall back onto the bed. "Really? You're going to pull the parental concern card, after leaving me alone on the streets when I was five years old?"

“We’ve talked about that,” she says, her voice hardening. “Fang and I thought someone was coming for you. We didn’t mean for you to be alone.”

“For ten years,” I mutter.

“When are you going to stop punishing me for that!” she yells.

“When you stop treating me like a child!” I yell back.

She sighs, and walks over to my bed, her voice soft again. “Hawk, you *are* a child. You’re my child. And I’m going to make up for all the protection I didn’t give you then by taking care of you now. This is the place for you, here,” she spreads her arms.

“I know you think the Council is boring, but you are fulfilling an important role...”

I put a pillow over my face to block her out. Her words are different, but it’s the same conversation we’ve been having ever since McCallum fell from power. Both Max and Fang want to make the world a better place, and they’ll go wherever they need to be in order to make that happen. Someday, I’ll be by their side. But right now isn’t *someday*, which boils down to this—I’m being left behind again. My mom is basically still saying the same thing she did the day they left.

You’re not ready yet.

I was ready enough to fend for myself for ten years on the streets. Ready enough to take on members of the Chang family with only my fists. Ready to drop-kick McCallum and face down the head of the Pater family. But...none of that matters to Maximum Ride. She’s still

going to treat me as if I were an overfed baby, just like the Council does.

Except for Langford... the woman who slipped me the note. Her voice drones on but my mind wanders to Langford's words instead.

You're not wrong. There's something in the woods. I've seen it, too.

Sounds like there's someone who thinks I'm up to a challenge.

And I'm going to prove her right.