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To Dante, Brisa and Delfi
Above all, to Flor, who makes all things possible
J.J.



How to Write a Book

BANG!

The plane jerks violently, like it's been whacked by a giant with a baseball bat. A howling wind slaps me in the face. My eyes snap open.

For a fraction of a second, time seems to stand still. The pilot is slumped forward, his head on the control panel. Dad looks at me, his eyes wide in shock, then turns back to the controls.

The air hits me again, so hard it presses me back against the seat. A siren wails and the little plane shakes like a bobble head in an earthquake.

"Dad, what's happening?" I shout. He's pulling on the control stick. "Dad?"

The windscreen is smashed. That's where the air is rushing in. If you've ever opened your car windows on a motorway, that's what it feels like, but right in your face.

Dad is pressing buttons on the control panel. "Mayday, Mayday," he says into the radio, but no one replies. Some of the dials spin wildly.

The plane is falling out of the sky.

Dad turns round. "We've had a little problem, Maisie," he says. "We've hit a flock of birds. Nothing to worry about."

A little problem? Nothing to worry about? Most definitely not true.

Smoke streams out of the propeller, which is supposed to be spinning but now turns slowly.

"LOOK OUT!" I scream.

"All under control," says Dad, although it clearly isn't. He's almost shouting to be heard over the rush of air, but his voice still sounds calm.

We're plummeting towards the sea. Dad keeps pulling on the control stick.

This is not how my first adventure was supposed to end. I'm only eleven. Much too young to die.

"WE'RE GOING TO CRASH!" I scream. I don't know how this will help, but I have to scream

something. At least it's accurate.

"No, we're not." Dad flicks more switches on the control panel. "Well, actually, yes, we are. But it's fine. Oh, look, there's sea ice ahead."

It really is a bad time for sight-seeing. "IT'S NOT FINE!" I yell. "WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE."

Maisie Macleod. Born just a few years before she died. Greatest achievement: finding all four corner pieces of a big blue jigsaw.

Dad tuts. Unbelievable. We're hurtling to our deaths and he still finds time to tut at me. "I wrote a book, remember? **How to Crash-Land a Plane**. Don't worry, Maisie, I know what I'm doing. We're going to be just fine."

Dad's never flown a plane in his life. He has no idea what he's doing.

I really hope I'm wrong and that he does know. If not, we're going to hit the water faster than a brick on a motorbike.

The dark blue of the sea is almost close enough to touch. We're still speeding forward and at the last second the blue turns to brilliant white. We're bathed in cold light as the world comes up to…



No, wait. What am I doing? That's a really bad way to start a story. I've dropped you straight in the middle.

I do actually know how to write a story. I'm writing a novel about a ghost pirate called Nyteshade. She's on a quest to defeat her greatest nemesis: a mer-vamp. Mer-vamps are mermaids that have been bitten by vampires. My teacher said the first chapter was like something out of a dream. Well, actually she said it gave her nightmares.

Dad writes books too. But his aren't about normal things like vampires or mermaids. In fact, he doesn't write stories at all. That would need imagination. I know he doesn't have any imagination because when I was born he wanted to call me Georgina.

Which sounds fine, except his name is *George*. George Macleod.

Fortunately my mum's dying wish was to give me a good Scottish name – Maisie – and you can't ignore dying wishes. So Maisie Macleod it is.

No, Dad writes books that explain how to do stuff. I'll tell you some of the titles, but before I do, I want to make absolutely clear that although they sound exciting, they're not.

Here are three of them:

How to Wrestle Crocodiles
How to Build a Zip Wire
How to Defuse a Bomb

See? If you didn't know better, you'd grab one, find yourself an extra large beanbag and settle down for the day.

That would be a mistake.

The first chapter of **How to Build a Zip Wire** lists all the tools you'll need and all the different types of bolt you should use.

The next few chapters list all the tools you *won't* need and all the different types of bolt you *shouldn't* use.

I don't know what the rest of the book says. No one's ever read it. No one ever makes it that far.

But here's the terrible secret: Dad's never done the things he writes about. There are no zip wires or unexploded bombs in our back garden. And he's never had a single flying lesson. So when he tells me not to worry because he's written a book about crash-landing planes, it just makes me scream even louder.

Anyway, *this* book, the one you're reading now,

is about me and Dad, and our great adventure. This is my guide to **How to Survive Even When Your Dad Crashes You into a Continent**.

And, unlike Dad's books, every word of it is true.



2

How to Change Someone's Mind

The story starts with a phone call, one of those calls that change everything.

It's the beginning of the Christmas holidays. It's cold and dark. Everyone in the world is sat in front of the TV, except for us. Dad says TV is a waste of time so we don't have one. He thinks a lot of things are a waste of time.

I'm at the kitchen table writing my story about Nyteshade. I write a page or two every evening. "You rush too much, Maisie," Dad always says to me. "Your writing's so messy no one can read it."

But the thing is, I'm already eleven years old. For ten years I didn't write a single chapter. That's a lot

of time to make up for.

I'm supposed to be helping Dad make a cheesecake. Cooking is one of his hobbies.

Dad loves his hobbies. His favourites are: jigsaws (the really big ones with thousands of pieces); waiting by a river (which he calls 'fishing'); and finding mistakes on train timetables. Cooking is the only thing we do together that's even remotely exciting. And that's because you never know if you're going to get food poisoning or not.

OK, that's not fair. I actually do enjoy cooking with Dad. I come up with the most imaginative ideas for recipes and he lets me make the ones that won't kill me. Even though they never work. I've only been ill once so far, which was when we made Ice Cream Soup. I mean, it sounded like a good idea at the time.

"I need to start packing after we've made this." Dad sets the baking tray on the counter. "I've got to be at the airport early." He often goes away on trips and leaves me with Elspeth, our neighbour. Then he comes back after two days and writes a book called **How to Ride a Kangaroo** or something.

"Why are you going to the airport?" I ask. "You're visiting an ant farm."

"Not an ant farm. Antarctica," says Dad. "I do wish you'd listen, Maisie. My new book is called **How to Survive in Antarctica**."

"But Antarctica's really far away!" I cry. "You won't be back for Christmas!"

"Of course I will. It's just a couple of flights to get there, a quick look around and then straight back. I'll be home on Christmas Eve."

See what I mean? You can't write a book about surviving in Antarctica after a 'quick look around'. Yet when I rinse a spoon and say I've done the washing-up, he tells me not to exaggerate.

Dad's phone rings.

This is the call I was telling you about. He motions for me to take over the cheesecake while he answers. I push my notebook aside and start looking for cheese.

"George, it's Elspeth," the phone screeches. Elspeth's got one of those nasal voices that mean you either hold the phone at arm's length or risk damaging your eardrums. I sometimes wonder why she bothers with the phone at all. She could be on the other side of the country and we'd still hear her.

"What can I do for you?" says Dad.

"My wee boy's flooded the house," says Elspeth.

"He was trying to give his Lego castle a moat. We're up to our knees in water. I'm so sorry, George, but I'll not be able to look after Maisie."

They keep talking, but my brain has left the planet. I won't be staying with Elspeth. Dad doesn't know anyone else, not well enough for me to stay over. He won't be able to go away.

Or, he can go, but only if he takes me with him.

I've never been on a plane before. I've never been anywhere.

Just the thought of it makes my stomach flop over in excitement. My heart skips. I might never get a chance like this again.

I get my puppy-dog eyes ready. They've never worked on Dad before but I've been practising in the mirror.

Dad ends the call. He sighs. "I'll have to cancel my trip. That's terribly inconvenient. It took months to arrange Guillermo and the charter. And it's the midsummer solstice too."

I don't have a clue what he's talking about.

"Maybe I can try again next Christmas," Dad says, but he doesn't sound convinced.

Here goes.

Remember to sound casual, Maisie.

"DadtakemewithyouIwon'tbeanytroubleI promiseplease!" I blurt it out so fast Dad has no idea what I'm saying.

"Are you OK, Maisie? Do you need to lie down?"

I do not need to lie down.

I clear my throat and try to sound less desperate. "I just meant you could … maybe … take me with you." Much better.

"Take you? But you're not old enough."

I hate being told that. According to Dad, I'm not old enough to walk to school by myself, or watch films about killer werewolves, or even have my own pet shark. "I'm eleven. That's old enough to go on a plane, isn't it?"

Dad shakes his head. "It's far too dangerous."

"So it's dangerous for you too?"

"No, because I can—" He stops, biting off the words before they come out. His mouth compresses into a thin line, like he's worried they might slip out by themselves.

Time to break out the puppy-dog eyes.

"Please, Dad. I really want to go."

He's not convinced.

"Pleeeeeeease?" I turn the puppy-dog eyes up to full beam.

It doesn't work. "It'd be so boring for you. I'll be travelling the whole time. Sitting on planes."

"I LOVE SITTING!" I shriek. "I promise I won't get bored. Cross my heart. I'll sit very quietly and read train timetables. And, remember, it's the midwinter thingy."

"Midsummer," Dad corrects me automatically. "Winter here, summer in Antarctica." I can see he's wavering.

I've only got one more card to play, but it's a good one. "Think about my *education*. Think of all the things you can teach me that I won't learn at school. Like the summer-winter thing."

Dad nods slowly. "That's true. There's geology and marine biology and glaciology…"

He lists more words ending in 'ology' but I've stopped listening. I just nod and smile while he talks himself into taking me on my first-ever trip abroad.

An adventure! Finally! Nothing interesting has happened in my dull little town since the Vikings left. But now I'm going to the magical land of Antarctica, a land of ice dragons, frost warriors and talking snowmen.

OK, it's pretty obvious that I know nothing about Antarctica, except that it's cold and really far away.

Maybe I can use it as the setting for Nyteshade's big battle with the mer-vamps.

Eventually Dad picks up his phone again. "I'll have to make some calls. And you need to pack." He looks down at my baking tray containing a packet of cake mix and some lumps of Cheddar. "That's not how you make cheesecake anyway."

I'm up the stairs and emptying my sock drawer before Dad finishes the sentence.

I'm going to Antarctica. Even if it's only for an hour. Even if I don't get off the plane. When I get back to school, my teacher, Miss Kumari, will say, "What did you do over the holidays?" And for once I won't have to say anything about jigsaws. Instead I'll say I went to Antarctica.

I run downstairs with an armful of socks. Dad's hideous gunk-yellow backpack is already sitting by the front door, ready to go. I never know how he manages to pack so quickly.

Antarctica. I don't even know where it is.

I don't even care where it is.

Best Baking Session Ever. And we didn't even switch the oven on.