

Actually, what he was looking forward to most of all was settling into a cozy spot by the fireplace and reading the books he'd brought along. There were three: one about a rain forest trek, one about rowing across the Atlantic, and the one he was currently reading, a book about an expedition to Mount Everest. Adventure stories were his favorite! *I may not have ever been anywhere exotic or done anything exciting,* he thought, *but reading about them is the next best thing.*

Another snore, this one louder, rumbled from the backseat. Everyone tried to contain themselves, but the giggles came bursting out. Even Jayden couldn't help but laugh as Rory finally stirred. "What's

everyone laughing at?" he asked groggily. "Are we there yet?"

They'd been on the road since the crack of dawn, and now it was approaching mid-afternoon. It had been a long trip and Jayden had to admit he felt like asking the same question himself.

"Almost! Only an hour to go and we should be pulling into the driveway," Mr. Walcott said.

"Hey, look, it's starting to snow!" Connor pointed out the window.

The flakes were scattered and slowly drifting down.

"See, the weatherman wasn't lying," Mr. Walcott said. "Perfect timing, too. It's not supposed to hit hard until after we get to

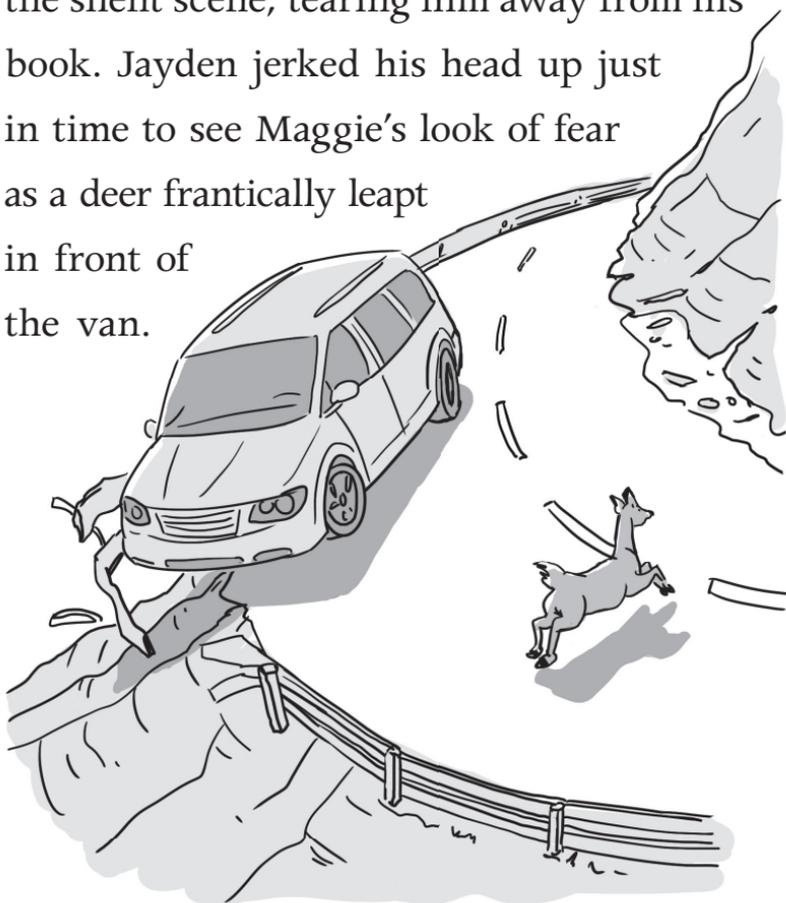
the cabin. Tomorrow morning we should be able to crank up the snowmobiles!”

Soon the van was filled with the playful banter of a family who knew one another well. Jayden couldn't think of anything to add, so he stared out the window at the deep woods rushing by in a blur. He didn't know the inside jokes, what he could tease them about. Would he ever know them that well? Would they ever know him that well? There were years of history among this family, and right now it felt overwhelming. With a shrug, he stuck his nose back in his book.

Before long, he lost track of time. Instead of riding in a van, he was climbing Mount Everest, weighed down by a backpack.

Exhausted. Frozen. The cold, still air quiet but for the sound of ragged breathing. The summit was tantalizingly close but seemed impossible to reach . . .

A bloodcurdling scream broke through the silent scene, tearing him away from his book. Jayden jerked his head up just in time to see Maggie's look of fear as a deer frantically leapt in front of the van.



Mr. Walcott swerved. The brakes squealed. And suddenly the van was tumbling down a steep hillside. Jayden's seat belt cut into his chest as his body was flung about. He didn't know whether he was facing up or down. The confusing whirl seemed to go on forever. Then a jolt stopped the van's fall with the crunching sound of impact.