

By the River

by Sarah Penwarden

School camp. Kenzie's seen the photos from last year. It looks nice: little cabins clustered around a central dining hall; grassy paddocks with giant macrocarpas; picnic tables and a fire pit; a green river, deep and shady, with a slide and a swimming hole. So yes, it *looks* nice, but Kenzie knows what it will actually *be* like: wall-to-wall noise, instructors blowing whistles, boys play-fighting, girls having dramas – with no way to escape any of it.

Her mother says she'll have a great time. "Besides, won't Chloe be there?"

"Yes, but ..." Kenzie stops. She can't tell her mother what she's afraid of – that Chloe will spend the whole time hanging out with Maddie Ng, and she'll be left alone.

Mum looks at her, and it's as if she can read her mind. "Try not to worry, love," she says. "Make the best of it. You never know, you might enjoy yourself."

Kenzie knows she won't.

Kenzie watches out the bus window until her mum's out of sight. Then she turns to look at Chloe and Maddie, sitting across the aisle. Last term, they started going to the same ballet class. Now all they talked about was dancing. They talked about their ballet teacher as they walked between classes, and at lunchtime, they practised little moves with their feet. Some days, they forgot all about her.

Maddie offers Chloe an ear bud. Kenzie looks away. She reads for the next two hours until they arrive at camp. Once they have their bags, the three of them head towards a cabin.

"This is going to be *so* cool!" Maddie says, taking a top bunk. "I've got heaps of food for a midnight feast!"

Kenzie arranges her sleeping bag on the other side of Chloe's. She squashes her teddy bear under her pillow so the girls can't see, then lies back, hands behind her head, and closes her eyes – just for a moment.

"You OK?" Chloe asks quietly.

"Yeah," she says, though she's feeling wobbly already.



Kenzie can hear the noise from the dining hall before she gets there. The bubble of talk bounces off the walls. She stops at the door, the last one to arrive. She had a long shower before tea and took her time getting dressed. Everyone's sitting on wooden benches, waiting for food. She scans the room for Chloe. There she is, laughing with Maddie. Kenzie walks over, and Chloe shifts so she can sit next to her.



Together, they queue for chicken pieces and mashed potatoes and salad, but Kenzie decides to skip the chicken once she sees it. Back at the table, she eats very carefully. The food isn't the same as the food at home.

"Tea's a bit yuck," Chloe says.

"Don't worry, there's always later," Maddie reminds them.

"Awesome," Chloe says with a grin.

Kenzie smiles, too, but right now, later seems like years away.

The next morning, before anyone else is up, Kenzie walks down to the river. A light mist hangs about, but the sun is up. It isn't cold. She thinks how perfect this is. The midnight feast last night had been fun, but Kenzie prefers the world like this, still and peaceful. She wishes it could stay that way forever.

Her teacher at primary school knew she liked space and quiet, but at intermediate, there's none of that. Sometimes Kenzie still hides in the toilets, just so she can think. She worries all the time about next year. She's been to the high school open day. The thought of going there every day makes her feel sick. Chloe would probably understand how she's feeling, but Kenzie doesn't have the courage to tell her. Besides, she's tired of always being the worrier.

She watches the river for a while longer. The water shimmers like a snake. It moves so fast, the current unstoppable.



Back in the dining hall, everyone's talking about what time they went to sleep and how many mosquito bites they have. After breakfast, they divide into groups. Kenzie's group is scheduled to do raft building. She groans and pulls a face to Chloe.

They gather at the river. All morning, there's talking and arguments as they build the raft, then lots of yelling and splashing as they paddle it across the river. Chloe looks hot and red-faced, but Kenzie can tell she's having fun.

"OK," Mike the instructor says. "Seeing as you've cracked raft building ... you can all have a go on the slide!"

Most of them cheer. Only a couple – including Chloe – look doubtful. The slide runs from the top of the hill all the way down to the water. It looks slippery and very fast. "Go on, Kenzie!" Chloe whispers. "I can't do it unless you go first." Chloe's always

been nervous of heights, but they don't bother Kenzie. She doesn't scream as she shoots down the slide, not like the other girls. Instead, she's thrilled by the air rushing past, the huge splash into the water. She swims back to the riverbank and scrambles out. Chloe slides down after her, followed by Maddie. They can't stop laughing when they see each other. Even Chloe had liked it.



That evening, the kids and teachers and parent helpers sit around the campfire. The sky is dark except for tiny holes of stars. Kenzie throws a pine cone into the flames, and a rush of sparks floats up. Mr K plays the guitar, and they sing a few songs. Then they go around the circle so that everyone can say something they're grateful for. When it's Chloe's turn, she looks at Kenzie for a moment. "I'm grateful for my friend Kenzie," she says.

Tears prickle Kenzie's eyes.



The next few days go past in a blur of bushwalks, noisy meals, swimming, and games of spotlight. On the last morning, when the bus arrives to take them home, Kenzie knows exactly what she's going to do. She'll ask Chloe if they can sit together on the trip back.

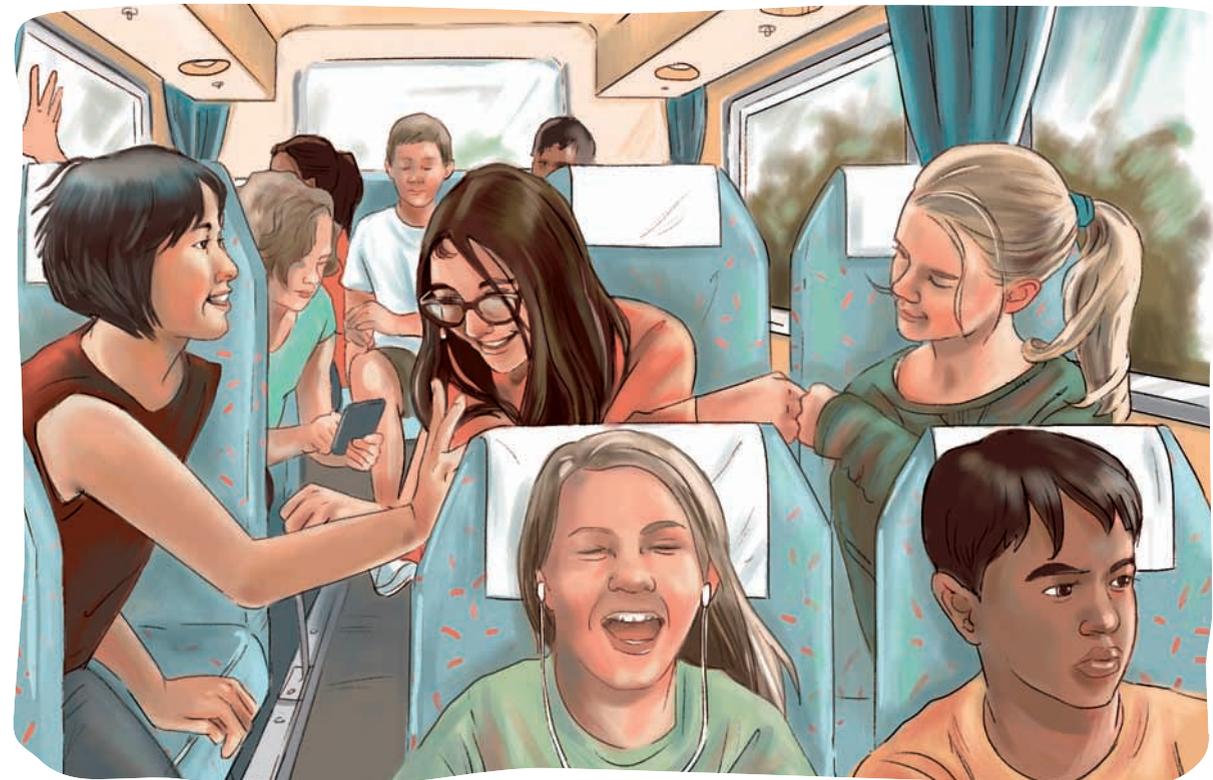
"Sure," says Chloe. "I sat with Maddie on the way here, didn't I?"

Kenzie nods, a little embarrassed, and Chloe looks at her closely. "What's up? You've seemed a bit sad. It's not me and Maddie is it? Because you know that –"

"No, it's not about Maddie," Kenzie breaks in with a rush. "I like Maddie." And she realises that she really does. "It's next year. I'm worried what it will be like."

"What!" Chloe squeals. "You're kidding, right?" She pulls a face. "High school ... it's freaky. Don't remind me! But whatever happens, we'll be together."

They sit near the back, Maddie leaning across the aisle so she can chat, too. The trees go past in a blur. A flock of birds flap off power lines and arch across the sky. And as the bus turns onto the main road, the river – Kenzie's river – winds out of sight.



illustrations by Adele Jackson

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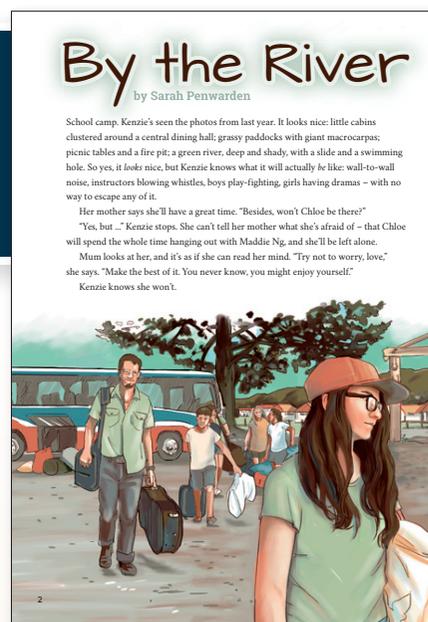
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