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deliver justice?

# DICE

CLAIRE BAYLIS



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## CHARACTERS

### THE JURY

Jake  
Dave  
Bethany  
Fiona  
Susannah  
Scott  
Chantae  
Kahu  
Mark  
Les  
Eva  
Hayley

### THE DEFENDANTS

Lee  
Chris  
Jayden/Jayz  
Travis

### THE COMPLAINANTS

Samara  
Maia  
Amy

*They come from Ngongotahā and Lynmore, from Western Heights and Tarawera, from Koutu, Springfield, Glenholme and Ōwhata. In ones and twos they come to the corner where Tūtānekai Street crosses Arawa, where the white building with its coat of arms and tinted windows sits in a courtyard bordered by kōwhaiwhai-patterned benches.*

*Some are dropped off. Some catch the bus. A few, like the elderly man in the checked shirt and beige trousers, walk. A tall man with wavy hair leaves his car in the free sixty-minute parking, assuming that will be long enough. Others pass the pale unblinking gaze of the pou and drive under the Prince's Gate to the free parking in the Government Gardens, or they choose the patch of dirt where the hospice used to be, where the sulphur smell is strong. An eighteen-year-old walking that way from his Mazda, looking out for the carved warrior with the bowler hat, notices that the mere pounamu another holds is actually a lizard. He pauses, breathes.*

*Past the brick pub on the corner they come, under the huge sycamore tree that is lit at night by fairy lights. Or they cross the road by the after-hours medical centre, or from the Fat Dog cafe.*

*People mill around in the courtyard, smoking, waiting, hugging; listening to lawyers with oversized briefcases who talk in authoritative, urgent tones. Some walk fast, head down, past these people. A few recognise familiar faces. One pauses, a hand on an arm: 'You okay, whaea? What's the story?'*

*Others catch up with the person ahead:*

*'Do you know where we go?'*

*'Have you done this before?'*

*A blonde woman in heels and a linen jacket glances nervously at the waiting people, avoiding their eyes, checking the colours of their clothes, their tattoos.*

*One or two mutter swearwords. Many worry about their arrangements, sending last-minute texts, while a handful, bolstered by experience, stride towards the door; it is a mere inconvenience to them.*

*A thin man with scraggly facial hair skulks by the planter, flicking ash on the azalea.*

*Someone talks about duty, another about community service. One has dressed in a suit in the hope of being challenged; others have dressed down in the same hope. A few, like the young woman in the mint green dungarees and the man from the bank, are content—a day away from work. But if it carries on, if they are chosen . . .*

*'What's the pay, anyway?'*

*'And what about petrol?'*

*'Bus fare?'*

*'Lunch?'*

*'Child care?'*

DICE

*The self-employed, imagining aggrieved clients and directionless apprentices, consider how to persuade whoever needs persuading of the untenability of their predicament. A few have already tried this on the form; none here succeeded.*

*A woman in a loose flapping cardigan hovers by the rubbish bin, holding a takeaway coffee.*

*Another pauses by her. 'I didn't think they'd summon me at my age.'*

*The younger woman twitches a brief smile.*

*'Come on, we'll be in it together,' says the older woman.*

## CHAPTER ONE

# Jake

Jake added 'Dice Bros' to his search. He clicked on the most recent news article about the case—it said the police had charged the boys involved in the teen sex game. Jake had lost track; he hadn't realised it had progressed that far. Four youths were facing charges for rape and sexual assaults and making a video. Jake scrolled all the way through and then clicked back to the search results.

...

THE FIRST JAKE heard of the Dice Bros (although not by that name) was when he was thumbing through the local newspaper as a way of putting off the mowing for a few more minutes. It was one of those summary sidebar stories, stating that police had made inquiries at two local high schools following allegations that a teen sex game had gone awry. There was a number to

call if you knew more information. Jake was curious, but there was no detail and it wasn't his children's school, so, sighing, he closed the paper and headed down to the bottom section of the garden by the sleep-out, where he'd left the mower.

The mowing was part of his preparation for summer. By the time Tilly came back from her mother's he'd planned to have the deck washed and oiled, chairs scrubbed, lawns mown—a present for his wife. A shiny ordered garden. Instead, in the nearly three weeks of her absence, all he'd managed was to weed the vegetable boxes and then overcrowd them with parsley, lettuce, corn and tomato seedlings.

As Jake mowed, he thought that somehow the weekends seemed to both stretch and bulge without Tilly here to shape them. He wasn't even sure how today had drifted away. He had spent several hours flicking between the Test and the tennis while he waited for her to call. Not that she'd had anything new to report. Her mother was still in ICU in Christchurch Hospital, and Tilly was still in emergency mode—he could hear it in her voice, could tell by the odd times she was ringing. Jake had lost that sense of urgency; he was in limbo, not knowing how long his wife would be away, nor how they would manage if her mother was discharged.

The mower was heavy. The catcher must be nearly full.

He wondered what food there was for dinner. It would only be him and TJ, because Annelise was at a sleepover. Jake had been especially glad of that when TJ had turned up with his new girlfriend, Melissa. Melissa and Annelise were in the same year, two years below TJ, and Annelise's shorts were as skimpy as Melissa's skirt, but it was the way Melissa's skirt swished as

she sashayed past Jake on the way down to the lake that made him almost worry for TJ—you could practically see her knickers.

Perhaps, just this once, he'd send TJ and Melissa for takeaways. TJ wasn't meant to drive Melissa on his restricted licence, but he'd taken to dropping her home, and the Indian wasn't much further. Then tomorrow Jake would do a shop and wash the deck, and that reminded him that he'd left the laundry neglected in the washer all day. Tilly should be here. There was just too much stuff with the kids and work as well.

Jake shoved the lawnmower forwards, and as he did there was a cracking, splintering noise. The mower spluttered, spluttered, and stalled.

Jake swore and, pulling it back, saw he'd run over a stick, a stick with a piece of garden twine attached; the other half was probably wrapped around the mower blades. It would be one of the bows and arrows TJ made when only he and Annelyse were around. Surely they should be too old for this now. Jake searched through the long grass for the companion arrows. Recently, TJ had adopted six-inch nails as arrow tips, taping them on with duct tape, and Jake imagined one of those through his shinbone. He considered marching down to the lake; TJ should be here helping, not frolicking with his girlfriend.

There were three sharpened sticks in the long grass (and one did have a nail), two blown-apart L&P bottles from TJ's dry ice escapades, and the one decent cricket ball. The kids just didn't look after things, or clear up after themselves, even though their mother was a teacher.

He undid the catcher, scooped up the matted grass that fell out, and decided to throw this load down the bank into the reserve. As he pushed the earmuffs down to his neck he heard

music—not TJ’s usual thudding bass, it was more melodic. He hadn’t heard TJ and Melissa come back from the lake, but clearly they were in the sleep-out now. The sleep-out where the children used to play houses with Annelyse’s tea set, mixing flowers and herbs with water and eating biscuits pillaged from the kitchen, and where these days TJ and his mates experimented with alcohol. Jake had found the empty beer and RTD cans over the fence when he was spraying the wandering willie. And now TJ was in there kissing and feeling up his girlfriend. To think that Melissa had been a friend of his daughter’s not that long ago; Annelyse was miles off that stuff.

Jake started whistling as he shook out the catcher, thinking he’d just make them aware he was on to them, but the music was loud, and then he caught the lyrics. Something about wanting head, tongue. And then he heard the word ‘pussy’. The song paused, before the singer, practically speaking, instructed the woman to talk dirty, put her legs up, poke out her butt.

It was too much. Melissa was only fourteen. And there were the neighbours.

He would tell his son to move the song on; he wouldn’t make a big deal out of it.

Jake coughed, and banged the catcher against the weather-board planks as if to shake loose the last clumps of grass. Then he peered in through the high side window.

The late sun streaming through the French doors cast a shadow on the back wall—an upright shadow moving back and forth in the bright patch of sunlight. Jake registered that it was a single shadow: the shadow of his son, cap on. Didn’t understand. Looked across to the divan, where Melissa was on her hands and knees in front of TJ, her top half bare, her surprisingly large

breasts hanging. She still had the skirt around her waist and TJ, his son, was fucking her. A fourteen-year-old. Doggy-style.

Jake backed away.

IN THE KITCHEN Jake poured himself a cold water, downed it, and then opened a Croucher. He sculled half of that too. Should he have stopped them? He could hardly barge in there with the girl all naked and . . .

He went into the toilet, realising as he did that he hadn't taken off his boots—there were grass clippings all over them and his bare shins were stained green. He followed the grassy trail back through the kitchen to the sliding door and kicked the boots off, sending them bouncing down the steps. The house was a pigsty. He finished that beer. Opened another.

Had TJ used a condom? Jesus Christ, what if he got her pregnant? A fourteen-year-old. Jake went back to the cricket that he'd left on live pause and started to fast-forward at double speed. He supposed Melissa might be fifteen; Annelise was young in her year.

TJ had been staring straight ahead. From what Jake had seen there hadn't been any connection, except at that most base level.

Jake paused the TV when the West Indies bowler threw his arms into the air. Rewound. Re-watched. The New Zealand captain had been caught out. The fielder hadn't even moved his feet, just stuck out his arm and caught it. A completely botched shot.

Jake was eighteen when he lost his virginity. He'd met Chloe at university, and they'd been on dates, and kissed, and held hands. Their first sex, most of their sex, was missionary and loving and facing each other. He remembered the first time, how he'd kept telling her how smooth her skin was and how

he'd felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude—that she was touching him, that she would want to. She wasn't a virgin, and had laughed at Jake, but she'd liked him and afterwards they'd lain together, faces touching, sharing the same breath, and he'd felt so indebted to her.

With TJ there had been a casual disregard for the girl, almost a callousness. It was the way he'd gripped her hips—Jake had seen the indentations from his fingers digging into her flesh; he thought that's what he'd seen. It was probably because of the internet. They should have banned iPads and phones from the kids' bedrooms, like that TV guy said, but Tilly made the rules. She was the expert. Deputy principal at an intermediate school now. And then it occurred to Jake that if that's what TJ did, what on earth did he watch? And her, Melissa: he couldn't believe she was so loose at fifteen.

Live now, he watched the West Indies bat and he let his eyes lose focus so the men became white blurs against the vivid green pitch.

He wished he hadn't looked in the window.

Early on, one of the first times he and Tilly made love, she had placed her hand over his eyes. When he asked her why, she'd said, 'You're staring. Too intense.'

Above the noise of the TV Jake could hear TJ and Melissa coming up through the garden, loud and sparking—she swearing about something, until she saw him.

'Ooh, sorry, Jake.'

She wasn't, he thought. He couldn't look at her. Mumbled to TJ about his exam revision.

'Yeah, we're just—'

‘Now, TJ.’

‘Has something happened with Nana?’

‘No. She’s fine. Just the same.’

‘What did New Zealand go for?’

Jake answered.

TJ asked about the captain.

Jake answered.

‘That’s crap,’ said TJ. ‘Hey, we’re gonna make some toasties, then I’ll drop Mel home. D’you want one, Dad?’

Look at him. So full of himself. Jake shook his head, keeping his eyes on the screen. Usually he’d confer with Tilly on how to handle something like this—not that there’d been anything quite like this—but he couldn’t tell Tilly, not while her mother was dying, because that’s what was happening. And whatever he said to TJ it wouldn’t make any difference now anyway. They were doing it. TJ wasn’t going to go back from that. He should tell him to use condoms, but they’d never had that kind of relationship. Tilly was responsible for the sex ed stuff.

With a creeping dread, it occurred to Jake that perhaps he should be telling Melissa’s parents. Imagine that conversation. He didn’t know them. Maybe he’d met her mother on the sideline at Annelyse’s soccer games . . . or was that Bailey’s mum?

Tilly would be the one to do it, but he couldn’t tell her yet, and surely Melissa’s parents should know what their daughter was up to anyway. If Annelyse had a boyfriend, he’d supervise. And then he thought, Melissa’s parents might think he was supervising them right now.

• • •

SITTING OPPOSITE JAKE at the kitchen bench, Tilly was silently reading something on her phone, frowning as she scrolled down. She sighed, but didn't look up.

It was two weeks since her mother had died. Tilly had cried when she met them at Christchurch airport, again at the end of the funeral and the day they got home, but since then she seemed to have adjusted. They had packed up her mother's villa and given most of the furniture to Women's Refuge—Tilly's idea; TJ had wanted to sell it all on Trade Me for a cut. And they'd shipped home five boxes of books, linen and kitchenware, which were stored—temporarily, Jake hoped—in the garage.

Finally Tilly said, 'Have you seen this?' It was her outraged voice. 'Nothing changes.' Her tone was far from resigned. Sometimes she got fired up unnecessarily, pointlessly. It would be a council issue—the grey hair brigade getting their knickers in a twist again over some Te Arawa proposal, either that or another refugee crisis, or perhaps, with all that sighing, climate change. She leaned right over the bench, thrusting the phone between Jake's face and his cereal bowl, until he slowly lowered his spoon and took it.

She was looking at a news report headed POLICE INVESTIGATE TEEN SEX GAME. It was alleged that a group of boys calling themselves the Dice Bros had plied underage girls with alcohol and sexually assaulted them.

'Unbelievable,' said Jake. 'You'd think after all the publicity about Me Too they'd know better. I thought schools—'

'Keep reading,' said Tilly. 'It's here—in Rotorua. One boy's only year twelve.'

It took him a moment to register. Year twelve. The same year as TJ.

Jake felt the blush creep up his face, and the more he was aware of it, aware of Tilly noticing, the worse it became. The bane of his adolescence.

TJ and Melissa. Melissa was, at best, fifteen. He still hadn't told Tilly. The timing hadn't been right. She'd been down south, and then back here, but preoccupied. Grieving. He was worried she'd overreact. He didn't want a scene; he wasn't sure how TJ would respond.

Nor had Jake told his son that he'd seen him. He'd hinted. The day after, he'd reminded TJ that Melissa and Annelise used to be friends. TJ had scoffed, 'In about year five, Dad. Melissa's a lot more mature than Annelise. A lot.'

'I'm just saying be careful—she's much younger than you.'

'Sure.'

'How old is she anyway?'

TJ had already gone back to his phone, clicking on the Snapchat ghost icon.

Jake took the opportunity while he was engrossed. 'You need to respect her. Girls are different . . .'

TJ nodded, grunted, leaned forwards so his face filled the screen.

'TJ?'

The phone clicked. 'I'm listening.'

'You need to be sensible. Girls can feel pressured.'

'Believe me, Dad, *I'm* not pressuring Melissa.'

Jake ignored this. 'We've got a lot on at the moment, TJ.'

TJ was smirking.

'What?' asked Jake, his voice tight.

'Nothing. Just something here.' He waggled his phone.

Jake had left then; he wasn't getting anywhere, and he'd thought it would be better for them to talk once he'd touched base with Tilly.

Only he hadn't yet.

In the kitchen, Jake gave the phone back to Tilly. The news report was vague—it said the students were from three local schools. The police were still investigating; no charges had been laid at this point. The police would not comment, nor would the schools.

As Jake put his bowl in the dishwasher, he said, 'Melissa's the same age as Annelise, isn't she?'

'We don't need to worry about that. It's hardly serious; he had a "thing" with her friend last month.' For some reason, Tilly made air quotes as she said 'thing'.

Maybe TJ had had sex with that girl too. Maybe he'd had intercourse with lots of girls.

• • •

BY THE FOLLOWING Saturday, the news reports about the Dice Bros seemed to have solidified—there were five boys and as many as six girls involved, aged between fifteen and eighteen. The boys were mainly finishing year thirteen, although one had left school and one was in TJ's year. Investigations were ongoing.

Jake skimmed through an opinion piece, and then said to Tilly tentatively, 'I suppose it's social media that drives this Dice Bros kind of behaviour?'

'It's rape culture, Jake, isn't it? Attitudes. It doesn't matter if it's on Snapchat or Facebook or at a party on a Saturday night.'

‘From pornography, d’you think? I mean, have you talked to TJ?’

‘He doesn’t know them.’

‘Oh. Good. I meant more generally, though, you know?’

‘I think TJ understands about consent.’

‘Course.’ The image was before him again: Melissa on all fours, his son’s body moving. He tried to bring to mind her face—had she been okay with it? And then he thought about her joking and swearing as they came into the house afterwards.

‘He needs to be careful, though,’ Jake said. ‘Girls can change their mind, can’t they?’

Tilly was looking at him over the top of her glasses and he nodded to her, thinking, yes, he could trust TJ’s judgement.

‘We need to be afraid for our daughters, not our sons, Jake,’ said Tilly in her teacher tone.

CLOSE TO ELEVEN, when TJ hadn’t surfaced, Jake knocked on his door, gave him a minute, then shoved it open. Picking a path through the wet towels, strewn clothes and tattered schoolbooks, he deposited a rubbish bag on the bed and told TJ he had half an hour to clean the sleep-out. TJ stretched, rolled over and then settled again, muttering about breakfast and his exams, even as he pulled his phone and headphones out from under the bed.

‘Mum’ll be home from yoga in an hour. I think you want to do it before then.’ Jake left the room.

No doubt TJ was startled—would think him firm, but fair. Discreet even.

Jake waited. He wasn’t going to clean up his son’s empty cans and chippie packets. He had a vision of a used condom down the

side of the divan, imagined pulling it out and finding the floor littered with them, Melissa's underwear, oh God . . .

He marched back. TJ was still lying there, smiling at the phone as he texted.

'Get up!' screamed Jake. It was Tilly who lost her temper in this house. Tilly and TJ who had shouting matches. Jake was the peacemaker. 'I want everything out of the sleep-out. All the rubbish gone and the floor swept. NOW.'

'What the . . .?'

Regaining control of himself, Jake told TJ in a normal tone that, once he'd cleaned up, they were going to move Nana's boxes into the sleep-out, so TJ wouldn't be able to use it for a while. He considered adding that when Melissa was over, the door had to stay open.

He said, 'And you're too young for RTDs.'

. . .

THE NEXT DAY, at lunchtime, Jake came into the kitchen to find Tilly bending over, peering into the back of a drawer.

'Have you seen that mandolin thing?'

Jake thought a mandolin was a musical instrument. 'No.'

She was wearing a skirt and the material of it clung, so he could see the curves of her buttocks, the shape of her thighs. And then that song came into his head—the man speaking—poke out your butt.

Jake moved so he was right behind her, as if he were going to help her look; closer, so he was pressing against her. How could he be turned on by that song, by that line?

Tilly giggled and straightened up. 'What's got into you, tiger?'

Bending to nuzzle her ear, he laughed too, relieved to hear her happiness again.

‘I thought a mandolin was something Captain Corelli played,’ he said into her ear. His hand stroked, cupped her breast, fingering the button on her shirt. Tilly arched against him, her frizzy hair in his face. Then, smiling, she turned, plonked a kiss on his nose and moved back to the dishwasher.

It didn’t matter—for the rest of the day, Jake knew, they’d occasionally touch or catch the other’s eye, a reminder, a message. Tonight. In bed.

THAT NIGHT, IN their room, with just the lamp on, as Tilly was lifting his T-shirt over his head, kissing his neck, pressing herself against him, Jake had an appalling thought. It wasn’t that he visualised Melissa’s breasts. Hanging there. But imagine if he did. Imagine if he thought of her now, in this moment.

• • •

IN THE CAR, TJ was telling Jake how Melissa and his friend Liam had played a prank on one of the teachers, plastering her classroom with posters of Trump with speech bubble comments, because they knew she hated him. He talked fast, explaining some of the comments, and Jake got lost, but laughed when TJ did.

‘You and Melissa still together then?’

‘Yeah.’

‘She’s quite a bit younger.’

‘She’s fifteen.’

Jake nodded and refrained from pointing out it was two years and asked instead how they’d got together.

‘We were playing Smash or Pass, and Liam gave me Melissa.’  
‘Playing what?’

‘It’s a game in the group chat, it’s like Tap or Gap, where your mate gives you a girl and you have to say “tap” or “gap” and why.’

‘So, “tap”?’ Jake asked with trepidation.

TJ grinned. ‘Yeah, you know, you’d do her . . .’ He shrugged.  
‘Want to be with her.’

‘And “gap”? Do you say on the group chat that you don’t like them?’

‘You can say it like—“just a friend” or “too young”.’

‘And what exactly does tap involve?’

TJ laughed. ‘Chill, Dad.’

‘So, you said tap to Melissa.’

‘Well, not to her. About her. And someone tagged her and she said, “Let’s go then.”’

‘Very romantic,’ said Jake.

‘Only don’t tell Mum, ’cos it’ll end up as one of those conversations.’

‘Those conversations?’

‘Not playing those kinds of games, respecting girls, the dangers of social media—you know, Dad.’

Jake nodded his head a fraction. He waited a while and then said, ‘It’s good to talk. We don’t so often now with you driving yourself.’

TJ didn’t answer.

‘We should go biking. We haven’t been for ages.’

TJ didn’t answer.

‘Teej?’

‘Sure, Dad,’ he said.

• • •

ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON Jake was having a nap when Annelyse burst in.

‘Dad, quick, it’s TJ—he’s crying.’

Jake jumped up; he couldn’t remember the last time TJ had cried.

Annelyse didn’t answer his questions as they ran down the stairs—he wasn’t sure if she didn’t know what was going on, or if she was holding back.

The boy was curled on the window seat in the kitchen, hands over his head, his body shuddering. Jake perched next to him, asking what was wrong, looking for signs of injury, prising TJ’s hands off his face. TJ started to rock, his body heaving.

Shouting, Jake asked Annelyse again, ‘What happened?’

‘He just came in like that.’ Annelyse’s voice was high and panicky.

‘TJ, are you hurt?’

Why wasn’t Tilly here? Why was she never here when things happened?

‘Turn over. Tell me what’s going on.’

TJ tried to explain. It was difficult to understand. Jake caught the name Melissa and then Liam. The slut—she must have gone off with his mate. This was what happened when kids had sex too early: they got caught up like this. TJ was hurting—real heartache.

Jake tried to imagine what Tilly would do. He poured a glass of water, ran the kitchen towel under the hot tap and wrung it out.

‘Now sit up,’ he said, in a voice which sounded calmer than he felt. ‘Wash your face. Drink this. You can tell me anything. Annelise, you should go.’

TJ held the towel over his face. Annelise hovered.

‘Is it . . . did Melissa . . .?’

Sitting up, his hands dropping away with the towel, TJ made full eye contact for his confession. ‘We killed a dog. It ran out in front of us. By Blue Lake.’

‘How did you get to . . .? In a car? Was anyone hurt?’

Gradually, Jake pieced it together. Two carloads of TJ’s friends, both with drivers on their restricted, had driven out to Blue Lake. On the way home they’d decided to race. TJ and Melissa were in Liam’s car, along with Liam’s girlfriend. They’d all been egging Liam on, so that as he pulled out to overtake the other car he hadn’t been able to stop in time when the dog ran out.

It took a little longer to get the full subtleties. They’d been yelling out the windows, which was what had drawn the black lab, barking and bouncing, on to the road. Yes, he did mean the part around from the lakefront where it was still fifty k’s, and Liam was, for sure, speeding. The other car drove on, possibly not even realising what had happened. The owners, including their daughters, saw the whole thing.

TJ broke down again as he described the girls, the dog’s injuries, and how it had died when he and the owner tried to lift it. He said the man had taken Liam’s details and told him to expect the police to call. Liam was blaming TJ and Melissa for making him speed, and overtake, for attracting the dog.

Jake sat next to his son on the window seat and held him. He stroked TJ’s hair, and told him it would be all right.

He didn't say it out loud, but he kept thinking, thank God his son wasn't hurt. Thank God they hadn't hit a child; thank God it was only a dog.

WHEN TILLY CAME home, Jake made TJ explain it all again.

To begin with, Tilly kept unpacking the shopping and Jake wasn't sure she'd understood, so he started filling in the details—the kids in the car calling out, the daughters seeing it all, TJ and the man lifting the dog—letting TJ correct him.

Tilly stopped moving around the kitchen.

'Oh, TJ, those poor girls. That poor family.'

Jake put his hand on her arm. 'He knows. He's really upset, Tilly.'

'I should bloody hope so.'

'Fuck, Mum, it wasn't me driving.' TJ started towards the door.

Jake wished Tilly had been there earlier to see how upset TJ had been.

'Thomas James, get back here,' she said, and her voice was hard and low.

He turned. 'What?'

She put her hands on his shoulders. 'You can't run away from something like this.'

He whined, 'Mum, I know we screwed up.'

Tilly remained absolutely still. Mother and son, eyeing each other—like animals, Jake thought.

And then TJ broke. 'I'm sorry, Mum. I'm so sorry. It was . . . the way the dog's head . . .' He started to cry again and Tilly put her arms around the boy, who was a little taller than her now. He was mumbling about the blood from the dog's eye, and seeing bone.

After a while, she started to rub his back and gently she said, 'We need to phone Liam's parents, and if the police haven't been in touch we should all go to the police station.'

'It wasn't just us in the car, you know,' said TJ, pulling away.

'Hold on,' said Jake, coming closer. 'Let's slow down. Fine to phone Liam's parents, but we need to be clear about what they could be charged with before we talk to the police.'

'Why?' said Tilly. 'They've done what they did.'

'Yes, but their futures . . . universities, jobs. We might need advice.' They had a lawyer who'd done their conveyancing and wills; Jake doubted he knew anything about criminal law.

'Imagine if it'd been a person,' said Tilly. 'A child.'

'It was a dog, Mum, please.'

'I know they've been bloody stupid,' said Jake loudly. 'Let things get out of hand. I know they could have ruined their lives. But they're just kids.' His hand sliced the air. 'Just slow down.'

No one spoke.

'It's a good idea for you two to phone Liam's parents, but I'm going to find out what the law is, okay? And we'll go from there. Just see if the guy's phoned.'

'What if Liam hasn't told his parents?' asked TJ, but they both cut him off, and that was it, thought Jake as he jogged up the stairs, they were back on the same page.

IT WAS MORE difficult than he'd anticipated to find anything about the law. There were Google results for accidents where the driver and dog were killed, for cruelty to dogs, and something about a dog being pulled behind a ute. There was an article about what to do if you hit an animal—it didn't say it was a crime. It was

clear the speeding and overtaking would be careless or reckless driving, but could the police prove it?

TJ came in and told him that Liam hadn't heard from the man or the police yet.

'All right,' said Jake. 'Give me a bit longer. Thank goodness you didn't hit someone.'

'I didn't hit anything, Dad. I wasn't driving.'

'No,' said Jake. 'You were just yelling out the window, getting him to race.'

When TJ left the room, Jake thought that he did have a point. Liam was culpable, not TJ. TJ had made a mistake. He'd been irresponsible. But was it illegal? Jake couldn't even find any laws about drivers hitting animals, never mind the culpability of passengers.

For a while he stared at the Google search screen, unsure what to look up that would cover TJ's position.

Then he typed, 'Law sex with minor New Zealand'.

There were some bits of the Crimes Act—something about consent and being drunk. Further down, a paragraph said: *New Zealand statutory rape law is violated when an individual has consensual sexual contact with a person under the age of 16.*

TJ had done exactly that. Statutory rape. He could go to prison. Jake should have told Tilly. Why hadn't he?

Statutory rape. That's what those boys had done too, wasn't it? That Dice case.

'Jesus, TJ,' Jake whispered.

He added 'Dice Bros' to his search.

There were news articles about the case. He clicked on the most recent—it said the police had charged the boys involved in the teen sex game. Jake had lost track; he hadn't realised it had

progressed that far. Four youths were facing charges of sexual violation and sexual assaults and making a video. It didn't say statutory rape. Jake scrolled all the way through and then clicked back to the search results.

Words from a blog further down caught his eye. *One of rape gang had sexual intercourse with a girl aged just 13!!* Jake clicked. The screen went black except for a paragraph in red with a rant about the oldest boy, the one who'd left school, suggesting this was his modus operandi—preying on young girls—and that the police were ignoring it.

Tilly was calling. Jake clicked back to the traffic offences, then went downstairs. The man had called Liam's parents. He wanted all the kids to come to his house the next day and apologise, and eventually he wanted them to pay for a new dog. He'd witnessed how upset they'd been. He felt if they complied with his suggestions, they'd have learned their lesson; the police didn't need to be involved.

Jake listened and nodded. 'You're lucky, TJ.'

'It's called restorative justice,' said Tilly.

TJ didn't seem to be listening.

'Will you come with me?' he asked suddenly, looking at Tilly. When she nodded, TJ glanced at Jake and he nodded, even though he wasn't sure whether TJ was asking him to go too.

After TJ went to his room, Jake poured them a wine.

'They've charged those boys in that sex game case.'

'I know,' said Tilly. 'Good on them.'

'Do you think? What does sending them to prison achieve?'

TJ was having sex with a minor. She was fifteen; it was statutory rape. If TJ dumped Melissa, she could report him.

If he told Tilly, what would she do?

‘Imagine if it was TJ,’ he said, seeing again his son’s shadow on the wall.

‘It wouldn’t be, though, would it?’ Tilly said it with such conviction that he agreed.

Jake thought then about the weight of TJ leaning against his chest when he’d been crying, and the shape of his son’s head cupped in his hand, and he thought, he would hold this burden himself. He could do that for his son.