

Owen completes an EPIGUIDE character chart

I don't know why I enlisted Jamie's help to fill out this form, but once he'd got a glance over it he was way eager and even told me I didn't need to be there, that he'd do it for me. Since I'd also had a glance there was no way in hell that was going to happen. I was also an idiot for giving him his own copy. I'd done it so we didn't have to sit side by side reading the questions except I had a feeling he'd complete his own filling-out at some later date and leave it where I'd see it.

'I'm pretty sure you can fill out your own name, Owen,' he said, 'but are you okay with the spelling?'

Yep, right from the start!

I glared and wrote my full name: Owen Whitney Tremayne. He couldn't tease me about the middle name; it was one handed down to each first born male and had been around for a long time. I wrote this for the name origin, since I'd never looked up what Owen might mean.

'I can think of several nicknames,' Jamie said helpfully.

I ignored him and wrote the only nickname I was called that I liked: Angel. It's what Andrew called me. Since he did use it in public I didn't feel embarrassed writing it down. I completed the birthdate, place of birth, ethnic background without Jamie contributing. Same with the questions about religion.

'Hunh,' Jamie said as he watched me write my address.

'What?' I growled.

'Nothing.'

He got a second narrowed glare before I completed the next few questions about where I lived and with whom I lived. 'Is this my ideal home and location?' I looked up at Jamie. 'What would you say?'

'Seriously?' he asked me.

'Well, if I had millions...'

Jamie shook his head. 'You don't want to be here, Owen, that's as clear as you and me sitting here filling out this form. Write *that*.'

'It's not about the situation,' I said stiffly. 'I like this house and where it is.'

'Then why'd you ask?'

'It's not my *ideal*.'

'Jesus, it's not fucking rocket science! Situation or not, I'm pretty bloody sure if you could leave here, you would. Write down Andrew's apartment.'

So I did. And because Andrew's apartment was classic, clean, and neat, I ticked the Neat and Comfortable boxes. Probably I should also have ticked Expensive but that wasn't actually what I liked about it or what I'd have in mind for my ideal abode. The driving, car and pets was easy – all negative. Jamie asked if Andrew had let me drive his Merc. 'No,' I snorted and the way he grinned I had a feeling he might not have been meaning the car. *Why* had I asked for Jamie's help?

He kept silent as I wrote down my job, how long I'd been doing it, where it was and whether or not I enjoyed it (I did). He knew my income so that didn't really peak his interest when I wrote the general sum down. It was the next question he waited for. In fact, it was probably the one that had made him agree in the first place – sexuality. Naturally I wrote *straight*.

'For fuck's sake,' he growled, reached across the table and pulled the form his way. He scribbled out *straight* and wrote *gay*. Actually he wrote **GAY**.

'I am not.' I grabbed the form back and scribbled through his monstrous letters.

'Owen, you are! You're in a relationship with another male, you have *sex* with that male. That's pretty gay.' When he reached out again, I yanked the form half off the table into my lap so he couldn't get it. 'Why won't you admit it? Nobody's gonna die of shock.'

'I'm not gay,' I said steadily and nobody was going to make me say different.

Jamie shook his head at me. 'I thought this was supposed to be honest.'

I gritted my teeth.

'Well, look, write bisexual then,' Jamie said and his tone softened just a little. 'That works, right?'

I didn't want to write even that, but I did understand his point given the situation. The issue was, if it hadn't been for Andrew I'd be 100% totally straight. Perhaps I should write *uncertain*? No, I was certain. In the end I actually wrote *other*. Jamie drew in a part breath but didn't verbally tell me I was a dickhead and a cowardly one at that. For marital status I wrote unmarried but I did answer the second bit honestly - I was romantically involved with Andrew, had been for almost a year.

Jamie muttered something that sounded a lot like 'that reads gay to me.' I pretended I didn't hear and he wisely didn't say anything regarding the second part of that whole relationship question - about previous romantic partners. I wrote *n/a* and I wrote that for the nicknames for Andrew. Which was true, I didn't have a nickname for him. Jamie again managed to hold his tongue, but I saw him smile because the next question was how did we meet. I wrote *at a bar*, because we had. I was hardly going to say why I was at a bar and what had happened there.

No children but regarding the relationship with children I wrote *two younger brothers and two younger sisters. Oldest of the brothers acts like a child.*

'Ha, ha.'

The physical appearance bits weren't difficult though I hadn't stood on any scales for a while so I left that one blank. Jamie kindly told me I was as thin as a rake. I wasn't but I didn't carry much fat. I wrote slender (and he muttered 'gay'). Skin tone was actually fairly easy - my brothers and sisters and I all had pretty even skin tone, not olive so much but we tanned okay. Jamie spent five minutes looking at me to find my face shape but by the time he said 'go with odd' I'd already passed that - brothers for whom I most looked like (which probably also meant our dad but there wasn't any way I wanted that on the form), general health as good and no health problems. Though my heart did occasionally really miss a beat but I wasn't sure if that counted so I left it out. I ticked *average* for the price of my clothes, though since I was working I did have dress clothes which may have had me lean towards *expensive*. Jamie sniggered at style, told me I didn't have any. I ticked the boxes for Conservative, Eclectic, Business and Casual. When I got to the next part of that question, about why I dressed that way I realised picking four things probably wasn't clever. I didn't cross any out though. I wrote down that I dressed up for work and dressed comfortably the rest of the time. Eclectic because I had a few pieces of clothing that weren't really casual or conservative. Conservative because you'd never get me wearing just jeans and a tank top.

Special jewellery or accessories? None really, besides the watch Andrew had brought me. I guess it covered both jewellery and accessories. I got another snigger when we got to the grooming question. I put *average* because I did put more effort into being tidy now that I had a job. Hairstyle was easy too - none. As in, I didn't style it in the mornings. My hair was long enough to flick behind my ears if I wanted but not enough to disappear into my shirt collars. And if Andrew had told me to shave it all off, I'd have done so in an eye-blink. But he liked my hair as it was and that was that. I guess the texture was wavy, though that might have been the cowlicks. Megan straightened hers but if she let it dry naturally it had a wave and when I took a better look at Jamie's as he sat opposite I noticed that his was straighter. Though it *was* also shorter. We did have the same hair colour - a sort of chestnut brown. All of us had that, though Megan, Lisa and Matty were slightly lighter.

For the next section on speech and language/communication I had to rely on Jamie a bit, because I was pretty sure that what I thought about myself wasn't what others did. How much of a good reference Jamie would be was debatable but I let him give me his opinion once I'd said what I thought. We agreed that my pace of speech was *average*, unless I got excited about something and then it picked up. We both thought we sounded average in the voice, though Jamie added, 'you do have a wicked stubborn tone.'

I took that as a compliment, though wasn't entirely sure it was one. We probably had a dialect to out-of-towners but I just wrote *n/a* for that one, and Jamie told me that if I didn't write 'it's not fair' as one of my habitual phrases then it was just another thing I was being dishonest over. I wrote it with a mutter since I did tend to say it a lot, but with good reason! I didn't reckon that I swore any more than anyone else in the house and certainly didn't restrict myself to a certain selection so I didn't write down any curse words.

'Volatile,' Jamie said with regard to mannerisms/demeanour.

'Bollocks,' I responded.

'Aggressive then.'

'I am not!'

Jamie eyes rolled. 'You are volatile and you are aggressive. Not all the time but do you not remember the time you punched me?'

'Would that be the same time you removed my right canine?' I responded sweetly.

He straightened in his chair. 'That time too,' he said a little coldly.

We had a staring game for half a minute then he said, 'honestly, Owen, you should tick every one of these because you are every one of them. Depending upon the situation, of course. Or maybe you should just tick *other* and describe it as "crazy".'

'Crazy is not a demeanour,' I told him. I glared down at the options. If I had to pick just one, which would I pick? If someone saw me on the street and had to pick, which would they choose just by looking at me? Probably remote, I thought, or nervous/shy. I'm not good in crowds or with people I've not met; I'll hang back until I'm sure. I ticked both of them, set my spare hand over the paper so that Jamie couldn't quite see.

The posture thing was probably the same - I was every one of them in different situations. When Sergeant Morrison was around I was as stiff as a board, the same when our parents were present. Stiff *and* wary. In general, though, I guess mainly I was relaxed, though out in public I tried not to slump. So I ended up ticking *average, varies with mood*. I was a hand-waver in terms of gestures. I tried to control myself but quite a bit of the time it was unconscious. In fact I either had my arms wrapped tightly around myself or I was waving them about. Maybe I needed to tick *other* again. Except I didn't; I ticked *when excited*, which got a snigger from Jamie who could turn anything rude. Andrew would respond that a habitual gesture of mine was holding my hands in fists. I didn't do that so much now so I resisted putting it down. I actually did write that I folded my arms a lot. It was a sort of defensive gesture (and a conscious effort to not wave my arms about!). I bravely asked Jamie if he noticed anything.

He shook his head. 'Not really, though I agree with the arm folding. You do it without fail when Morrison shows up and your eyes narrow too, like you're facing him in the OK Corral.'

I couldn't exactly argue because Sergeant Morrison had once said he felt like he was staring down a duel every time he came for a visit. I didn't add eye-narrowing to the gestures though.

Jamie thought he should complete the next section - the one on everyday behaviour and habits - because he reckoned I wouldn't be honest. 'For example,' he said, 'you're not going to write criminal activity, are you, for finances?'

'Why would I write that?' I challenged, tone telling him he better bloody not answer the way he was going to (which related back to my prostitution, I was sure. Not that it was criminal activity but Jamie took every opportunity to bring it up.).

Jamie ran his tongue over his teeth, appeared to be considering whether ignoring my tone was a good idea. 'What are you going to write then?' he asked finally, since during his internal deliberation I actually hadn't filled in my own thoughts.

I considered the examples on the sheet. Prudent/cautious was definitely me - I'd had to be and even now I had a good wage I remained that way because I was also, in fact, deeply in debt. Andrew wasn't really bothered about recouping the money he'd put forward for my medical bill but it was still a debt I owed, and it was big. I wrote down that I was cautious, determined to become debt free, and that I was trying to save. Jamie didn't tell me what he thought about the answer.

He snorted at the examples of personal habits but made no mention of the prostitution, and said nothing when I wrote *n/a*. I didn't look at him as I read over the next section - about morning routine, particularly the bit that said 'who else is sleeping in the same bed?' I wrote that I was up, generally, by seven weekdays and was out the door by eight. Most days I had toast and a cup of tea for breakfast, which I had standing in the kitchen rather than sitting at the dining table. I didn't bother about writing about my state of mind, though I guessed I was normally fairly good in my mood. I liked a sleep-in in the weekends but I was perfectly fine getting up early during the weekday. I didn't answer the bit about who was sleeping with me.

The next bit about work was fairly standard too - I got a ride to work, I was pretty good at my job (and I enjoyed it, so that helped). I didn't generally work an eight-hour day. On the days I didn't go home with Andrew, I left about 14:30 so I could have family time with my brothers and sisters. Early on I hadn't wanted the family time but I appreciated now that had Andrew insisted. It was good to be a family some days.

Dinner-wise, if I went out it was actually to Andrew's apartment so I didn't really consider that as 'out'. Maybe once a month we went out as a family, and we had Andrew round to eat with us a lot. Sometimes I thought he only came so he could ensure I actually ate. Megan was our main cook but all of us helped.

On a typical evening I'd be playing a board game with my younger brother and sister. The TV was usually on but I didn't often sit down to watch something particular. If I was at Andrew's apartment I just liked being near him, even if he was doing extra work in his office. We played Scrabble a lot and I occasionally made him sing for me (that was his fault for not hiding the karaoke machine *really* well).

'I thought he said you told him not to sing,' Jamie said.

'What?'

'Yeah, I'm pretty sure when I asked about the karaoke Andrew said you'd forbidden him,' Jamie said. 'Has he gotten better?' He jabbed at the paper.

'Uh.' My face heated - I remembered that night too now and realised what I'd written really didn't match. 'He's um been practising.' I stared down at the form aware that Jamie was looking at me, clearly wondering just what I was hiding. No way I was telling him. 'So, sleep habits,' I said to put him off.

Terrible choice because he grinned. 'You going to tell me about them? Am I not too young to know?'

'Fuck off,' I responded and reddened more. When I stayed with Andrew I slept like a log; he was protection and love personified. When I spent the night alone I was more restless but nightmares had been rare of late. I wrote that I generally slept well.

Jamie made a noise of disappointment, then said, 'I know stubborn isn't a talent, but you do it really well. You should put it down.'

'Bite me.' I wrote that I had no special skills, which actually was kind of sad. Then I added Scrabble, which was probably silly but I was pretty good at it. Since I'd said I had no special skills I looked at the next bit about things I might be particularly unskilled at and thought I would look pretty pathetic if I answered *everything*. Should I ask Jamie? I looked up at him; he was sucking on a finger nail. He raised a brow at me but said nothing. I left that section blank and thought about hobbies. Man, I *was* pathetic - I didn't really have any hobbies. I wouldn't have said playing Scrabble was one and I certainly didn't do sports. I didn't collect anything; I was even hard pressed to name favourite movies or books. 'I'll come back to this one,' I mumbled.

I glanced at the next section - Family of Origin - and turned the page to The Past.

'Owen,' Jamie said.

'What?' I replied, on edge.

He just looked at me, then down at the form.

'I don't want to,' I said softly.

'You don't have to go into any detail,' he pointed out.

I didn't care. Just putting down their names would hurt.

'Do you want me to do it?'

I looked up. Jamie was sincere. 'I will, if you want,' he said quietly.

I wanted to stick to my guns and leave the section empty, but I also nearly handed him the form. I was relieved that he wasn't in a joking mood about this and I appreciated his solidarity. I bit my lip, then shook my head. 'I can do it.' The names, status (and age), and occupation were in fact pretty simple answers. They were just facts. Actually, my relationship with mom and dad was fact too - I wrote *bad* for both. Maybe it should have been *missing* for mom because it felt that way, but because she was with dad and he was against me I gave her the same adjective. Jamie said nothing. Writing my siblings was easier.

'Good,' he said.

I looked up.

'I mean, our relationship with you,' he said. 'It's good.'

I straightened a bit. Good probably wasn't what I'd have written, especially not where Jamie was concerned. I had been a bastard to him and he to me. I looked down at the paper and thought about the last couple of weeks. I guess *good* covered it well enough, so I wrote it down. 'Thanks,' I whispered.

Jamie just shrugged. He rose. 'I need a drink, you want something?'

I shook my head. He left the table and I watched him until he said, 'just because I'm not right there making you write doesn't mean you can stop.'

And I realised that he'd left the table so I would have some space to answer the next details, which included things like happiest and saddest memories, police record, first sexual experience and major illnesses, accidents or trauma. A shudder rippled down my spine. Crap, I didn't want to give details of these things. But I bit my lip, and did. I wrote down where I was born though I no longer considered it to be my home town and I said my childhood was happy though we'd moved around a lot. I couldn't come up with an earliest memory but the happiest memory - well, the thing that came to mind straight away was when I'd played Scrabble with Andrew the morning after I'd admitted how I felt about him. I'd had other happy moments but that one stuck in my mind. Saddest... was that the same as worst? Probably not. I chewed on my pen and finally wrote that my saddest was when I'd yelled at my littlest brother for something that was totally my fault and made him cry.

I wrote that I'd left high school half way through 11th grade but that I had liked school (because I liked learning). I couldn't really think of a significant childhood event other than that it had been hard to make friends with all the moving about we'd done, but I wasn't sure that was an actual event. I wrote *n/a*. I also wrote *n/a* for significant past jobs because I couldn't stand to see prostitute written down even if I felt that it had been legit. I didn't have a police record but I had a history with Detective Senior Sergeant Morrison that probably read like a record. And it was probably down to him (I admitted it occasionally) that I *didn't* have a real record.

First crush/romantic love I kept empty. There'd been a girl at school I liked but I couldn't call it a crush and it certainly hadn't been romantic. And as first sexual experiences go mine was not exactly normal. I did give the truth though - in tiny letters - *with a man, not really horrible*. With the latter I tried to reach that middle ground of not being a positive memory but also not being a negative one. In reality it was both since it had led to my current relationship *and* situation, but thinking on it as simply my first experience I thought I'd answered honestly enough.

The section on major illnesses, accidents or traumas was significantly harder to complete. Especially since it had a second bit - am I still affected, and how? I had suffered pretty major trauma and though it had been several months passed now I was still affected. The nightmares were directly related. The debt I had was directly related. I shifted in my chair; I didn't want to write what I had suffered even if writing it down might have been considered therapeutic. I ended up writing *yes* for the first bit and *nightmares* for the second bit, and then was relieved to turn the page and leave it behind for the time being.

'Oh crap,' I muttered, seeing the next section. Relationships with Others, with the first question being who was my best friend? I couldn't answer it. Even when I thought back to when I was in school, I couldn't answer it. I'd not been friendly enough with someone to call them a *best* friend. But that didn't mean I'd been lonely, I hadn't.

Jamie sat himself down and I said, 'I don't have any friends.'

He choked on a snort of laughter. 'That's pathetic, Owen.'

It was, so I couldn't take offence.

'No one from school?'

I mumbled that I barely remembered anyone from school, which was probably even more pathetic.

'Man, you can't leave it blank,' Jamie said. 'People will worry. Put Andrew down.'

'But...'

'He's a friend, isn't he?'

'Well, yeah,' I said though it had in fact been a while since I'd thought of him in that exact way. I wrote him down, ignored the *other close friends* section.

Straight after that was how I related to various people—friends, strangers, family, the opposite sex etc. I didn't want to do the list one by one so I put *generally get on with everyone but have to work through shyness first*.

Jamie snorted. 'You don't have that problem with authority.' He poked a finger at his guide. Authority included police, IRS, doctors among others.

I shrugged, didn't change my answer. For the next two questions—about most likeable trait and biggest flaw—I asked Jamie's opinion. I had ideas for both but sought his answer in an effort to deflect his cackling at mine. He cocked his head, looked almost surprised. No doubt he was, but I stayed silent, waiting.

‘Determination,’ he said finally. ‘Don’t know that it’s really a trait but I like that you stick to your guns about stuff. You know, you don’t let anyone brow-beat you into doing something else.’

I was pretty sure he didn’t think this six months ago but I wrote *determination*, mumbled, ‘thanks.’ Then waited, nervous, for the flaw.

‘Keeping secrets.’

I looked up and held his gaze while he continued, ‘it may not be so bad now but you did it for so long it still hurts.’

‘Okay,’ I said around a lump.

Jamie nodded and looked away. I’d been going to put ‘stubbornness’ because it directed almost everything I did and I knew it wasn’t good. But the keeping secrets thing—yeah, it had been bad. I felt like I should apologise again but there was always a part of me that felt I’d done the right thing keeping those secrets.

The next questions had me squeeze my eyes closed a few seconds, trying to figure out how I could skip them.

‘Aww, come on, Owen,’ Jamie said across the table, ‘you’re supposed to be being honest.’

‘You’re a pervert,’ I responded.

He just grinned.

I answered *no* to any secret crushes and *monogamous* regarding how I acted in a romantic relationship. It was the question about my sexual behaviour that Jamie waited for. Not that he probably wanted to know; he just liked to see me squirm.

‘It’s private,’ I muttered.

‘At the apartment, maybe,’ Jamie responded with a decent amount of amusement.

I froze a second. No *way* they could hear...

Jamie chuckled. ‘The way you’ve gone fire red I think you should put “inhibited”.’

‘I’m not in...’ I cut off, straightened in my chair.

Jamie’s brows rose in challenge.

Fine, I thought. I wrote *average, but would like to experiment*.

Jamie couldn’t quite see what I’d written but his curiosity was piqued. I’d have to make sure he didn’t get his hands on this! Andrew and I had a decent sexual relationship but I couldn’t quite let him touch me—massage or something more. Too many memories. But I *wanted* him to, I wanted him to fix me. I just couldn’t quite get that wish passed my lips. I guess it didn’t really constitute ‘experimental’ but I wasn’t going to explain further.

I ignored the pair of *who do I like/dislike most* questions, and considered who the most important person in my life was right now. I wrote *Andrew* because he was, though I felt a bit off saying that when my brother was right here!

‘Why?’ Jamie said.

‘What?’ I hadn’t expected he might query it. God, what should I say?

He rolled his eyes, tapping the paper. ‘There’s a second part to that question.’

Yeah, but I’d been ignoring it because when I thought about it a lump stuck on my throat.

‘I’ll answer.’

‘No, I’ll...’

Jamie’d grabbed for the form before I could protect it. I didn’t leap across the table, just sat back, resigned. He chuckled. ‘Experimental, huh?’

My narrowing gaze cut the chuckling off. He scratched some lines in and I just stared when he passed the paper back to me. Jamie’s brows went up. ‘Well, it’s the truth, isn’t it?’

He’d written *because he makes me want to live*.

‘Plenty of other reasons,’ Jamie said quietly, ‘but that’s the core, right?’

I think I gave a nod. I couldn’t look at him, and was barely able to swallow down the rock in my throat.

‘Owen?’

When I looked up he asked, quietly, ‘did you ever try it?’

‘No.’

We held gazes, but this was one secret I would *never* reveal, and one that Andrew wouldn’t either. And since Andrew had saved me that day what Jamie had written was true.

Whether he believed me or not, Jamie shrugged and said, ‘secret attractions?’

‘None,’ and wrote that down.

For the biggest influence I wasn’t quite sure what I should write. Was it on how I acted, how I spoke, what I liked to eat? I guess that, *generally*, the biggest influence was Andrew. Just walking through the door in the evening he could calm any panic I might have been in prior. And he’d taught me a lot at work that I could put into practice at home.

For the person I misjudged/misunderstood most I had no hesitation in writing *Jamie*. He looked surprised, but it was true and then he said, ‘you can put me down for the next question too.’ Who misjudged or misunderstood *me*.

‘I think we’re better now,’ I mumbled as I wrote.

‘Yeah, mostly,’ he responded, and I accepted the half agreement.

I hadn’t lost touch with anyone significant that I actually cared about so didn’t answer that question, nor the one after it about the worst end of a relationship.

Andrew ended up being the answer for whom I relied on for practical advice and emotional support, which I felt bad about. This was beginning to read like I couldn’t function without him. And while that held a lot of truth I didn’t actually think of him that way. And I worried that this was making clear how much I didn’t turn to my brothers and sisters for help. Jamie didn’t make any comment about it but did say that I should put down him and the others for whom I supported. ‘You sometimes suck at it’ – smile – ‘but you’ve always been here for us.’

I listed my brothers and sisters, and scratched at an eye. I sucked *more* than sometimes but I appreciated that Jamie thought enough to have it as the answer.

That brought me (us) to a new section: Mental Attitude/Personal Beliefs.

Jamie snorted. ‘Just write “fully mental” and that’ll cover it.’

I ignored him, except thought maybe he had meant it because the first section asked about psychological issues. The examples included phobias and depression. I wasn’t sure what to put. I’d spent a lot of time upset and angry but I didn’t really think I’d ever been depressed. And besides nightmares and the occasional freak-out now, I didn’t think I had any issues. Jamie held his silence, even when I moved onto the next section (where I wrote *optimist* for *optimist/pessimist?*).

I’d never heard of the Meyers Briggs Personality Type and didn’t want to look it up so gave it *n/a*. I wrote that I was most comfortable when I was with Andrew and family, and that I was most uncomfortable in a crowd. More than that I was uncomfortable when people started asking personal questions but since that kind of thing wasn’t given as an example I didn’t state it. With regards to my approach to life I thought I’d actually been the three things listed—cautious, brave and reckless so I put them all down. Jamie kept his thoughts to himself even when I glanced up at him.

I wrote *family* for what I valued or prioritised most and I ignored the ‘who do I really love best?’ question. The next asked who I’d be willing to die for, and I felt an uncomfortable pull in my shoulder. I did my best not to let that day flash into my mind, but my hand shook just a little as I wrote *Andrew and my brothers and sisters*. I glanced up at Jamie, who gave me a grim smile. No doubt he was remembering how, that day, I’d also come close to answering the unasked question: ‘who would you kill for?’

Sucking in a deep breath, I looked to the next question and wrote that I was generally compassionate but that I was also self-involved. Jamie muttered that I wasn’t but I didn’t scribble it out. I didn’t really have a personal philosophy so left that blank and I’d had too many ‘most embarrassing moments’ to write them down. I couldn’t really narrow them down to just one.

My secret wish lay in the realm of being experimental with Andrew and I couldn’t write that down. I put *n/a*.

‘What about wanting mum and dad to bugger off?’ Jamie asked.

'That's hardly secret,' I responded and turned to the next question. I bit a lip: 'What (or who) is my biggest fear?' Actually, it was an easy answer and it had been the answer for so long, but I didn't really want to see it in writing.

'You know what my biggest fear is?' Jamie asked.

'What?'

'That I'm going to grow old and grey before you finish this.'

I set the pen down and leaned back in my seat.

'Oh, come on, Owen,' he said. 'It was a joke.'

'You keep wanting me to be honest on this.' I stabbed a finger downward. 'If I am, then this question is *not* a joke!'

Jamie rubbed his eyes. 'I know. I'm sorry, I just... tried to lighten the mood.' He let out a long sigh. 'My biggest fear, before you re-met Andrew, was that one day I'd wake up to find you gone too. Not like mom and dad, but gone off and... well.' He glared down at the guide in front of him. 'You were always upset and angry and I'd hear you have nightmares, and you wouldn't open up. I was afraid it'd all become too much and we'd get the police visiting to say they'd found your b-body hanging from a tree somewhere. Exc-cuse me.' And he got up and hurried from my visibility.

I sat like someone had sucked my life away and left me with nothing but a shell. Jamie had never told me this before, and I was such a shit brother I'd never asked him how he'd felt or still felt. I looked down at the page blurring in front of me. Losing Andrew was my biggest fear. He had all of my heart, he could make things okay just by being there or by smiling at me, he was keeping all my horrors at bay (those past and present). It was totally true: I couldn't function without him and I didn't *want* to function without him. This is not to say I didn't fear losing my brothers and sisters. I did, but I never really thought there was ever a possibility I *would*.

The pen scribbled in the answer but I also wrote *having my brothers and sisters hating me*.

I knew I should go talk to Jamie, but just couldn't seem to make myself. Part of that was selfishness. I was in a good space these days and hauling all those old things out would destroy my calm. Yet, Jamie probably needed to talk or yell or something. It was only right it should be at me, since I was the cause of it all. I set down the pen and shifted away from the table. I'd gone only a couple of steps when I heard, 'don't think you can just forget the rest of that.'

The squawk I couldn't keep back but I managed not to leap so badly. I turned, found Jamie behind me, weird expression on his face. We stood and stared at each other.

'I wasn't...' I dragged in a breath. 'I never knew you felt like that,' I whispered.

'Yeah, well, guess I can keep a secret too,' he said. 'Sit down.'

'We should talk...'

'I don't want to,' he said, 'and I can tell *you* don't want to. Just sit down and finish the stupid guide.'

I got the feeling he'd manhandle me back to my spot if I didn't move, so I slunk back behind the table. He returned to his seat, didn't try to look across to see if I'd written anything. Instead he said, 'I don't think I've ever seen you display any prejudices, and you wouldn't know political even if it bit you on the arse.'

I sat a bit like a zombie.

'And you don't seem like the sort to believe in fate.'

Perhaps he noticed how silent and still I was because he finally looked up. '*Do* you believe in fate?'

'I... I don't know,' I said, felt like I'd been caught on the spot. I wasn't sure how to react.

'Then write it down.'

'Jamie...'

'Write. It. Down.'

I didn't make any move to pick up the pen. Jamie stiffened like he was preparing to go into warp drive, and I was glad it was just him and me in the house tonight. I just hoped there'd not be too much blood and teeth around the place when this was over.

'I'm sorry I never noticed, never *took* notice. I was... *am*...' I subsided, shaking my head. I didn't know how to explain my actions from back then so they'd be reasonable. And maybe, to Jamie, they never could be

reasonable. When he kept his silence, I picked up the pen and answered the three questions just like he'd surmised.

'Did you ever think about killing yourself?' he asked quietly.

'All the time.'

'Now?'

I shook my head.

We eyed each other.

Then he nodded and said, 'I think that's your greatest strength. You cope. Not always tidily, but you get through.'

It took a second to realise we'd come out the other side of something that could have been bad, and were back to the guide. I looked down at it. Would *coping* work as an answer? Was that really a strength? In the end I wrote *perseverance*, because I thought that might cover more than *coping* did. I didn't bother with *Other good characteristics* and asked quietly what Jamie thought my greatest flaw is.

'You answered that already,' he responded.

Well, at least he didn't give me another one. I wrote down *keeping secrets* again, and he didn't let loose what other flaws I had. Didn't comment either when I didn't write down any, though I had plenty. I considered my favourite attributes, chewing on the pen as I did so. It was going to be a bit of a repeat but I liked that I was stubborn (aka determined), liked that I didn't back down. Physically... I liked my eyes but was too embarrassed to say so. It felt too vain. The least favourite things: I didn't like how I had so much trouble opening up. I didn't think things were curdling inside me because I wasn't talking but I had blown up like Jamie did just before and it was probably because I kept things to myself. Physically, I didn't like how easily I could turn red!

Of course they are! became the answer to 'Are these feelings accurate?'

I turned the page. Thank god I was nearly at the end. I sucked at my teeth while I considered how others probably perceived me. I could have asked Jamie but this was supposed to be how *I* thought they did, not what they really did. Though it was probably the same: *too stubborn, too secretive, too unable (unwilling?) to ask for help and too defensive*. But also *loyal, family-oriented, determined, dedicated*.

When Jamie leaned forward I spun the paper around so he could read right-side-up. He just shrugged and said, 'not much space for the next answer.'

Biggest regret.

The thing was, I didn't regret the prostitution since it had been a 'job' but it was hard for people to understand that. I'd told Jamie several times, but I think he still expected me to write it here. I didn't. I wrote *not waiting til the next day to tell family about blood test results*.

Jamie's brows went up so far I thought they'd disappear into his hairline. 'Really?' The tone was a mixture of surprise and *are you fucking serious?*

'Yes,' I said. 'If there was one thing I could do over, it'd be that. I'd tell you guys the next day and all that shit wouldn't have hit the fan.'

'You think I wouldn't have put two and two together?'

'This isn't actually about you,' I told him in the straightest voice I could manage.

'You would prefer to *lie* to us instead of avoiding Wheeler's attack?'

'Yes.' Stiff this time and that was the only reason my voice didn't shake.

Jamie looked like he didn't know how to react. And so I did. 'I don't care what you think about this, Jamie. I would rather go through *that* stuff again than have Matty crying because of me. I hated that, I hated that you turned me into the bad guy because you got all jumped up about Andrew. I needed him then because I didn't have *you!* And because of *all* that, you made me into a monster and Matty cried.'

Whoa, ridiculously jumpy explanation, and tears now stood in my eyes. Jamie looked gobsmacked. I drew in a shuddering breath. Then I realised I'd cast my eye down the questions below and they included my biggest secret, how I react in a crisis and what's usually the cause of problems in my life. I went into that difficult-to-control giggle/sob stage. I put my head in my hands but it didn't really let me 'get a grip'. I was tired; answering this guide was emotionally exhausting like I never imagined. And maybe I should scribble out what

I'd written and put *letting Jamie be here when I completed this guide*. No, wait, I added that instead under *Other regrets*, then crossed it out before Jamie could see. All still with one hand to my head.

Across from me Jamie was silent and I couldn't look at him. We were the stupidest pair of brothers ever and, like earlier, we simply passed over what had happened. I wrote *staying sane* as my proudest accomplishment. That probably wasn't what the guide's creator had in mind but the fact I had got through everything without resorting to drugs of some sort made me proud. I left *Other accomplishments* blank.

I probably had plenty of quirks but none immediately sprang to mind so I left it blank. I thought Jamie would comment about the biggest secret but he held his silence and I left the answering space blank here too. How I reacted to a crisis took a bit of thought; it kind of depended upon the crisis but I liked to think I maintained a certain level of calm, that I could work through things in an orderly manner. *Calm and orderly* looked a bit stupid but I kept them there. Jamie didn't tell me what he thought, even though he was still sitting across from me.

I wrote *me* for what usually causes the problems in my life because it was true. How I acted or reacted (or didn't react) – generally it was all something originating from me.

For the question about what I'd like to change about myself, I wrote *I'd like more courage*. I suppose it didn't directly answer the question but it's what came to me. If I had more courage I'd be able to open up more often, I probably wouldn't have had to do all that lying long ago and I wouldn't be sitting here now trying to pretend that Jamie and I didn't have a lot of working out to do. I refused to write the 100-word paragraph about myself; if people wanted to know, they could read the answers in this guide.

Goals were next—short and long term. I'd never really thought about any beyond just getting from day to day. I wrote that my short term goal was to survive the remaining month to my eighteenth birthday. For the long term goal I put *maybe study?* I'd thought off and on about doing some study but right now I didn't have the time nor the right head-space. Longer term, but secret to myself, was that I wanted Andrew and myself to make a commitment to each other.

I wrote *yes* for planning to achieve the goals and *don't know* for about others being affected. I didn't think anyone would be affected by the goals per se, but the way I might achieve the short-term goal might do something. Not that I planned anything radical, but I knew others were finding this month a strain too. I put *n/a* against 'What if anything is stopping me from achieving these goals?' because I was going to turn eighteen as a matter of course, and as yet there was nothing stopping my study goal.

I looked at the next question about what event or occurrence I dreaded or feared the most. It was a copy of the earlier question about fear where I'd said losing Andrew was my biggest fear. Except this time I wrote, because it sort of related to my short term goal, *dad winning*. In a month, when I turned eighteen, he'd never be able to control me again. I lived in fear that this month would be the longest in my life, that the strain Andrew was under would cause him to break up with me, that dad would *win*. I was not going to be able to cope with that, no matter that I'd already coped with things that could be considered far worse.

When I realised my breathing wasn't exactly stable, I tried to calm myself down. Across from me Jamie was silent. Man, I'd screwed up before! The lump was too tight in my throat for me to start apologising but I hoped he saw I was sorry anyway. And then I whispered I'd been a shit brother.

'So have I,' he responded quietly, tremor in his voice.

I managed a weak smile, then he asked where I was up to on the guide and I realised I'd been covering it with my left arm. 'Um, things I'm actively working to gain, keep or protect.'

'Well, that's easy,' he said with a brief smile. 'Andrew and me and the others.'

I straightened a little.

'Well, you are,' he said, 'so put it down.'

So I did, and he was right. I was doing, and would do, all I could to keep Andrew and my brothers and sisters with me and away from dad's grip. For the questions about who I wanted and didn't want to emulate I simply put *no one*. And then I felt a monumental wave of relief when I realised all I had left of the guide as Likes/Favourites – regarding food, movies, sports etc.

Food: Ham

Drink: Tea

Colour: Orange (though it wasn't a colour I could wear without getting several raised brows.)

Book: *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan

Film: *Kung Fu Panda* (actually I didn't have a *favourite* but I had to put something.)

TV Show: *The Big Bang Theory*

Music/Song: *Boulder to Birmingham* by The Hollies. (way before my time but Andrew sings this *really* well.)

Sport: Baseball (didn't play it myself.)

Hangout(s): Andrew's apartment, under the tree in the backyard

Motto/Quote: don't have one

Possession: the watch Andrew had brought me.

Alright, I felt so relieved I'd come to the end that I almost needed to go and throw up. I'd revealed more in answering this guide than I'd ever told anyone. And that was probably why Andrew had encouraged me to do it. I wished I could just sit and tell him how I felt about stuff, past and present. I knew he wouldn't ask to read my answers so I folded the pages up and pushed them across the table. 'Can you give it to Andrew?'

'Your hands painted on?' Jamie queried.

'Jamie, please...'

'Look,' he said and straightened because I did. 'This whole thing was supposed to help you. Turns out it helped me a bit too. Well...' He scrunched his eyes closed then looked back at me. 'Maybe not helped but... Owen, I'm as much to blame about all this shit as you. So why don't we... crap, I don't know what I'm saying.'

Since I didn't either I just stayed quiet.

Jamie tapped the folded pages. 'We have been shit brothers to each other for so long it's kinda hard to stop being so, but I want to. I want you to be able to talk to me, Owen, to rely on me, and I want you to know that I *am* someone you can rely on. My goals are the same as yours - I want us to be a family; you, me, Andrew and the others. I'll do whatever I can to help that, and I want you to know it. I was shit before, hating you just because... well, it was easy but I...' He drew in a heavy breath. 'I was so afraid you'd kill yourself and I didn't know how to talk to you about it.'

Oh no, we were there again. I bit my lip. 'Jamie, please don't...' I swallowed. 'That's in the past, can't we leave it there? Can't we start again?' *Can't we pretend it didn't happen?*

I knew that was a big ask because there was so much that had passed so badly. But I didn't think that raking it over was necessarily beneficial. And I was a coward at the end of the day. I still carried a lot of resentment, like he no doubt did, and I didn't want to get into a shouted recrimination match. It wasn't going to help anyone.

Jamie sat with his eyes closed. I waited. When he looked at me again, he pushed the pages back my way. 'I think we've promised to be better brothers a number of times. Let's try to make it *work* this time. You need to hand this to Andrew, but I'll be with you when you do. How's that?'

'Okay,' I responded. It *was* stupid to make him be my go-between, and this was a good step for us - for me.

'Good.' He rose from the table. 'You want a hot chocolate?'

'Yeah, thanks.'

'Good,' he said again and I realised I might have got one anyway.

My lips pressed into a smile as I watched him make the drinks. Maybe, just maybe, we were on better footing now. I ran my fingers around the folded pages of the guide. And just maybe, once Andrew had read the pages, I'd be able to fill in some gaps for him.