

GO HAPPY TWENTY-THREE

EDDY'S EYES NARROWED, BUT BEFORE HE SAID ANYTHING, he read the letter. His eyes widened. Lexie was staring him down and he met her gaze: "I'm sorry. I mean, I didn't know how you wanted this to work out, but . . ."

He shook the paper a little. "I doubt this was it."
He sat down beside us and put a hand on Lexie's arm.

"I am sorry."
Lexie asked, "You're not gonna tell Mom?"
He shook his head.

"There's more," I said. I tilted my head toward the computer, but Eddy didn't stand. Instead, he looked at Lexie. "Do you want me to know what it is?"

Lexie studied him for a moment. Maybe she was deciding if she could trust him. "Go ahead. It won't change anything."

Eddy sat in the office chair and started reading all the stuff I'd just read. He didn't say anything, but after a bit,

he blew out a breath loud enough that we could hear it. "Wow." He twirled around to face us. "That's crazy."

Lexie shook her head. "No. She's crazy. Was crazy. And now *I'm* crazy."

"Lex." I put an arm around her. "You're wrong." I looked up at Eddy.

Eddy said, "Are you serious? Other than some shared DNA, you have nothing in common with this woman. You are not her."

Lexie sniffed. "How do I know that for sure?"

Eddy scratched his head. "Because you're you. We're your family, not her. The people downstairs are your family." He pointed at the computer. "She had absolutely nothing to do with who you are."

"But it's obvious you hate who I am," said Lexie.

Eddy's mouth dropped open a little, and then closed. He looked as if he'd been caught at something. "No... no, that's not it."

"You always pick fights with me. It's like you can't stand to be in the same room with me." Her gaze went from him back to me. "Before we went in the Compound, neither one of you could stand me." She wagged a finger between me and her. "*We* only started getting along when we thought our lives depended on it."

In a low voice I said, "Our lives did depend upon it."

"Seriously?" She tilted her head at me. "So if that hadn't happened, we—"

"No." I held up a hand to get her to stop. "That's not what I'm saying." I sighed. "I'm glad you're my sister,

honestly." I looked up at Eddy. "I just need the two of you to figure it out. Because I need to have both of you in my life. But more than that... I need you both to *want* to be there." I didn't look at Eddy when I said that, but he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

None of us said anything for a few minutes, and then Eddy cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. Really. It's been an adjustment having you all back."

Lexie snorted. "Wow, excuse us for not being dead."

Eddy covered his face with his hands and groaned. "God." He dropped his hands. "I didn't mean it like that.

I spent so long thinking you were all gone forever. And it took a long time for me to figure out how to go on without all of you. A long time. And when it seemed like it would be okay, that I could go on... it all turned out to be a lie. And, except for Dad, you were all back and my life changed again." Before we could say anything, he quickly added, "For the better. I have my family back." He paused. "It's just... taking me a little while to figure out my place again. I was the only one of us left. And I got used to that. And now... I find myself having to go back to being a younger brother and an older brother"—his eyes met mine—"and a twin."

Lexie shrugged. "You're probably looking in the wrong place for sympathy."

Eddy said, "I don't want your sympathy. I want things the way they were. Before."

I said, "How do you expect that to happen?"

Lexie rolled her eyes. "You don't think we all want that?"

Eddy practically yelled, "Then do it! For God's sake, stop dwelling on the past six years. I'm *sorry* about what happened! I'm *sorry* Dad did that to you! But . . . when are you gonna get over it and live life again? Be like you used to be?" He looked at Lexie. "Maybe I can't stand to be in the same room with you because all you do is walk around looking sad. God, Lex, maybe I pick fights with you because when you fight back I actually get to see who you used to be. It's the only time you seem to forget about being sad and actually act like there's still life in you."

Lexie didn't say anything.

Then Eddy looked at me. "And you. You're like someone who's afraid of life. You don't want to go out because someone might be trying to get pictures of us or ask what it was like." He held his arms out to the sides. "Welcome to the frickin' world of the Internet! Everybody wants to know what everybody else is doing. So what if someone takes our pictures and posts them on the Internet? Maybe they'll say some nasty crap, but they can't really hurt us. They can't change our family. They can't take away everything we have. All we have to do is ignore them, and then someone else will come along and they'll forget about us." He paused. "Eli, it's so hard to be with you because you don't want to do anything if it means leaving the grounds of this house. You're getting to be like Mom. How long do we have to hide out here? How long do we have to wait to be normal again?"

Stunned, all I could do was sit there. Then I said what I was thinking. "Is that why you sneak out with Tony?" Lexie's brow furrowed. "You've been sneaking out?" Eddy asked me, "How do you know?"

"I saw you. The night of Quinn's birthday party, I saw you guys go over the fence." I left out the part about listening to him and Tony talk about me. Given that he'd basically just repeated everything he'd said that night, I didn't see the point.

Eddy leaned his head back and looked up at the ceiling for a moment, and then he dropped his head back down. He averted his eyes. "Yeah. I just want to get out and have fun." He shrugged.

Lexie said, "I don't want to sit around and be sad." I glanced at Eddy. "I don't want to hide here forever." I didn't. It just seemed . . . easier. And safer. But maybe it was time to stop playing things safe. Maybe it was time to *live*. Get back to normal. Whatever normal was.