

BILL HARLEY

NOW

You say

YES





Chapter ONE

“The barbecue ones,” Conor says.

“I know,” Mari says for the fourth time.

“I don’t like the other ones. Especially not the vinegar ones. They’re bad.”

Conor is standing sideways to the rows of snacks, facing the aisle that leads away from the meat section. His head is down—he’s not looking at her. He never looks at her. He’s not looking at anything except his fingers, which are opening and closing like they’re on the inside of a puppet and the puppet is talking. But the puppet is silent. It’s the motion of the hand that fascinates him, that has always fascinated him. Especially when things aren’t right.

And things aren't right.

"I can't find barbecue ones," Mari says.

"They have to be there. Edith's Original Barbecue." Conor's head starts nodding up and down.

She leaves him there and walks back up the aisle, hoping that someone put Edith's Original Barbecue Potato Chips in the wrong place. There are thousands of bags of different kinds of chips, but only Edith's Original Barbecue Potato Chips will do. She can feel things spinning slowly out of control, turning aimlessly like some asteroid hurtling out of the gravitational force of some solar system—but her job now is to find the right kind of potato chips.

"Edith's," Conor repeats, loud enough for people in the aisle to turn and stare at him. He doesn't stare back, because he's an asteroid too, oblivious to the planet Normal. The other people in the aisle have sighted him through their own telescopes planted firmly on Normal, and they have stepped back to readjust the lenses. A woman with a baked-on tan, decked out in a fancy pantsuit from Rodeo Drive, turns her cart and heads in the other direction.

“Edith’s Original Barbecue Potato Chips with the taste of real smoke and peppery barbecue. Homestyle recipe. Ten ounces net weight,” Conor recites from the hard drive of his memory. “Edith’s.”

“I know,” Mari mutters.

There they are. Thank God. What idiot put the Edith’s with the Lay’s?

“Here,” she says, grabbing a bag. Conor turns to her, takes the bag from her hands, and clutches it to his chest. Without a word, he makes a hairpin turn and heads toward the checkout line in fourth gear, ignoring everything around him.

Mari follows. She doesn’t call to Conor to slow down. It would just attract attention and he wouldn’t listen anyway.

The express line is six customers deep. There are too many people around and Conor is beginning to stim.

Stim. Stimming. Short for “stimulating,” or “self-stimulating.” It’s what some people on the autism spectrum do when things get weird for them—which is pretty often. If you’re not used to it, it’s one of the most disturbing parts of being around someone on the spectrum. It just looks crazy.

Whatever “crazy” means.

People pretend to ignore Conor, which means they stare at him when they think no one will notice. Mari has seen this a thousand times. Right now he’s pretty interesting, since he’s muttering the slogan of Edith’s Original Barbecue Potato Chips under his breath, holding the chips to his chest with one arm, and staring at his flapping fingers with the other.

It’s times like this that make Mari want to shout, *“Excuse me. May I have your attention? This is my brother, Conor. He’s nine years old and is on the autism spectrum. Call it Asperger’s. He may seem weird to you, but he’s smarter than you’ll ever be. And yeah, he doesn’t look like me. I’m adopted and he’s not. Mind your own business.”*

But that would attract more attention and be a bad idea.

Mari has many bad ideas.

Mari slips her backpack off her shoulder and pulls her wallet out of the back pocket of the pack, hoping she has enough cash to buy the chips.

“We have to pay for the Edith’s Original Barbecue Potato Chips NOW!” Conor announces. Everyone in every checkout line turns and looks at him.

He has no clue about how he affects others.

Mari wishes she could care as little as he does about what others think.

Coming to the supermarket was now, officially, one of her really bad ideas, but she had to get him out of the hospital, and the Vons supermarket was just across the street. She's in charge of Conor, but she's anxious about her mom. The store is crowded, the line is long, and someone in front of them has decided thirteen items is okay in the express line. It's the woman with the baked-on tan. Perfect. Rodeo Drive Lady is checking out her phone while the cashier rings up her items and everybody waits.

"You can open the chips now," Mari says to Conor.

"No," he says, shaking his head. "They aren't purchased yet."

Conor's sense of rules is so strong, so literal, so by the book, that sometimes Mari thinks he would gladly push the button to blow up the world if it were in the rule book. On the other hand, if a rule doesn't fit in with the Official Rules and Regulations of Conor's World, there's no way he would follow it, even if it was a federal law and they'd send him away for life.

Mari's heart catches. "Conor's World." That's what Mom calls his grid, his framework, his understanding of everything around him.

"I can't eat them until they're purchased," he repeats. "They are still owned by the store until they are paid for."

Mari remembers when Mom set this rule: the day when Conor opened up four candy bars in the checkout line, which made perfect sense to do, since they were sitting there at eye level, asking to be opened.

"It's okay to eat them while we wait," Mari counsels.

"We should pay now," he says.

People look away.

If it weren't so annoying, it would be funny. If a normal teenager talked out loud like this, being "inappropriate," his friends would laugh at his brashness. It's funny because it's breaking a rule—you're not supposed to talk this loud in a line of people you don't know. It would be hilarious.

"Pay now!" Conor repeats, a little louder.

People squirm. Everyone is nervously trying to ignore both of them, which means they are staring even more.

“We have to wait,” Mari says.

And then her phone vibrates. She takes it out of her back pocket.

It’s a text from Dennis.

Get over here now.

Rodeo Drive Lady is still busy on her phone, watching the girl bag her thirteen items.

There are three other customers in line in front of them.

“Let’s go,” Mari says, taking the bag of chips out of Conor’s hand. She puts the wallet back in her backpack and slips the pack over her shoulder.

“We haven’t completed the sale!” he says, loud enough for half the store to hear. “We can’t leave until we complete the sale. *Then* they belong to us.”

“Mom needs us,” Mari says. Holding out the potato chips, she turns and walks past everyone in line. She doesn’t look at anyone. She’s hoping it will work, and it does—like a dog tracking a rabbit, Conor follows the potato chips.

They’re out the door and headed across the street to Hamilton Memorial Hospital, where their mom is on a bed

with all sorts of tubes in her, and their mom's stupid boyfriend, Dennis, is waiting for them, acting like he has the right to order Mari around.

She hands the bag of chips back to Conor, who clutches them like some religious relic that will keep him safe from harm. She figures the people in the store—the customers, the cashiers, the stock boys—are glad to get rid of her and her brother.

Taking a bag of potato chips without paying seems like a small thing when your mom is in the emergency room.