

A close-up photograph of a man's face and hands holding a baby. The man is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The baby is wrapped in a dark purple and brown plaid blanket and is wearing a grey headband. The baby is looking towards the camera with a neutral expression.

*Sam's baby-sitting—
for good.*

**hanging
on to max**

M A R G A R E T B E C H A R D

chapter one

THE TOTAL SILENCE WOKE me up. I opened my eyes, slowly, and there they all were, watching me. Ms. Garcia, with her sad little worn-out smile. The rest of the class, grinning like monkeys. The room was almost dark, except for the light from the slide projector.

“Nice nap, Sam?” Ms. Garcia asked. Everyone burst out laughing. Ooh. Good one, Ms. Garcia. Except what teacher in her right mind would turn out the lights and show slides at 1:30 in the afternoon?

I shrugged upright in my desk. “Sorry.” I shook my head, trying to clear it out.

“Do you know what this slide is, Sam?”

I squinted at the screen. “Jupiter?”

People applauded. Someone in the back whistled. I

rubbed my eyes. When I'd fallen asleep, there'd been a slide of a woman making cookies. Ms. Garcia's "Why We Should Study Math" inspirational slide show.

"Okay," Ms. Garcia said, "in 1995 NASA sent a probe from the Galileo spacecraft down through the atmosphere of Jupiter." The slide projector clunked to a picture of the probe.

"It looks like a giant tit," some guy said.

Ms. Garcia sighed. "Okay. Well. The probe sent back a stream of data for 57.6 minutes, until the incredible pressure of the Jovian atmosphere crushed it."

"Poor little probe," the girl next to me said.

"Bor-ing," somebody in back said.

I imagined the probe, analyzing, computing, while the weight of Jupiter pressed in heavier and heavier.

"So," Ms. Garcia said, "do you think the scientists at NASA had to use math to design this probe? And to communicate with it?"

"I'd rather design a giant tit," the guy in back said.

Ms. Garcia sighed. The next slide was a Volvo. "Now back on Earth the safety engineers . . ."

I put my head back down on the desk and closed my eyes.

The bell woke me up. Kids were grabbing books and papers, cramming them into backpacks. Everybody talking at once. At the front of the room, Ms. Garcia was saying something about turning in the test papers from the beginning of class and something that was due next Wednesday. But nobody was listening. People were jamming up in the doorway, pushing to get out. "Test papers," Ms. Garcia said again.

The guy who sat behind me, who always smelled faintly of sweat and cigarette smoke, slapped my back. "Hey, dude. At least you weren't drooling."

"Right," I said. "Thanks." I stared down at my test. I'd finished it in the first ten minutes. And that had included checking my answers three times. I stood up slowly and shrugged into my backpack.

As I dropped the paper on her desk, Ms. Garcia's hand snaked out and grabbed my wrist. "Give me a couple of minutes, please, Sam?"

I glanced at the clock. "It's 2:30."

"They'll wait for you."

I sighed and moved out of the flow of kids. Good job, Sam. Two weeks into September and already you've ticked her off. Already you're blowing this. A kid

Sam's senior year should be a breeze. Parties, football games, pep rallies . . . and, oh yeah—a baby.

It's Sam Pettigrew's last year of high school. And he's spending it figuring out how, at age seventeen, he is supposed to care for his baby son, Max.

Max wasn't part of the plan. He wasn't even part of the backup plan. But he's here now, and Sam is attending an alternative high school with other teen parents like himself. Talk about a wake-up call. But Sam is determined to make it work, to show everyone—his dad, his new girlfriend, himself—that he has what it takes to be a good dad.

Trading footballs for diaper bags and college brochures for feeding schedules, Sam gives fatherhood his best shot. Only no one told him it would be this hard. What if his best isn't good enough?

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