

**Death by Diploma**  
**Chalkboard Outlines: Book 1**

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**Chalkboard Outlines™**

A Red Adept Publishing Book

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*For my father, Donald W. Bowles. You're the one who started all this... ☺  
I miss you so much, Daddy!*

***You shall not know by what strange accident  
I chanced on this letter.***

***—The Merchant of Venice V.I.278–9***

Prologue  
Wednesday, August 26

*Dearest Mickey,*

*Please, please write me back. Oh, I'm so worried these letters aren't finding their way to you. Our love deserves a chance to flourish. I know you think so too. You might want to give me one of your favorite quotes: "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened," but you don't really feel that way. I don't believe we're over, not yet.*

*Never forget how much I love you—let the colors remind you. Your Airborne Raquel Welch is thinking of you.*

*Love,*

*Marlena*

Melvin McManus ran his fingers over the letter again. The paper was worn until almost transparent, and the care with which he folded it and inserted it back into its envelope made it seem as though he held a priceless jewel. He picked up his silver flask and stared at it. His left hand started to raise the flask to his lips, but then he flung it against the wall of the narrow room. He stood.

Melvin closed the small hidden doorway and routed the pipe maze to get to the basement. He stumbled through the basement door and lurched up the stairs, his bulky form weaving as if he weren't sure of finding the next step. Covering his mouth to muffle a hacking cough, Melvin stopped and listened. He really shouldn't be there after midnight—his shift only went from three

to ten. But sometimes the work took much longer than that, because he hoped the care he took with the building might help the students stop taking this important time in their lives for granted. Many of them did take it for granted, though, and might end up like Melvin, navigating the world without any education or any real options. Those students didn't make any kind of connection between now and later.

He opened the door at the top of the stairs and continued through the gymnasium and into the hallway. The brown tile on the commons floor gleamed, and he thought of Adam and when he'd found the poor kid splayed out on the now-shiny floor. Melvin had been thrown out into the world so young, he'd never had to deal with schoolyard bullies as Adam had. Poor kid. Melvin ran a hand through his sparse gray hair, pondering.

As Melvin paced through the commons, steadying himself briefly against some lockers and again on a wall painted with a fierce-looking blue cat, he stopped to look at the sign above the main office: "Wildcats: Producing Proud and Productive Future Citizens." He'd seen that sign many times, but tonight, it made him long to become, finally, the future citizen he wished to be. He didn't know how much longer he could stand the waiting, even with his helpful hideout in the basement. He knew he was close, though—close to achieving his goal. Edward had said as much last week, and the closer Melvin got, the less he drank and the better he felt. He allowed the moment of anticipation to swell, forgot about the Wildcats sign, and almost ran back to the basement for the letters.

He sighed, an explosive whoosh that flattened his belly and whispered his nose hairs. *Almost there, almost there.* He looked at his hands, dirty and greasy from work but still strong. He thought of those hands in his younger years, how she'd kissed each of his fingertips as if they

were precious. He remembered what those hands had felt like when they held her, and the dirt fell away like magic.

A muffled thump startled him out of his reverie. *Crap*. Melvin knew he was a little tipsy, not done with his work, and in the wrong part of the building to boot. He walked nonchalantly in the other direction, but he heard the thump again, followed by a tinkling noise like breaking glass. *Damn*. Maybe he should look. It could be a cat or other animal, and he'd hate to trap one in the school for the whole night.

He peeked through the windows of the main office and looked at the front desk, where the computer monitor flashed and he saw someone sitting. Melvin checked his watch: half past midnight. Oh, he hoped it wasn't who he thought, but he had to check. After unlocking the doors, he curved around the front counter to approach the left desk and stiffened when he saw who it was.

"Oh, I can see you didn't listen!" he exclaimed. "We have to make this stop. That's it; I don't care what happens. I'm gonna..."

Melvin heard a whoosh followed by a crack, and he felt his body fall as it slammed hard onto the shiny brown tiles.

*Love goes toward love as schoolboys from their books  
But love from love, toward school with heavy looks.*

—*Romeo and Juliet II.2.176–8*

Chapter 1  
Monday, August 24

Emma Lovett walked onto the campus of Thomas Jefferson High School, in Pinewood, Colorado, at seven thirty in the morning. She looked at a wide expanse of the courtyard. Lovely. In all four corners, nubby split-log benches enclosed small gardens of pastel flowers, their soft scents floating through the morning air.

The center of the yard was divided into two sections, each marked off by cement benches encircling a monstrous and splendid old tree—walnut, she thought. Maybe oak. No, oak trees would leave little acorns all over the benches, and one would be unable to sit there without getting hard nuggets up one's butt. That would be an interesting excuse—no, teacher, my homework isn't done because I have hemorrhoids.

She smiled at the image and let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Whew—no allowing nerves to get the best of her! They're just kids, for Pete's sake. She hadn't signed on to fly the space shuttle, only to teach some kids how to diagram sentences and



recognize iambic pentameter. Okay, that latter part could be hard. No, stop—she could do this. She rubbed her freckled nose, which already felt oily.

Emma gingerly touched the long brown hair hanging about her shoulders and smoothed her flowered skirt. Maybe she should have dressed more like the teachers she'd had growing up in Holly Hills—colorless dresses and a bun so tight it pulled one's face back toward one's ears. She took another deep breath and shook her head. No, this was her new life, and she was determined to be herself, act like herself, look like herself. Lifting her chin, she strolled toward the center of the courtyard as if she'd been doing this all her life.

A knot of boys stood in the corner where the cement yard met the tall brick wall of the school. As soon as they spied Emma, they let out a string of catcalls and wolf whistles that would do a construction worker proud. She was tempted to run for cover, but she called on her Southern upbringing and walked directly toward the pubescent crew.

“Good mornin’, boys. How’re y’all doing?”

The boys mumbled, embarrassed, clearly uncomfortable interacting with adults.

Only one, a medium-sized kid with a shock of bleached-blond hair, managed a red-faced, “Fine.”

Emma continued, “I want to talk to you about the whole catcall thing. It’s really awful. There are so many better ways to tell a nice girl you think she’s pretty.”

“Like what?” said a tall one in the back corner. He had pieces of metal poking out of several spots on his face and a T-shirt that read “Chicks hate me.”

Instead of lecturing him on the dangers of infection from all the piercings, she launched into her maiden attempt at molding the young minds of the world. “Well, a sincere compliment, for starters—about her dress, her hair. Maybe a nice note that explains why you like her. And

that should be aspects of her *personality* you like, guys! Ah don't know—flowers and chocolate are my personal favorites.” With this sage advice, and without waiting for a response, she started for the blue steel double doors leading into the commons.

As Emma walked into the school building, she took another deep breath, inhaling the metallic smell of lockers that mingled with refrigerated air and floor wax. Not a pleasant combination, but so rife with nostalgia it might as well have been a donut shop. She'd only been to the district office for an interview on Friday—late hiring here—so this was her first time at the school. She'd had education classes at college before she arrived, and her student teaching had been an odd experience at an alternative school held in an office building in Holly Hills, so this was technically the first time she'd be teaching at a real school. Hoo-ee, that sounded so scary! It was all right though. She was so excited to start this part of her life, independent and making a difference, she felt as though she could do anything.

One of the boys from the group she had just spoken to ran up beside her. Up close, she noticed that his black hair had a distinctive streak of white, making him look sort of like a skunk, though she knew better than to point that out to him.

“What if... what happens if she says she doesn't like me?”

The question and the yearning behind it sounded a lot more like what she knew was true about teenaged boys. They wanted love but had no inkling of what to do if they found it.

“The right one won't ever say that,” Emma promised, a smile building on her face.

For a moment, the boy looked as though he wanted to say something else. Instead, he bolted back toward the doors that separated him from his friends.

Well, that had gone okay—her first official teacher/student exchange. No one had flipped her off, and she hadn't assigned any detention. Did detention still exist? She thought it must,

although with her general lack of preparation to be here, how would she know? She turned back toward the interior commons, ready to find her classroom.

The interior commons was as open as the courtyard, with high ceilings and tall windows framing double doors on both ends. Rows of skinny royal-blue lockers lined the walls on either side, with a renegade door here and there between sets of lockers; two in the back were labeled Gym. The right and left walls of the commons had doors labeled Main Office and Athletic Office, respectively. Hallways extended from all four corners of the space, giving the effect of a giant H. On the map, anyway. Which wouldn't keep her from getting lost. Visualize the H—how would that help? She wondered if getting lost on the first day would be an omen. *No, I don't believe in omens. That rabbit's foot in my purse is there only because petting soft things calms my nerves. Really.*

She skimmed across gleaming brown tiles toward the gym, turned right at the far corner, and walked down the hall. Her map gave the room numbers: 100, 102, 103... and 104 was hers. She walked into the room and gazed around, dry mouthed. The desks stood at attention, and an empty wooden bookshelf begged for literary redemption. The teacher's desk—*my desk*—squatted in the right-hand corner facing the student chairs, and she tiptoed forward, reverently touching everything she passed.

This room alone made the journey of the past few years—leaving her jerk of a husband, going back to school, moving thousands of miles away from home, getting a scary new job—worth it. Upon reaching the big desk—*my desk!*—Emma settled into the rickety wooden teacher chair, spread her arms wide for the “this is my throne” ritual—hands clasped behind her head, eyes closed—and heaved an enormous sigh of contentment.

A knock at her open door made her eyes pop open.

“Hellooo? Hi there!” The hand that had knocked was attached to a man. Probably in his sixties, with thinning gray hair and watery blue eyes, he wore a gray jumpsuit. “I’m Melvin, the janitor for this side of the building.”

Emma jumped from her chair and hopped over to shake his hand. “Hello, Melvin. So nice to meet you! You’re the first adult I’ve seen here today. Are y’all gonna be greeting me every mornin’?”

He ducked his head. “Wow. I like your accent. It matches the flowers in yer skirt.” He colored, as if the comparison embarrassed him. He continued past Emma, eyes roaming across the corners of the room and lighting on the garbage can next to the desk. “Nah, I won’t be here every mornin’. My shift goes from three to ten every night, but at the start of the school year, first week or so, I like to make the trip in early, just to make sure school’s goin’ off right.” He smiled and peeked into the garbage can, double-checking it.

Emma spread her arms, figuratively embracing the room. “Melvin, it looks great! Not a speck of dust or dirt to be found, and I am rarin’ to make some use of it educatin’ the youth of our future. I’m so happy you take such pride in your work. Maybe it’ll rub off on the students.”

He smiled again and shrugged. “You know what I always say? ‘What’s the point of doing anything if yer not gonna do it right?’”

Tears sprang to Emma’s eyes. She quickly turned away from Melvin and ran a hand over the desk, pretending to care how clean it was. “My dad said that too.”

“Your dad’s a smart man,” said Melvin. “Have a great first day! I’m sure I’ll see you again all this week.” He tipped an imaginary hat and shuffled from the classroom.

Emma’s eyes followed his bulky form as he lumbered away. “He was,” she said to the air. “The smartest.”

In preparation for her first day, Emma pulled some supplies from her bag, including a college-ruled notebook with spanking-clean pages ready to be defaced by a fountain pen. Melvin reminding her of her dad had sent her off on a memory tour, and the new notebook had her thinking of her best friend, Hannah. Friends since birth practically, she and Hannah had always started the new school year with a beautiful new notebook. They always christened them with their names in oh-so-neat handwriting, some years with hearts and flourishes, some without. The ritual was symbolic of starting a new year with all its expectations. *Oh, Hannah, if you could see me now. I'm a teacher!*

She looked at the students' names on her roll sheets: American Lit, two classes of Sophomore Lit, and Speech. Emma's plan for the first day was simply to teach her students some get-to-know-each-other name games, and she wanted to write names down as the students played. She felt learning their names as quickly as possible was essential for connecting with them.

As she wrote her name—Ms. Lovett, no flourishes—on the notebook cover, the most un-teacher-like woman Emma had ever seen appeared in the doorway, hands raised up on either side of the frame. She stood at least five feet eleven inches tall, with blond bobbed hair dropping to a sleek angle along her chin. Perfect makeup emphasized her smooth fair skin and almond-shaped blue eyes. A slim red suit coat was buttoned over her black top and calf-length black skirt, her long legs ending with pumps that definitely sported a stiletto heel. Her of-course-she'd-worn-braces smile bathed the whole room in its sparkling light. She looked almost exactly like Hannah would have if she'd ever paid more than twelve dollars for a haircut and worn anything but jeans and Keds. They both had the same self-assurance though. Emma could already tell she would like this woman.

“Hey there,” the woman said languidly, without Emma’s Southern drawl. Her smile widened. “I’m here for your indoctrination.”

The grin was so contagious Emma couldn’t help but grin back. “You are? Well.” She threw her own arms up in a V and struck a queenly pose. “I’m feeling real ‘indoctrinable’ at this particular moment. Teach me your ways, O Wise One.”

The woman came over to the desk and plopped down on the corner with a grace that belied the word “plopped.” “That’s it! I just was curious to see if you knew what the word ‘indoctrinate’ meant. You’re in!” She stuck out her hand. “I’m Leslie Parker, head of the English department, defender of the second-semester word, and crusader against PDAs in the hallways.”

Emma returned the greeting. “I’m Emma Lovett, one of your new departmentees. Is that a word, ‘departmentee’? Now... the meaning of ‘second-semester’ word is patently unmistakable. Conspicuously evident. Alarmingly discernible. But PDAs? I thought those were electronic organizers, like a pre-Blackberry datebook.”

Leslie laughed and shook Emma’s hand. Emma shook back vigorously—no shrinking Southern violet, she.

“No, here at TJ High, PDA stands for public display of affection. You’ve never seen anything that makes you *really* want to hurl until you’ve seen two sixteen-year-olds playing tonsil tag in the middle of a crowded hallway.”

“Oh. Yuck.” *She even sounds like Hannah, although Hannah would have called it “tonsil hockey.” I love this woman already!* “But a crusade? Shouldn’t you be more worried about—oh, I don’t know—stamping out ignorance?”

“That’s classroom work. Hallway work’s important too.” Leslie paced, bobbed hair swaying as she shook her fists. “I did it, yes. During my junior and senior year, I was routinely

impaled against my locker by the tongue of one Timothy Andrews. I followed my fool tongue, married the bastard four years later, and *here* I am! A divorced, bitter old maid at the age of thirty-seven. No, ignorance is bliss, but PDAs can never be unlearned and must be stopped!" Leslie took a huge breath and seemed to step down from an invisible soapbox.

"So how do you stop them?" Emma asked.

Leslie made a dismissive gesture. "Oh, well, I usually bonk 'em upside the head as I walk by."

The image made Emma laugh. "My friend Hannah hates when people neck in public too. Does that stop it, thunkin' them upside the head?"

"Oh, I don't know." Leslie sighed. "I keep hoping if I do it often enough, they'll get tired of biting their tongues and just stop." She started toward the door and held it open for Emma to follow.

"I thought I saw a chunk of tongue lying in the hall as I came in. Ick."

"But worth it if I can stop one poor impressionable girl from following her face. Your friend Hannah, a fan of discretion even at a young age, sounds like the original Southern woman. A debutante, perhaps?"

Emma's laugh was almost a yelp. "I don't think Holly Hills, South Carolina, is much for debutantes. Wooden shacks maybe, and Hannah's more inclined to wear overalls than ball gowns. But she feels the same way as you. Said that fun stuff should be only for the ones havin' the fun."

"Ah, smart girl. So, Emma Lovett, are you ready for the fifty-cent tour of Thomas Jefferson High, our lovely institute of erudition?" Leslie waved her through the door.

Emma smoothed her blouse and ran her fingers through her hair. “I’m ready. Erudite me!” She giggled. “I must really be nervous, because all I can think about is how dirty that sounded.”

“Oh, Emma Lovett, I think I’m going to like you. I’ll erudite you. ‘They that thrive well take counsel of their friends.’”

“Shakespeare. *Venus and Adonis*.” *I’ll never tell her that’s one of maybe two Shakespeare pieces I know, and that’s only because of the Adonis part.*

“Oh, Emma Lovett, I take it back. I *know* I’m going to like you!”

The two women walked down the hallway toward the heart of the building, comparing “second-semester” vocabulary words and keeping an eye out for any PDA.