AN ENCINA ACADEMY NOVEL

Everything Outside the Frame

A picture can be true and still tell a lie.



SUSAN MCDOWELL

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THE ENCINA ACADEMY NOVELS

Everything Outside the Frame
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Everything Outside the Frame

An Encina Academy Novel

SUSAN MCDOWELL



Thinking School

Everything Outside the Frame
Encina Academy, Book One

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Published by Thinking School

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

First edition, 2026

ISBN: [assigned by KDP]

For everyone who is fine.

Bear ye one another's burdens,
and so fulfil the law of Christ.

GALATIANS 6:2

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PART ONE

The Sneeze

CHAPTER ONE

Nora

By Christmas, four hundred people had called me a thief, my father had lost the only reason we lived in Spain, and I'd learned exactly who took the picture that started it. None of that had happened yet on the Monday I sneezed into a microphone. I'm starting there because it was the last day I was fine, and I didn't know to enjoy it.

The thing about a sneeze is that you get about one second of warning, and one second is not enough time to leave a chapel.

I know because I did the math afterward. It is what I do. Some people replay embarrassing moments; I audit them.

It was the third Monday of September, the third week of my second year at Encina Academy, and I was standing at the front of the chapel with a clipboard, a color-coded sign-up sheet, and what I believed to be complete control of the room. Three hundred students, kindergarten through twelfth grade, sat in pews that had been built for Spanish nuns four centuries ago and were therefore exactly as comfortable as you'd expect. Sunlight came through the high windows in long dusty bars. Somewhere outside, the storks on

the bell tower were clacking their beaks at each other like someone shuffling a deck of wooden cards.

"Lantern Night," I said into the microphone, "is eleven weeks from Saturday."

"Last year this school raised nine thousand, six hundred and forty euros for the Encina Fund. This year the committee's goal is twelve thousand." I let that sit. "That's not a number I made up to sound impressive. That is the cost of four full scholarships. Four people who get to sit in these terrible pews with us."

That got the laugh I'd planned for. Dr. Tran, our principal, smiled from the side aisle with her arms folded, which from Dr. Tran is a standing ovation.

"So I need volunteers. Sign-up sheets are by the door. Blue is for the Autumn Market, green is for lantern workshops, yellow is for —"

And then the sunlight, or the dust, or four hundred years of convent, got into my nose.

One second.

I turned my head. I got my elbow up. I did everything a person is supposed to do. But the microphone was clipped to the lectern eight inches from my face, and the chapel at Encina has the acoustics of a canyon, and the sound that came out of me and through that sound system was not a sneeze so much as a small explosion with a squeak on the end of it.

A first grader in the front row screamed.

And in the half second after—while the squeak was still bouncing around the rafters and my eyes were shut and my whole face was doing whatever a face does—I heard, very clearly, a camera shutter.

Click.

I opened my eyes.

He was crouched in the center aisle about fifteen feet away, one knee on the stone floor, a big black camera in front of his face. Dark curly hair that needed cutting. A gray Encina hoodie with the sleeves pushed up. He lowered the camera three inches, enough for me to see his eyes over the top of it, and he had the decency to look slightly sorry.

Slightly.

"Bless you," said Pastor Íñigo from the front pew, loud and cheerful, and three hundred people fell apart laughing.

I smiled. I am very good at smiling. "Yellow," I said, "is for setup and cleanup. Thank you."

Then I walked back to my seat with my clipboard against my chest, sat down next to Tess, and looked straight ahead.

"That," Tess whispered, "was the greatest moment of my life."

"I'm fine."

"I didn't ask."

"I'm telling you anyway."

Tess Okafor has been my best friend since my fourth day in Spain, when she found me in the hallway trying to read my schedule upside down and said, *Oh good, a new one, I'm keeping you.* She's from Houston, she is louder than anyone I've ever met, and she can tell when I'm lying approximately sixty percent of the time. I work hard to stay in the other forty.

"Who was that?" I whispered. "With the camera."

She gave me a look. "Nora. You've been here a year."

"I know who he *is*. Gabe Somebody. Yearbook. I mean who is he to take a picture of me mid—"

"Gabe Morales. Mrs. Morales's son." She leaned closer. "He's been here since kindergarten. He has spoken, I think, eleven words

in that time. Four of them were to me, and they were 'you're in my shot.'"

I looked across the aisle. He'd moved to the side wall and was photographing the kindergarteners now, who were filing out holding a rope with loops in it like a tiny chain gang. He didn't smile at them or wave to make them look. He just waited, still, and then the shutter went, and he checked the little screen and almost smiled at that instead.

"I'm going to make him delete it," I said.

"You're going to make *Gabe Morales* do something."

"I'm going to ask politely. With a clipboard."

"Oh, well," said Tess. "With a clipboard."

• • •

I did not get the chance, because Mrs. Morales got to me first.

She caught me under the encina at break. That's the tree the school is named for, a holm oak in the middle of the courtyard that was already old when the convent was built around it. Its trunk is wider than my dad's car, and there's a low stone wall circling it where everyone sits. We just call it the Wall. If you're looking for someone at Encina, you check the Wall.

"Nora! That was a wonderful announcement." Mrs. Morales teaches English lit and advises about half the things at this school that need advising. She's from Michigan, she wears her reading glasses on top of her head and then asks where they are, and she is the reason I got through *Macbeth*. "The sneeze only helped. People remember a sneeze."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Now. I've been thinking about the committee. You were treasurer last year and you were magnificent, and this year you'll chair, obviously. But twelve thousand is a big jump, and Dr. Tran and I think the chair needs a co-chair. Someone who knows the town. The sponsors, the Club Náutico, the lake permits, all the local side."

"That makes sense," I said. I'd been thinking of Lucía, whose mother owns the bakery in the old town and knows every single person in Valdelago.

"So I've asked Gabriel," said Mrs. Morales.

I waited for the rest of the sentence. There wasn't any.

"Gabriel," I said. "Your Gabriel."

"His father runs the Club. The lanterns launch from their dock. He's lived here his whole life." "And honestly, sweetheart, it would be good for him. He spends a great deal of time looking at things. I'd like to see him be *in* something."

"Did he say yes?"

"He's getting there."

Across the courtyard, in the arched walkway that used to be the cloister, I saw him. He was leaning on a column with the camera hanging from his neck, watching us, and from the way he was standing I understood that he knew exactly what conversation this was, and that "getting there" was a generous way to put it.

He lifted one hand off the camera. Not a wave. More like a man admitting to something.

Here is a list of things I knew about Gabe Morales as of that Monday at 10:52 a.m.:

1. He had photographed me making the worst face of my life.
2. He did not want to be my co-chair.

3. He had, according to Tess, an eleven-word vocabulary.
4. I was going to need him to talk to sponsors.

"That sounds great," I told Mrs. Morales. "I'll set up a meeting."

I'm very good at smiling.

• • •

We live in Los Pinares, which is a neighborhood on the hill above town where the streets are named after trees and every house has a gate. It's where most of the Encina families from somewhere else end up—the Americans, the Brits, a Dutch family with five blond children who all cycle. From my bedroom window you can see down over the red roofs of the old town to the lake, which is really a reservoir, forty years old, although nobody here calls it anything but *el lago*. In the evening it goes the color of a nickel and then the color of a peach.

I love that window. I didn't expect to. When Dad told us two summers ago that Corvane Medical was sending him to run their office outside Madrid, I cried for a week and made a list titled *Reasons This Will Ruin My Life,* which got to thirty-one items. I was fourteen. I'd lived in Franklin, Tennessee since I was born.

Mom found the list. She didn't get mad. She sat on my bed and said, "We're going to be fine, Nora. The Ellisons are always fine." It's what she says. It's what her mother said, I think, except with a different last name.

And we were. I made it true. I learned the subjunctive. I learned to eat dinner at nine. I got a 4.0 and a seat on the Lantern committee, and I stopped keeping that list sometime around last November, and I can't even tell you where it is now.

That Monday I came in through the kitchen and Mom was at the counter cutting tomatoes, with her phone propped against the fruit bowl and her Bible study workbook open beside it.

"How was the announcement?"

"I sneezed into the microphone and a child screamed."

"Oh, honey." She was trying not to laugh. "Was it the squeaky one?"

"It was the squeakiest one."

Ben, my brother, came skidding in on his socks. He's eleven, he has the same sandy hair as me and none of the same interests, and he'd been out of school for exactly as long as I had but already had a smear of mud up one arm. "Nora did the squeak? At school? In front of *everybody?*"

"There's a photo," I said, before I could stop myself.

His face. You'd think I'd handed him a puppy.

Dad got home at seven-thirty, which was early for him. I heard the gate, then the front door, then his keys in the dish. He came into the kitchen pulling off his blazer, the navy one, and kissed the top of Mom's head.

"There's my committee chair," he said to me. "Twelve thousand?"

"Twelve thousand."

"That's my girl. Go big." He picked a piece of tomato off the cutting board, and Mom smacked his hand without looking. "You want a Corvane sponsorship again? I'll talk to—I'll see what I can do."

"That'd be great. How's work?"

"Busy." He smiled. He has a very good smile, my dad; I got it from him. "It's always busy in September."

Later I would go back over that moment a lot. I'd audit it. The half-second catch in *I'll talk to*. The way Mom's knife stopped on the board, then started again.

But that night I only thought: twelve thousand, a co-chair who doesn't speak, and a photograph that needed to be destroyed. I went upstairs, opened my planner, and under Tuesday I wrote in green ink:

Meeting w/ G. Morales. Bring binder. Be nice. GET THE PHOTO DELETED.

I underlined the last part twice.

It was the only problem I had that I knew about.

CHAPTER TWO

Gabe

At six-thirty in the morning the lake belongs to me and the grebes.

My father opens the Club Náutico at eight, the fishermen come at nine, and the kayak tourists from Madrid don't show up until the sun is high enough to burn them. Before all that there's an hour when the water is flat and gray like a sheet of darkroom paper before the image comes up, and the only sound is my oars.

I row a single scull. It's twenty-seven feet long and about as wide as my shoulders, and it wants to tip over every second you're in it. People think rowing is about strength. It's mostly about not getting in the boat's way.

Also, you go backward. That's the part nobody thinks about until they try it. You sit facing the place you just left, and the place you're going is behind your head. You have to trust the line. You look at your wake, and if the wake is straight, you're fine.

I like that. I like being able to see exactly where I've been. I've got reasons.

That Tuesday I rowed out past the second buoy and stopped and let the boat run. The sun was coming up over the sierra. The water turned from paper to copper. I sat there with my oars flat and said what I usually say out there, which is not much. *Thank you for this. Help me not be an idiot today.* It's not a fancy prayer. I've never been good at the fancy ones. My mother's side of the family prays like they're writing a letter, and my father's side prays like they're in a hurry, and I mostly just report in.

Then I remembered I had a meeting at four with Nora Ellison, and I added a third line. *Seriously. About the idiot thing.*

Rowing in, I passed El Muelle. The chairs were still stacked, except one. A man in a navy blazer sat at the last table on the dock with a laptop open, by himself, at ten to eight in the morning. Tourists don't wear blazers. Fishermen don't own laptops. I noticed him the way I notice everything, and then I put the boat away.

• • •

Here's how it happened. Sunday night, my mother, at the stove:

"I've put your name forward for something."

"No."

"You don't know what it is."

"It has a committee."

"It has a small committee."

My father said in Spanish that a man who argues with his mother before dinner doesn't get dinner. My grandmother, Abuela Pilar, who lives across the landing and eats with us every night, said that I was too thin anyway, and the committee would probably have snacks.

So that was three against one. In my family that's called a discussion.

I knew who Nora Ellison was. Everybody did. She'd arrived last year, and inside of a month she was on four committees and had fixed the lunch line. I'm not exaggerating. There used to be one line, and it took twenty minutes, and she went to Dr. Tran with a drawing, and now there are two lines and it takes eight. She's a runner. She's blond in that way where it's four colors at once. She walks like she's late to something, and she's never late.

I had about forty pictures of her in the yearbook archive, and in every one of them she was smiling the exact same smile. I'd noticed that. It's my job to notice. Same angle, same number of teeth. Like she'd found the setting that worked and locked it.

Then Monday in chapel she sneezed, and for one two-hundred-fiftieth of a second her whole face came apart, eyes squeezed, nose wrinkled, mouth open, hair flying, and I got it. Tack sharp. It's one of the best portraits I've ever taken. She looks like a real person in it. She looks about nine years old and completely alive.

I knew she'd want it deleted.

• • •

We met at the Panadería Rosario, because it's halfway between the school and the lake and because Lucía's mother gives me the broken palmeras for free. It's on the Plaza Mayor in the old town, under the arcade, with three tin tables outside. I got there early and took the one against the wall.

She showed up at 3:58 with a binder.

The binder was white, three inches thick, and it had tabs. At least ten of them, each a different color, each with a printed label.