

ANNABELLE SAUNDERS'S DAY - Action News
Team, San Antonio

"GOOD MORNING, SAN ANTONIO. WE ARE BRINGING YOU THE LATEST coverage of our up-to-date coverage... no, no, no." Annabelle flipped her blonde extensions forward and twisted a curl around her manicured finger. She sniffed and leaned forward, inches away from the bathroom mirror, and inspected her pores. Then she settled back, stood tall, and tried again.

"Good morning, San Antonio. I am Annabelle Saunders, filling in for Bob Gunderson today, who can't be with us," she droned in her practiced Texan drawl. "We are continuing our action news coverage of the devastating act of bio-terrorism that is sweeping the nation and the world this morning. Just a few moments ago, our president issued a plea for people to stay calm and rational. And I can't stay calm and rational because I'm in the *freaking* anchor desk."

She'd called her parents, who had not fully shared her enthusiasm in light of the recent attacks on the country, first thing. But all great anchors were made amid tragedy, and she would be no

different. When the dust settled and the terrorists brought to justice, she'd still be there—her winsome expression and comforting eyes a beacon to those who were afraid.

"Where were you when the virus hit?" generations would ask. And someone would say, "Sitting at home, watching KP12, and that newscaster Annabelle Saunders comforted me when I didn't know what was going to happen."

When people turned on their TV sets, they'd have her, and she'd walk them through the tragedy. She smiled wide, then wiped the smile away and stared at her reflection. The makeup artist had bailed, too, but Annabelle didn't care—she'd do her own makeup, do her own hair, and write her own leads. Bob Gunderson could eat her dust.

"Stoic. Sincere. Serious," she repeated on a loop. "Stoic." She raised her eyebrows a touch. "Sincere." She put her hand over her heart. "Serious." All hints of her excitement, erased.

"Good morning, San Antonio. Annabelle Saunders with the news... filling in for Bob Gunderson, who called in sick for work because he's a chump who's afraid of the big stuff—" She did a small dance and listened to the way her heels clicked on the tile. Her pencil skirt was pressed, and her tulip blouse unbuttoned just enough to show the outline of her collarbone, no cleavage.

The bathroom door swung wide, and a production assistant with wild hair and a clipboard that Annabelle was pretty certain was just a prop motioned for her to follow.

"On in five. The early morning team will say their goodbyes."

"Perfect," Annabelle cooed.

The assistant scrunched up her nose and kept walking with

focused intensity, her little arms pumping. “No teleprompter.”

“I can wing it—”

“Like hell you’ll wing it. We’ll wire you up... speak to you directly. Say only what the big guys tell you to say. You got it?”

“I was born ready,” Annabelle said, and then she realized the assistant hadn’t asked her if she was ready. She cleared her throat. “I’ve got it. I got it.”

“Jesus Christ, where’d we get you?” the girl replied, and she rolled her eyes. “You an intern or what?”

“No!” Annabelle replied and she crossed her arms, indignant. She froze five feet away from the anchor desk she coveted. The morning team was off, stripping themselves of microphones and shedding their jackets; they rushed off without even so much as a handshake and Annabelle glared at them, annoyed. They could at least congratulate her or wish her luck, or tell her they’d be watching, or offer some advice. It was a well-known industry fact that Steve Gunner, the early morning anchor, was a real jerk, but she still expected a half-hearted hello. But nothing. Gunner was gone and Bridgett Young, his co-host, was gone, too.

“Well? You want to do this? I wish we had other options, but you’re the only one,” the assistant said.

“The only one *willing?*”

“The only one who showed up.” The assistant rolled her eyes, and then she moved a pair of worn headphones off her ears and wrapped them around her neck. She leaned in conspiratorially. “You see... people are dying, right? Most people don’t get in their cars and rush to work.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Annabelle replied. She refused to accept

that she was here by default. “It’s the news. If you’re a real journalist, you absolutely get in your car and rush to work. If people are dying, you drive *faster.*”

This was not the response the assistant wanted to hear or cared for, but instead of arguing, she shook her head and gave Annabelle a gentle shove to the stage. The cardboard skyline of San Antonio wobbled as she took her place. A pink, fluorescent light cast a thin illusion of sunrise against the picture—the world was starting to wake up, turn on the news, and they’d see her—Annabelle Saunders.

The diminished staff fussed with her microphones and put a tiny speaker in her ear. A man from the booth did a test, and Annabelle answered assuredly that she could hear him loud and clear.

No teleprompter. She was a hero. Navigating the intricacies of the anchor desk without the crutches required by her predecessors. She’d have a name that would go down in history—from rarely used sideline reporter to anchor. She thought about what the assistant had said, that no one else showed up, but she couldn’t imagine that was true.

A light came on and the cameraman counted her down, a jingle started, the lights came up and made her cheeks bloom hot and red.

“Good morning, San Antonio,” Annabelle said. *Don’t smile. Don’t smile. Don’t smile.* The man in her ear gave her the words, and Annabelle was only one step behind.

“We regret to inform you,” he said.

“We regret to inform you...” she repeated, “...that this

morning we received word..."

"That our dear anchor and beloved friend Bob Gunderson..."

"That our *dearest* news anchor and most beloved friend, Bob Gunderson..."

"Has passed away from injuries sustained from a car crash while attempting to get to work this morning."

Annabelle paused. Gulped. Raised her eyebrows and said, "Has passed away from injuries sustained from a crash in a car this morning while he tried to get to work...in his car...this morning..."

Her throat became dry, and she coughed. It rumbled the microphone. Someone in the control booth swore, and Annabelle lowered her eyes. The news desk was empty—there wasn't a single sheet of paper there or a coffee cup. She wished she had a coffee cup.

"We know that many of you joining us have endured much heartbreak as news pours in..." the man continued.

Annabelle coughed again. She was lost. She tried to see the assistant or the cameraman, but the studio lights were bright and everything four feet away and beyond was just darkness, shapes, and nothingness.

"We know that," she started, "if you're joining us, then you too, have endured, moments, this morning, of heartbreak as we receive news reports from all over this great nation—"

"Annabelle? Can you hear me? Nod if you can hear me. Jesus, can she hear me? Someone get a paper down to her..."

Annabelle nodded. The studio was silent. She knew the cameras were rolling, she knew her parents were watching, and

maybe even that guy she flirted with at the gym was watching too. She had told him she was going to be an anchor on KP12, and now he could see her. Was this the time he worked out on the weight machine and watched the news? Was he watching her right now?

She knew the silence had gone on too long.

"And so today, we wanted to bring you stories of what's happening out there in the world..."

The assistant shifted, Annabelle could see her. She was pointing to her ear over and over again.

The man in her head said, "Repeat after me, you got it? Repeat after—never mind. Just... can we cut to someone on the street? Say, now let's go to Matthew Budding, who is talking to people downtown today. Say it!"

"Now let's go to Matthew Budding, who is talking to people downtown. Matthew?"

"I'm here, Annabelle! Thank you!" the reporter said, and then he was off rattling about statistics and sharing the news, and he was shoving his microphone in people's faces, and Annabelle could see him in the television screens, his voice in her ear.

Then the man from the control booth bounced down toward her, his eyes fierce. He handed her a slip of paper, and he pushed it across the news desk with his pointer finger.

"Read this. Okay? And... I'll be working to feed things into the prompters..."

"Okay," Annabelle replied. "Am I doing okay?" she asked.

The guy blinked once and then twice.

"You're doing fine, sweetheart," he said dryly. "Just don't go

off on any rants, okay? Say that we are bringing stories from the streets, say that we will have up-to-date information as fast as we can. I'll keep feeding you who we're going to, and you just say their names."

"Can I engage in... some... journalism?"

"Some *journalism*?" he scoffed. "No." And he was off.

Ridiculous. Insane. Just because she was a stand-in, an understudy, a filler anchor, didn't mean she should be relegated to looking pretty and sitting at the desk with a mournful expression. She cleared her throat and heard that Matthew Budding was wrapping up his interview with the homeless man and the working mom, and it was back-to-you, Annabelle.

"Thank you, Matthew. So awful. So, so, so awful," she said. She hadn't watched the interview, but she knew it was awful because wasn't this whole thing awful? The dogs, the virus, the speculating, and the traffic.

The man in her ear said, "Go to Cynthia Quinton at the airport."

"We'd like to take you to Cynthia Quinton, who is interviewing people at the airport today. As you can expect, lots of delays are impacting travelers."

"Just say her name, Annabelle. Cynthia Quinton. At the airport."

Annabelle ignored him.

"Cynthia... ummm... hello! Ummm... can you describe the mood at the airport today?"

"I could drive buses through your ummms," the man said to her. She moved to her eyes and stared in the direction of the

booth. The teleprompter on the camera clicked on. It read: SAY WHAT WE TELL YOU TO SAY. Nod once if you'd prefer me to feed things into the prompter.

She kept her head perfectly still.

Mood. She'd heard someone say that once. Can you describe the mood for me? That was what all news anchors asked their reporters, and Annabelle wouldn't lose her one moment to shine because the director wanted her as a set piece and not a legitimate journalist. She had skills. She went to college for this.

The camera went to Cynthia. She was holding her hand against her ear and behind her, people milled in the background; the camera caught a glimpse of something, a body, or maybe someone sleeping—people were huddled over the lump, a TSA agent with a gun stood nearby. Some passengers ambled, world-weary, others rushed and ran, panicked. There was an old lady in a wheelchair and a mother with her kid—both wide-eyed, pale. Still, Cynthia stood, the lights of the camera on her face, not a clump of mascara to be seen, her lip-gloss shining.

"The mood?" the reporter repeated as she continued to push her hand against her ear. "Annabelle, the mood here today is *panicked*. We just got word that the FAA is grounding all commercial airplanes until the source of the attack is known. Air flight is not expected to resume—"

In the background, a person tumbled. The camera caught it, and then panned away. Had that been blood? Had the person been coughing blood?

"I'm sorry, Cynthia, was someone injured? Can you describe the scene for us?"

Now, Annabelle could see the carnage in the monitors. A line of passengers poured in from nowhere, and a few of them were carrying bodies. Someone held the limp body of a child. And when Annabelle realized what she was seeing, she let out a small gasp and covered her mouth with her hand. The cameraman stayed focused on the dead child, the weeping mother, and Cynthia's microphone went out, so viewers everywhere watched the scene in stony silence.

"Cut the feed," the man in her ear said to someone else. "Go back to the studio. No, wait, go to commercial. Damn it! Just go to commercial! I don't care which commercial. Any commercial!"

A bulky man in a bulging, button-down shirt appeared on the screen. He sold tires. "Come on down to the only San Antonio institution that can promise you quality service, unbeatable prices, and ice cream for the kids." The tire jingle filled the studio.

Annabelle exhaled. She brought her hand down slowly; there were traces of her lipstick on her palm, and she wiped it off on her skirt and it left a waxy smear.

She sat, unmoving, while the tire commercial fed into a national commercial for breakfast cereal, and then another commercial for Toyota trucks. The director appeared in front of her, his face taut.

"Read the teleprompter," he commanded.

"I have a background in journalism. This is what I was born to do. You can trust me to do this."

"It's not about you."

"But if you want people to keep watching, I can engage. You have to let me. I'm not a set piece."

"Just read the teleprompter. New plan. Read the teleprompter. I found someone to type it up and send it to you... new plan. Here." He reached out, took the speaker from her ear, and dropped it into her hand. "You deviate from the teleprompter, I pull the plug on you. See her?" He pointed out into the darkened studio. Annabelle lifted her hands to block out the light, and she could see an outline in the shadows. "That's your new anchor. Laticia from Channel Five News. They don't have enough of a crew to run a show, so she's here. You read the teleprompter, or you're gone."

Annabelle stared at Laticia from Channel Five News and then nodded.

Sixty seconds later, she was on the air and the screen in front of her fed her line after line. She read them without hesitation, like she was bred and born to do nothing but read teleprompters. She felt sick to her stomach.

"We apologize for the interruption. We'd like to take this moment to say that as we cover this unfolding event live, there may be images that are disturbing... We may not have time to issue a warning of the nature of our images, so please use guidance and prudence as you stay tuned to the unfolding events. Thank you for your understanding. It appears we are headed back to the airport now to check in with Cynthia. Let's go there now."

Annabelle stopped.

The camera didn't change from her face. She looked to the monitors and out into the studio. Nothing.

The teleprompter clicked forward.

"It appears we have lost contact with our camera crew at the airport," Annabelle read, and her stomach dropped. There was nothing else coming from the prompter, the man no longer buzzed in her ear, and Annabelle didn't know what to do. Still live, Annabelle motioned outward into the studio and said, "We do have a co-anchor who will join us today. Some of you may recognize her... Laticia VanGaurd from Channel Five..."

From the shadows, Laticia appeared. She was dressed for the gym, her hair in a bun, stained yoga pants, but she was wearing a windbreaker with her news team's logo on the front. She slid into the chair next to Annabelle and, despite her casual look, jumped into action.

"Thank you, Annabelle, for inviting me up here. While we wait for our communications to be restored, I thought I'd share my morning. Of course, I know that many of you are out there in the world living this, and so please don't hesitate to submit your stories and your photos to our website... We're still doing the best we can to keep that updated. Also, you can post pictures of people you are looking for. While the communication remains spotty, please use us to locate loved ones."

"I think the viewers would like to hear about what you experienced today," Annabelle prompted.

She waited for the director to come down and yank her off the desk, but he didn't show. It felt like she and Laticia were the only two people left in the entire world. Laticia, beautiful, bold, and brave, recounted her gym story in such a rehearsed tone that Annabelle was positive she had been practicing it the entire way to the studio. Of course, she assessed Laticia's measured cadence

with pride; it was perfect, so very perfect.

"It was surreal," Laticia said, "to stand somewhere where I am so keyed in on my health and wellness, and realize that people—whom I've worked out alongside for years—are dying. And then, it felt so futile. But I have to tell our viewers and you, Annabelle, that this is not just a day that will go down in history, but it will alter our history. Our histories. Around the world... we share this grief and this pain. Whenever humans are faced with terror attacks, we rise and we will rise. They can hurt us, but they cannot define us, and so we endure today with our backs against the wall, but our spirit lifted by the humanity we witness."

Laticia's speech ended and the teleprompter still remained blank.

Annabelle cleared her throat, smiled, reached out for a non-existent coffee cup, and put her hand in her lap.

"Well, we have lost communication with our booth," Annabelle said again slowly, tentatively. "So, viewers, I suppose you're stuck with us." She laughed. It was a nervous laugh, but she knew as it was happening that it would appear callous and shallow. Hadn't Laticia just described the man choking on his own vomit on the basketball court? And then she had laughed and showed her teeth and tossed her head back. Annabelle arranged her extensions down over her shoulders and sighed. Stoic. Serious.

"If you'll excuse me," Laticia said quietly. "I think I need to check on our program manager and our assistant."

"I can do that!" Annabelle offered, raising her hand like she was in school.

There was a solitary cameraman left, and he kept the wide shot fixed on them for a second and then went to a close-up of Annabelle while Laticia slipped off the set and disappeared back into the dark.

This was not a news show. This was a disaster. She had nothing to say, no stories to tell, and no people to interview.

Annabelle looked directly into the camera and shrugged, no longer concerned about the viewers or the MIA director. She didn't even know if Laticia, with her bun and her yoga pants, would return. It was just the cameraman and her, and he was eating a sandwich. It made Annabelle's stomach growl because she had bypassed breakfast to fit into the pencil skirt.

"Hello," she said to the camera.

The cameraman didn't stop eating.

"I guess... it's just me... and I'm sorry that I don't have any real news to report to you. We're in a communication blackout right now."

She stopped. The camera guy made a motion with his hand for her to keep going, so she did, moving blindly forward, blinking into the white light before her.

"And I guess I'm sorry that I am in here while you are all out there... not that it feels safe in here... but that it feels isolated." She paused. "I wish I was with my family."

She realized as the words left her mouth that her brutal honesty might be jarring to the viewers, and she wished she could take it back—now they'd never let her do this again. She'd be relegated to glorified intern or, worse, a weather girl.

"I'm sorry," she said to the people at home. "Forgive my

unprofessionalism amid the tragedy at hand. It would appear that our control booth is no longer able to communicate with me... and I'm unable to send you to the reporters at our various locations statewide. I..."

Annabelle trailed off and put her hands squarely in front of her on the desk. She stared straight ahead at the camera and waited. What would the people see? Confidence? Confusion? She ran her left hand through her hair and then returned it in front—prim and proper.

The cameraman's sandwich dropped to the floor in slow motion. It slipped from his hand—pieces of lettuce, a tomato, the bread—and it hit the worn cement flooring with a barely audible thud. Then the cameraman followed his sandwich to the ground. He doubled over at the waist and groaned. It was a split decision to stay and tell the people at home what she was seeing or rush over and help him—this man, this stranger. But Annabelle moved out from behind the anchor desk and left the camera rolling as it filmed nothing but the empty background.

She approached the man and watched as he convulsed.

"You okay?" she asked. She wished she knew his name. Why hadn't she learned his name? Stan. Jerry. Robert. Maybe it was Robert. Christian. He looked like a Stan. "Sir? Can I help you? Tell me what I can do to help you. Oh God. Oh God." Annabelle's hands hovered over his body, unsure of whether or not she should touch him. He had a gray moustache and a pot belly. His button-down shirt pulled across his chest as he struggled for each breath, and Annabelle noticed a small dollop of ketchup resting near his chest pocket. Or it could be blood; there was no way to

tell.

Annabelle's foot landed softly on something mushy, and she hesitated before looking down. It was the sandwich. A piece of bread slathered in sauce moved under her high-heeled shoes, and she picked up her foot and tried to wipe the offending pieces off.

"Sir? Stan," she said. It was better to call him something rather than nothing. "Stan..."

The man coughed, and blood flew out of his mouth in a fine spray. When Annabelle looked down at her perfectly procured lace top, a Chanel knock-off, but still not cheap, the droplets seeped into the pattern and created a speckled look. She took a deliberate step back and shuddered.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled. Her hair tumbled forward as she bowed her head. "I'm so sorry, Stan. I'm so sorry." She backed up three steps, her right foot still slippery.

In a matter of moments, the man had ceased breathing. There was a deep, offending rattle that gave Annabelle goose bumps, and then nothing—total silence.

She counted to ten. And she fixed her hair over her shoulders and stood up tall, elongating her spine like her professors had taught her. She ran her tongue over her teeth and rubbed her index fingers over her false-eyelashes. Everything was in place. She wondered if the blood splatter would be noticeable on camera.

Steadily, Annabelle walked back up to the anchor desk and sat down in the soft chair. The studio was so dark and the lights on the stage so bright—it was hard to see anything except the big, white orbs staring in her direction. A cold chill passed over her,

and she felt very alone. Where was everyone else? Why was she expected to manage this on her own? This was ruining her career. She had to salvage.

"Our dear cameraman, Stan, has just..."

She waited, sniffed, and looked forlorn. "Passed. For those of you out there today, we are encouraging you to stay home. Stay away from places where there are crowds... ummm..." She cringed. The ums and the ahs and the ohs were taboo, and she couldn't help it. "Please, take my advice and... stay home? Maybe gather your belongings and hunker down, prepare for the worst. I don't have any word on when aid will reach us. When we last touched based with our reporters at the airport, they, she... Cynthia, was it? Said that there was quite a bit of activity there that should be avoided, so avoid that."

Annabelle put her hands over her face and took a deep breath.

It was pointless. Stan, or whatever, was dead. The producer was gone, Laticia gone. Not a single soul stepped in and told Annabelle what she was supposed to do next. The anchor job was not even a reality—there would be no anchors. She knew that. She must have been silent for twenty or more seconds, and she stared at the blood on her shirt.

"Forgive me, viewers, but I simply can't fake this anymore. I don't know what's happening, and no one can tell me. I'm lost and alone. Mom and Dad... if you can hear me, I love you and I'm going to come home. Okay? So, wait for me. And be safe. Everyone... just be safe."

She stripped the microphone off her collar and pulled the pack off her waist. Gently, Annabelle set the pack on the anchor

desk and walked away. She walked straight to the back of the studio and pushed open the double metal doors—sunlight greeted her, real light, not artificial studio light, and she blinked back its brightness. The TVs in the adjoining room danced and flipped through image after image of the bleak reality outside of the studio walls. She watched as planes fell from the sky, cars piled up on the freeway, and bodies collapsed in the street.

It was then she realized that the photo stream, with its ticker underneath, was a national newscast.

And they were showing it on their channel. Seconds ago, Annabelle thought the local viewers had watched solemnly as she tearfully took her leave of the anchor desk, but she dropped her head and her shoulders slumped. They'd cut away from the mess of her broadcast and who knows how long ago, too. She didn't know if she was relieved or devastated.

Annabelle looked around. The station was deserted. Laticia. The producer. No one was left. And even if she went back and tried to salvage what was left of the news, no one would be on the other end to watch it. Annabelle felt sick. Her *parents*. She had hoped her on-air call to them had been enough, but if it hadn't reached them, then she had endured this tragedy without attempting to see if they were okay. She spun and tried the door back to the studio, to see if she could navigate back toward her purse, her phone, but it was locked. Several times, she pulled and tugged on the metal door, and then she banged her fist against it, but it was no use. She rubbed her scalp and felt the small, plastic extensions at her crown. Her feet felt heavy and her eyes itched.

No, her eyes felt like they were on fire.

Annabelle dug the heels of her hands into her eye sockets and cried out.

Her chest seared with pain and she felt compelled to cough; it came on suddenly and unexpectedly, and she didn't know what to do, so she let her body explode with a coughing fit so ferocious that she felt the pain in her legs. When Annabelle looked down, she realized her lace top was now covered in blood.

Was it her blood? Stan's blood? It couldn't be her blood.

She wiped her mouth and smeared a line of red across the back of her hand. Annabelle coughed again. A bright light flashed in her line of vision. Her first thought was that someone was taking a picture of her—did she have a fan? Was someone taking a studio tour? Her vision blurred, and the bright flashing became more intense. Annabelle's stomach ached. The nausea was unbearable; how lucky she was to throw up off camera. Her eyes burned. She coughed again and fell to her knees. *So, this was what it feels like*, she thought as everything around her began to blur.

She wished she had known before. She wished she would've been able to tell the people at home. "It will hurt... you'll be sick... your eyes won't close and you'll see the world fall and you'll feel every ache and for a second, you won't mind that you are dying because you want to die. Dying is better than this."

Annabelle's cheek hit the tile, and a warm pool of blood grew around her open mouth. But her eyes could still see the TVs in front of her right as it cut to the national anchorwoman. She looked great, poised, and unafraid. Stoic and sincere. Annabelle was jealous.