

WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN YOU MIX
A DISC JOCKEY, A SCHOOL TEACHER
AND A CHARITY AUCTION?

Radio Wave Romance

A CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

KATIE CLARK



Radio Wave
Romance

Katie Clark

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Dedication

Dedicated to all my loves, and to all those kids who have to fight that most dreaded monster called cancer.

1

Annalise pulled two steaming cups close as she scooted past a coworker in the hallway. Sam stood down the hall at the door of the studio, with her hands on her hips and an exasperated expression on her face.

"You're on in thirty seconds!" Sam's call from the end of the corridor urged Annalise forward.

"I'm coming!" She rushed as Sam shook her head and hurried inside.

Annalise could almost hear her thoughts: *Why can't that girl make it on time?*

She set her coffee at her desk and hurried to Sam's side to offer a hot chocolate peace offering. "You know I love you," she said with a wink. Then, she slipped into her own side of the two-room studio and grinned across the glass at Sam.

Sam smiled and rolled her eyes as Annalise jerked the headphones into place. "You're on in five, four, three, two, one." Her voice carried through the small pass-through that had been cut out from the bottom of the window separating the rooms.

"Good morning, sleepy Salem! Welcome to Mornings with Annalise. This is Annalise Waters. We've got traffic on the hour, and we'll be taking calls at twenty after. Until then, enjoy a commercial-free music marathon."

"Clear," Sam said. She leaned back in her seat and

shook her head, her long, graying curls bouncing around her shoulders. It was only the twinkle in her eye that gave away her true feelings—she could never be mad at Annalise. At least, that’s what Annalise liked to tell herself.

“Why do you insist on doing this to me?” Sam teased.

Annalise bit her lip and then blew on her still-too-hot coffee. “Sorry. I really needed my caffeine. And I brought you your favorite!”

Sam chuckled. “You better be glad that I love you back. Now take off your coat.”

“I’m glad for your love every single day.” Annalise removed the heavy coat, hung it on her chair, and then flipped through the day’s script.

Script was a loose word. It was more like a few notes scribbled on a piece of paper from Sam’s husband’s hotel letterhead. Some days it was longer, but today, the checklist was short, just a few points she should touch on throughout the show.

“Are you ready for the caller hour?” Sam asked. “Last week was a bit of a disaster.”

“I can’t help it when people want to argue with me,” Annalise defended herself. Just thinking of the woman who had started an on-air feud made her blood boil. “Doesn’t anyone screen these calls?” The plea sounded true enough, but deep down she knew the truth. She thrived in the midst of conflict. It got her blood pumping and her adrenaline rushing. Made her feel alive, which was important.

Sam’s raised eyebrows showed she wasn’t fooled by the claim. “We can all agree she was a pot stirrer, true. But try being a little nicer next time, eh?”

“Her theory was wrong. That’s the point of the

segment, isn't it? I'm teaching fiscal responsibility in these little weekly snippets. What if the rest of the listeners went out and tried her ridiculous suggestions?"

Sam didn't reply, but she narrowed her eyes.

OK, so maybe she could have been a little nicer. She would try harder. It would make Sam happy, if nothing else. Besides, once they'd gone off the air, Annalise had offered to meet with the lady to work out her budget—which the pot stirrer had refused.

"We're back on in thirty seconds. It's the weather, news, then get ready for caller one."

Annalise slipped the headphones back into place and adjusted herself more comfortably. She hated the weekly Q & A, but when ratings had taken a slight dip, Mr. Winslow, the station owner, had scrambled for something to keep her afloat. The Fiscal Responsibility segment was Sam's idea.

"Did you know the number one reason for divorce is finances?" Annalise opened. Which was a stupid line because everyone these days knew the number one reason for divorce was finances. She hated opening with it, but Mr. Winslow insisted. "In this week's Fiscal Responsibility segment we're going to take calls from the public—that's you—so get ready. But first we're going to traffic, weather, and news."

She switched over to the affiliate news station, who jumped right into the latest traffic pile up.

Sam sat across the glass, already taking phone calls and questions.

Annalise took another swig of coffee, which had finally cooled to an acceptable temperature. The sweet but bitter warmth spread through her. It loosened her muscles and mind as she pulled out the financial guru

stuff the bosses had put together for her to reference. She'd read through it multiple times, but when it came to answering these people's questions, having it nearby gave her a boost of confidence.

The traffic, weather, and news went off without a hitch, and Sam gave the nod. Annalise leaned toward the microphone, ready to go live, and this time she was ready. She waited for Sam's fingers to tick down.

"We're back with this week's Fiscal Responsibility segment. We welcome your financial questions, and I believe we have our first caller."

Sam nodded and punched a button on her end. A smooth masculine voice filled the airways. "Miss Waters, do you advocate supporting local charities as a part of regular fiscal responsibility?"

"Charitable donations are a great way to get tax breaks. So as long as it's in your budget, I say go for it." She waited for the standard "thank you" that always followed.

"Funny, because I've been a listener for a while, and I've never picked up on any charities you actually support. In fact, I've done a bit of outside research, and I still haven't been able to find anything."

Heat erupted in Annalise's ears, and she turned worried eyes to Sam.

Sam frowned and bit her lip, but the public was waiting. Dead airwaves were bad airwaves.

Annalise fumbled for something to say.

"And what would you suggest?" That was as good a save as any.

"Well, the children's hospital is my personal favorite. Have you ever visited?"

The heat faded into a throbbing, a deep spasm in the pit of her stomach. It spread quickly to her heart

and brain until she couldn't block it out. "Once or twice, yes," she forced out. Painful memories flooded her mind.

"And you didn't find it donation-worthy?"

She swallowed hard. "Your point has been made. I will update my donation information on the website soon. Thanks for your call."

She switched herself off the air and glanced at Sam. "I'm taking a break."

Sam nodded and hurried to switch the station to music, while Annalise stomped to the bathroom. Images from the past raced through her head—hospital beds, beeping machines, and worried faces that would never leave her mind's eye.

She turned on the faucets and splashed cool water over her cheeks and eyes. Then, she grabbed a paper towel to dry herself off. What a disaster. Now she looked like a monster, and they were going to be getting hate mail and who knew what else.

The nerve. How dare anyone question her donations? She gave to her church, above and beyond what she tithed. It wasn't anyone's business what she did with her money.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the mirror.

It was everyone's business. She was a public figure, and people wanted to know. They always had and they always would. Now the station was going to get demands that she prove what types of charities she supported. It was going to mean public announcements, fundraising events, the whole shebang.

And that meant people would be getting to know her. Asking her questions. Digging into her past—a

past she didn't want to remember.

The bathroom door opened and Sam slipped inside. "You OK? You looked as pale as a ghost."

Annalise straightened and took a deep breath. She was overreacting. People forgot things they heard on the radio five minutes after it aired. "I'm fine. I told you we needed to screen these calls."

"I'm sorry, sweetie." Sam's arm slipped over Annalise's shoulders. "You've got to go back on air, though. Can you do it?"

Suck it up, sweetheart.

Dad had always told her that when she was a kid. She did it then, she could do it now. "Yeah, I can do it."

"Good. And we'll get lunch on the station. What they don't know won't hurt them."

Annalise managed a smile. "They told us yesterday they were buying lunch today anyway."

Sam grinned. "You remember that, do you?"

Annalise went back on the air like nothing had happened, but her mind was never far from the caller. The guy who thought he should challenge her on the air, for all the world to hear.

If she ever met him in person, she'd give him a piece of her mind.

"But don't you think that was kind of rude, Mr. Sanders?" Maggie, one of his students, sat at the front of the class as always. Her short curls were pulled into a barrette, and she leaned forward for his answer. He'd just finished his phone call with Annalise Waters, radio show host extraordinaire, as his class watched in fascination.

Christopher Sanders shrugged and backed against his desk. "Sometimes you have to be forceful to make a point. I wouldn't advocate being rude just for the sake of being rude. But we have a cause, don't we?"

A mumble of assent moved through the high school social studies class.

"You better believe we have a cause, and we're going to see our demands met. Troy's life is worth that much to you, his friends, isn't it?" Troy was a student—a great kid. Being diagnosed with cancer at sixteen definitely put a damper on that, though. "Getting public attention for the hospital is a need. I am trying to get that need met. This is how economics works, and it's likened to lobbyists who work in Washington every day."

Every eye in the classroom was riveted to him, and he could see the determination in them. "So I took drastic measures. The greater the cause, the greater the risk you must take."

The bell rang and students filed out. Maggie stopped at his desk and smiled sadly. "Thank you for fighting for Troy. He really loves you."

"I love him, too," Christopher said. "Tell him I'll see him soon."

Maggie nodded and hurried out.

It wasn't fair, really, young love. Maggie and Troy had a potential future together that was being cut short by Troy's illness. It wasn't fair at all.

If there were public figures who could help spread awareness, they should be doing it. And Annalise Waters was a public figure. Most news anchors or radio show hosts got on board with some charity or another. Annalise hadn't signed up to tout any of them, at least not that he could find.

She was all talk and no results—just like someone else he used to know. Wendy was the last person he wanted to think about, so he hurried to finish up for the day instead.

He sat at his desk and graded the last of his papers before slipping them into the bottom desk drawer. The lock slid into place, and he pocketed his keys and made his way to the school parking lot. A few teens roamed the grounds still, mostly the ones who'd had detention and were waiting for a ride, or the ones getting out of basketball practice.

He waved at the group of sweaty boys, and they waved back. Except one was missing.

Troy Harrison had been in the hospital for three weeks straight. The poor kid couldn't catch a break. If it wasn't one infection it was another, and the end was nowhere in sight. Cancer was like that.

Christopher's phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out to read the text. *Was that you on the Annalise Waters show? Can't believe you went through with that.*

Chris couldn't believe he'd done it either. He'd been talking about it ever since Troy was diagnosed. He'd even had a group discussion with his class over it—they'd debated the effects having a celebrity's support, big or small, could make in a public campaign. In this case, Christopher advocated starting a local campaign to help the kids at the children's hospital, particularly Troy.

He unlocked his car door, climbed inside, and then texted back. *Yep.*

It was the fourth time he'd been asked this afternoon. He wasn't sure what had made him finally go through with it, except Annalise's show was a

popular one, and even if it never went any farther, he'd put the thought of donating to the children's hospital in the people's minds. That was good enough for him.

Guilt nagged at the back of his mind, saying he could have gone about it a different way. After all, he'd catch more flies with honey than vinegar. But his courage hadn't failed him this morning, and he'd just done it.

He pushed the guilt aside.

The drive home was an easy one, only four blocks from the school. He pulled into his driveway and stared a moment at his home. In the summer the shrubs were usually grown up around the front windows, and the weeds along the fence that separated his yard from the neighbors grew out of control; but in the winter, everything was dead. That sat just fine with him—yard work wasn't one of his strengths.

The house was modest with two small bedrooms and a bathroom, but what more did a bachelor need? His students warned him all the time they were going to set him up on an online dating site. He'd threatened to fail them if they did.

He fished out the leftovers from the night before—a vegetable stew he'd perfected over his years of putting himself through college. He had lesson plans to prepare for tomorrow, but after that he wanted to run by the hospital and see Troy. He needed to drop off his homework, even though the whole homework thing was a pretext.

Troy was going to need a lot of catch-up work when he came through this.

Chris paused and gritted his teeth. It wasn't *when* he came through it, it was *if*. That was exactly why the hospital needed more funds. They needed better

research, better equipment, better everything. Troy's life didn't deserve to be wasted, and neither did the rest of the kids' on the various hospital floors.

He finished off the stew, and then moved to his table and worked out the lesson plans for the next day. By the time he'd completed them and stored them in his bag for the morning, it was already eight fifteen. It was an hour drive to the hospital, and visiting hours ended at nine. He'd never make it in time.

Chris dropped into his desk chair, pulled up his e-mail, and began typing.

Hey Buddy, hanging in there? I'm going to bring your homework by sometime this week. I expect to pick up last week's, got it? No slacking off.

Seriously, how are you doing? I hope to see you soon.

Mr. Sanders

He punched the send button and watched the tiny clock on the right hand corner of the screen until it dinged, letting him know the message had been sent.

It wasn't enough, but for tonight it would have to do.

He closed out his e-mail and logged onto the Internet. He smiled when he checked his social media feed. News of Annalise Water's fumble on air filled the screen. People were demanding the station list their professional affiliations with local charities. The station's spokesperson was responding as best as she could, but basically it was a bunch of fluff.

They were going to have to do better, and that was a good thing.

The guilt from earlier returned, but it was overpowered by the feeling of victory.

Maybe now they'd get some results.

The next morning he packed a lunch and grabbed

his bag. Then, he hurried to class early. He was meeting two students for a tutoring session.

Kirk and Lance were on the basketball team with Troy, although he didn't think the three of them were friends. The two juniors had approached him a few weeks ago, hoping to get high scores on their upcoming college placement tests. Seeing them take their studies seriously was all the reason Christopher needed for agreeing to help.

The boys arrived five minutes late, which was typical teenage behavior. Christopher looked up as they entered. "Hi, guys."

"Mr. Sanders, my mom heard you on the radio yesterday," Kirk said as he sat down. "She didn't know it was you, but I told her. She said she couldn't believe it."

Chris smiled wryly and shrugged. "My students put me up to it. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it."

Kirk grinned.

Christopher pulled two chairs closer to his desk and then waved the boys over. "Let's just hope something good comes out of it."

Both boys turned serious. "Right," they mumbled.

The hour passed quickly, and students trickled in until class time. Chris started first period without incident. It was last period he waited for. Last period when he'd see how Troy was doing, because Maggie would have minute-by-minute details. Even the school principal had agreed to allow her to carry her cellphone for updates, as long as she promised it wouldn't interfere with class.

First period ended, and Christopher quickly logged onto the radio station via his computer and tuned into the Annalise Waters Show live broadcast. It

hadn't started yet, but it would any minute. It was doubtful his stunt yesterday had done any good this soon, but there was always hope.

Dull music played over the sound waves, and Chris muted the noise as students filled their desks for second period. He'd be able to listen off and on throughout the morning—all of his students knew what he was up to by now. The whole school knew, and from the sounds of it all their parents knew, too.

If the student body and their families alone got on board, they'd be able to make a big difference. A small flame could ignite a big fire.

Minutes ticked by and he listened for the show to start. Finally, he heard the manager—Sam was her name—announce the upcoming segment with Annalise.

It was time to start class, so Christopher called for his students' attention. "Everyone get out your books and read through last week's chapter. We're going to have a quiz later this period."

The students frowned and groaned, but Chris insisted. Then, he dropped into his desk chair and waited for the show to begin.

2

Show time. Annalise had done her best to get to the station on time this morning, but that meant skipping her coffee. Between music breaks she'd hurried to the break room to grab a cup, but now it was time to get back on air. She grabbed her headphones and re-welcomed the listeners. Then she started a music segment before she could even take a sip of her coffee. Once the music was going she grabbed her script for the day and scanned over it.

A lack of sleep had left her with a pounding headache, and she massaged her temples as she read. Nothing had dulled the memories brought on by yesterday's caller, and today she was paying for the sleep deprivation.

"You caused quite the buzz yesterday." Sam's voice traveled through the glass between their studios in its usual muffled state.

"For once, it wasn't my fault," Annalise said. She skimmed the notes. Then, her eye caught a line jotted at the end of the paper. She froze. "Sam, what's this?"

Silence met her, and Annalise glanced up. Sam's face stared back at her across the glass, her eyes worried.

"Sam?"

"It's damage control."

A weight settled in Annalise's stomach as her gaze

travelled back to the solitary sentence. *Announce the holiday fundraiser for the children's hospital.*

"What does this fundraiser entail?" She pictured cocktails and myriad little black dresses. Or maybe red and green dresses—Christmas *was* coming.

When Sam stayed silent again, Annalise groaned. "Sam! Why didn't someone warn me?"

"You're live in fifteen seconds."

Annalise glared at her manager and friend. "Traitor," she mouthed as she pushed her headphones back in place.

She read a few of the announcements on her page, but she didn't get near the one at the bottom. She needed more information first. Like the dates, the event, the locale. And she needed to find the culprit.

After the announcements and a traffic and weather segment, she returned the listeners to a straight half hour of easy-listening music.

She wasn't staying in her seat for this discussion.

Sam stood as Annalise approached. "Please explain," Annalise said. She couldn't help it, she felt like a teenager on a rampage.

"There was a lot of backlash after that call yesterday. People began asking what you do actually support and if the station is against supporting the hospital. There were a lot of calls and emails about some kid named Troy, who goes to the local high school and was recently diagnosed with cancer. We had to do something, and the fundraiser was an idea that's been thrown around in the past to garner more listeners."

Annalise's heart stopped. She closed her eyes and groaned again, shaking her head and backing away. "An idea thrown around in the past? Please tell me the

singles auction isn't the fundraiser we're going to put on for the children's hospital."

The station had considered putting on a singles auction a few months ago, but nothing had ever come of it. The idea of a stunt like that for the children's hospital seemed ridiculous.

Sam sighed. "It was the best we could do on such short notice. We already had all the specifics worked out. You have to understand, when you froze yesterday it spoke volumes." She crossed her arms and gave Annalise a stern look.

"I didn't freeze because I don't support local charities, Sam." The words were harsher than she'd intended, but Sam didn't know her history. None of them did, and she'd planned to keep it that way until some random dude decided to shatter her glass house. The last thing she wanted was to relive the horrors of her childhood—the horrors of her sister's childhood.

Sam sighed. "I'm sorry. I am really, really sorry. But Mr. Winslow is set on this course of action. It's going to be a four-week event, leading up to a Christmas Ball. All money raised will be presented to the children's hospital in Birmingham. The setup is already in the works."

She gave more details, and Annalise tapped her foot in an angry rhythm. This wasn't fair. None of it! Like she was supposed to put her entire life on hold just to please some guy. Some listener.

"Do we even know who he was?"

Sam nodded and sighed again, and Annalise's heart softened a little. None of this was Sam's fault.

"Christopher somebody. He's a teacher at the high school, which probably explains all the notes about the Troy kid."