

Dire Consequences

By

Sage Delouise

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Published by Blushing Books®,
a subsidiary of

ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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Delouise, Sage
Dire Consequences

eBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-107-9
Cover Design by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Chapter One

Behind the reception desk for Vibrant Hair salon, Anna checked her phone for the zillionth time today. Nothing from Roger. Not a text, not a voicemail, not a word. Her schedule on the computer screen showed her that, if she didn't have any walk-ins, Crystal would be her last client for the day. Crystal was down for a trim, it shouldn't take long. Although, once they got chatting, who knew? And then it would be zero hour. Time to go home and face Roger, who was practically her fiancé. They had been talking marriage – before last night.

The shop was empty and she'd swept the green linoleum floor clean after she finished her last haircut. With the fans on high to combat the summer heat, the salon was comfortable. The building was an older one, and it did not boast central air conditioning. But the weather on the west coast was mild enough to survive summer with a portable air conditioner, and a few well placed fans that kept hairdressers, barbers and their customers cool.

Anna had Vibrant Hair to herself today. All the other hairdressers had gone on vacation for the last two weeks of July, which suited her fine. The walk-in clients were all hers. She wanted to build up her clientele, and as the only hairdresser available, she was accumulating permanent customers.

Right on time as always, Crystal strode in, her huge over the shoulder bag bulging more than usual. Anna smiled in welcome and pointed to the chair where her clients sat. *Her* chair in her own salon. She was still proud of it, her own station at her first hairdressing job in her own salon. The job Roger had helped her to get trained for. The Roger who had been gone when she woke up this morning. The Roger who had not called today.

Crystal's bag landed on the floor with a thump as she sat.

"If that bag were any bigger you'd need a crane to lift it." Anna picked up her scissors. "The usual?"

Crystal nodded. "Maybe leave the bangs. I want to grow them out."

"Seems to me I've heard that song before," Anna lifted and dropped Crystal's shiny, strawberry blonde hair.

“I mean it this time. A new me sits before you.” Crystal dimpled as she smiled. “No bangs, stick to my diet, start dating. That’s why my bag is so big. I stocked up on veggies.”

“Congrats on the first step.” Anna’s movements were quick and graceful as she clipped Crystal’s hair into sections and began cutting the ends.

“How’s Roger?” Crystal asked. “How was the party?”

Anna caught her own expression in the mirror, behind Crystal. Her lips had turned down, and a frown creased her forehead. The lipstick she’d put on this morning had disappeared during her lunch break. A tortoise shell clip held her curly brown hair in a ponytail because she hadn’t felt up to styling it, and while the highlights in the front were holding up well, she was beginning to fade. She forced a smile. “The party was a hoot. Cute guys. Gus something or other was flirting madly with me.”

“Don’t tell me you went along with him.”

“Keep still.” Anna lifted her scissors away from Crystal’s hair. “I can flirt if I want to.”

“What did Roger say?”

Anna went back to trimming. “Not much. He wasn’t happy. The truth is, he slept on the couch last night. When I came downstairs, he’d already left for work, so we’ll probably talk about it tonight.”

“Sometimes,” Crystal said, “when you talk about Roger, I’m glad I’m not in a relationship. Don’t have to watch my Ps and Qs. But then again, if he doesn’t like it when you flirt, I think it shows how much he cares about you, and I wish someone cared about me that way.”

“It’ll happen. You keep taking care of yourself the way you are and before you know it, men will be knocking down your door.”

“I hope that’s true.”

Anna drove home faster than she should have. In her head, she ranted at Roger about how harmless flirtation was, and that even though they were living together, she could indulge in a little coming on to men who were attracted to her. She imagined telling him that he should get off her case.

The street in front of their small, rented house was missing something – Roger’s car. Not that he’d be home this early, anyway, but her heart banged hollowly. He hadn’t slept in their bed

last night, or called her all day, and now she was suddenly willing to apologize to him, and to accept his punishment if he had one planned. In the living room it was quiet. She cranked up the volume on the radio and head banger rock blasted into the space. Upstairs, in the bedroom, she stripped off her work blouse and slacks and opened the closet. And stared. Chills shuddered up her arms. It was half empty. Roger's clothes, his cuffs and collar shirts for work, his tweed jackets, and the slacks that hung so perfectly over his tight butt were gone.

Okay, Roger, now you're scaring me.

She dropped onto their king sized bed, suddenly lost. *What had she been doing? Oh yeah, getting into some comfy shorts. The low slung pink denims Roger liked.*

But Roger isn't here. She jumped up and ran to the dresser, dreading what she feared she'd find. She'd guessed right. His tee shirts and underwear were gone; one lonely sock huddled in the corner of a drawer.

Oh my god. This is serious.

Back on the edge of the bed, she could only clutch her phone, watching it, as if that would make it ring. She touched the photo of him, the icon that dialed his number. She didn't want to sound desperate, so she practiced asking him, casually, when he'd be back. She'd pretend she hadn't noticed his missing clothes.

After an hour, when he hadn't called, she tried him again, without practicing her calm voice this time. His voicemail answered.

And again, when it was growing dark, with the uneaten sandwich she'd made sitting on a plate in front of her at the kitchen table, she tapped the photo of him on her phone and listened to his phone ring.

"Anna."

"Holy crap, I didn't think you were ever going to talk to me again." *So much for sounding cool.* "Your clothes are gone."

"Yes, I took them with me this morning."

"Why?"

"You know why. You were flirting, outrageously, with a guy from work. Someone from my workplace, at my company party. I've told you before not to drink around my co-workers, and especially my branch manager. And you know I hate it when you flirt."

“But you didn’t say anything. Or do anything except sleep on the couch. And leave before I woke up this morning.”

“You mean I didn’t spank you? I didn’t haul you across my lap and deliver what you deserved?”

For a moment, her bottom clenched as if he were slapping her behind right then. At least he would still be with her. But she would never admit that a punishment would be better than him leaving her. How dare he leave without talking to her this morning? “Did you really move out because I had a glass of wine, and smiled at your co-worker? I thought we agreed to start communicating better.”

“I’m done communicating with you right now, talking doesn’t seem to be getting us anywhere. And you’re not being totally honest. You know you had more than a glass, and you know better than to flirt like that around people I have to see at work. If you don’t understand that by now, another speech from me, and another spanking won’t help.”

Anna felt slightly sick. He’d never sounded like he was giving up on them before. Anger gnawed at her. “You didn’t even try.”

“You mean this time, Anna. This time, I didn’t want to go through that routine again. Didn’t I support you through hairdressing school?”

Yes. And he’d put up with her resistance to studying for the required chemistry courses. “You did, and I made it through because of your encouragement.” *And the consequences when I didn’t apply myself.* “I’m so grateful, you know I am.”

“That’s not the point. I helped as much as I could, even though I had to use some pretty strict measures to keep you from flunking out.”

“I remember. Thank you for caring, and helping me get this career.”

“I’m not asking for your thanks. I’m telling you that I need a woman who’ll support me in my career, do what I ask her to do at my work functions. I’m going to go now. I’ll talk to you soon. But I’m not moving back in. I’m staying at my brother’s for now.”

What? No. Did he really say he wasn’t coming back?

For a split second she wanted to beg him to come home. But anger took over. “You know what, Roger? If you’re going to let a little thing like the party last night split us up, then we’re not worth saving.”

“Fine,” he said.

“Fine,” she echoed.

The phone went dead. He’d hung up. He’d never hung up on her before.

Outside the west facing kitchen window, the summer sun sank and the sky turned red.

When she couldn’t stand sitting in the kitchen any longer, she trudged upstairs. The bed looked absurdly big. She curled up on top of the covers, still holding her phone, willing Roger to phone and say he hadn’t meant it.

When it rang, her hand jumped and she dropped the phone. The call was not coming from a familiar number. Definitely not Roger.

“Anna?”

“Who is this?”

“Gus. From the party last night. I know you were there with Roger, but you were coming on to me pretty hot ‘n’ heavy. Thought you’d like to get together.”

Goosebumps prickled her arms. “Where did you get my number?”

“Roger. He didn’t seem too fussed about giving it out.”

The snake. When had he decided that they were each single and free to meet other people?

“So how about it, Anna? Do you want to get together?”

No. She didn’t. But if Roger was dumping her, why not? She’d show him she could live without him. “What did you have in mind?”

“Dinner tomorrow? Are you free?”

“Free as a fish in the ocean.”

“Should I pick you up?”

“No.” God no, that was too much too soon. “I’ll meet you somewhere.”

“Eight o’clock, the Towers Steaks and Lobster? Do you know where it is?”

Shocked, she heard herself agree to a date with a stranger.

Panic pounded in her chest. She had no idea why she had just said, yes. She was losing it and she had to talk to somebody. R.F.N. Right frigging now.

Lainie, her BFF, was the most sensible person she knew. Lainie wouldn’t judge her, she’d understand.

“Anna,” Lainie answered.

“I just agreed to a date with a man, not Roger. I don’t even know him, except for a teensy hot flirt last night.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Not exactly the response I was hoping for.”

“Tell Momma all about it. How did this happen?”

“He was flirting with me at a party, a bank party for Roger’s work. And I flirted back, and I might have been a little blasted. But Roger, unforgiving toad that he is, has moved out. Taken his clothes. And that’s not the worst part.” She got up and paced, opening the closet and drawers, still not believing they were minus Roger’s clothes.

“Go on,” Lainie said.

“He gave this guy my number. He might as well have put my name and number on a telephone booth. ‘For a good time, call Anna’.”

“That’s not like Roger. He’s so, so bank managerish. So conservative.”

“So boring.” *It wasn’t true, but she was on a roll now.*

“You’re not going out with this guy.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, Lainie, I am. If Roger doesn’t give a hoot in a hot place, I’m going.”

“I know I can’t talk you out of it,” Lainie said. “I can tell by that tone.”

“No,” Anna sighed. “You can’t. I have to look out for number one.” Tears burned and she absolutely would not let Lainie hear that in her voice. “Well, thanks for listening. I’m off to check my wardrobe for something killer to wear tomorrow.”

At midnight, when Anna crawled into bed, she tossed and turned on the empty acres of mattress. She was still holding her phone, but at two AM, and at three, and each time she woke up, the screen was blank. It didn’t seem possible that Roger hadn’t been driven by loneliness to call her by now.

If you can’t lick ‘em, join ‘em. If he could just walk out like that, after three years of living together, that was beyond outrageous. Good thing she already had a date lined up soon. Going out with a new man was what the doctor would have ordered, if she’d consulted one. *Wait. She had.* Lainie was a doctor, a doctor who was married to the state governor. Nice and safe, and settled. So Lainie hadn’t exactly endorsed dating a stranger. What did she know about being dumped and single? She’d said Anna shouldn’t be doing this, going out with Gus. But she wasn’t the one sleeping alone for the first time in years.

Deep breath, you can survive this. If he can, you can. She rolled around, threw off the covers and curled up again, determined to get some sleep.

In her dream she was coughing, choking. She woke up to air that was thick with smoke, and burning her lungs, and the sound of sirens. There must be a fire on her block. The banging on the front door downstairs sent her shooting up and off the bed. She flew down the stairs to the foyer, and watched, through burning, blinding smoke as the door crashed inwards and four firemen exploded into the house. One grabbed her arm and said, “You have to leave now. Come outside with us, ma’am. Is there anyone else in the house?” She could only shake her head.

“No pets?”

Again, she shook her head, felt his hands dragging her outside, and away from the house. From the street, she could see the smoke billowing from the living room window. The smells of burning chemicals, plastic and wood, and god knew what else choked and sickened her.

One of the firefighters approached her. “Do you have any idea how this could have happened? Do you have candles lit, or a fireplace?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Did you cook dinner?”

“No.”

“Where is Mr. West?”

“Roger? He’s, he’s...” She hadn’t said it aloud yet, except to Lainie. “He’s not here. And how do you know his name?”

“I called the owner of this property, it’s leased to Roger West.

“Of course.”

“You know your landlord lives in another state, he won’t be able to get here tonight.

“I know.”

“Do you have a place to stay for the night?”

Automatically, she looked down and saw she had never let go of her phone. “Yes.”

“Maybe you should give them a call.”

“When can I go back in?”

“We’re making sure the fire’s completely out, that the building is safe, checking out the source, where it started and how. When the arson investigator gives us his findings, we’ll let you know. Do you mind giving me your number?”

The planet spun and the fireman reached for Anna's arm. "You better sit down."

"Arson? Somebody started this fire on purpose?"

"That's what we're going to establish."

Numb, Anna held up her phone and he wrote down her number, saying, "We don't know anything yet. We haven't seen enough to make a determination. We caught it early, one of your neighbors saw the smoke and called nine-one-one, so we hope the damage will be minimal. You better make that call, Anna. There's nothing you can do here tonight."

Anna pushed the stethoscope icon to reach Lainie, and Lainie, mercifully, answered, even at four in the morning.

"Anna, are you all right?"

"Depends how you define that. There was a fire at my place, I'm not hurt, but—"

Lainie cut her off mid-sentence. "Get over here right now."