

If and When

by

Diana Davis

David Beaufort paced from the bookshelf at one end of his study to the other. The time had come for action, and he had no idea how to proceed.

Were it a matter of business, law, medicine or politics, he had friends he might consult. But this was a matter of the heart, and the only person he had to consult in that regard was the object.

Westing, his valet, knocked and David bid him enter. "Papers and accounts, sir." Westing held up the stack of newspapers and business and set them on the desk. He turned for the door, but David stopped him.

"Westing, is there an acceptable length for courtships in the colonies?"

"Oh, um." He gave a little laugh. "You know, I'm really not certain."

"Of course." What a ridiculous question to put to his valet; David knew Westing wasn't married. He couldn't even have been older than David himself.

"I think however, it is mostly dependent upon the couple? How well they know one another, if there are any impedi-

ments to the match, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, yes.” Impediments?

Westing began to turn away but turned back. “I mean, assuming one means to end the courtship favorably. Otherwise, the length doesn’t matter.”

“Yes—and yes, I do.”

Westing’s countenance brightened, but he resisted any temptation to comment beyond a “Very good, sir,” and he took his leave.

David perused the news and the business Westing had brought, but there was nothing there to hold his attention.

He and Cassandra could certainly court longer, but that would not change how he felt. He loved Cassandra, and she loved him. It was really not a question of whether they would marry, but how soon.

For his part, he wanted it to be quite soon.

Westing knocked again and David again bid him enter. “Miss Crofton to see you.”

David didn’t wait for Westing to say he’d shown her to the drawing room, as usual—there was nowhere else to take a guest, but David appreciated the little formality.

He fetched his coat from the chair, one of his favorites: dusky blue velvet with silver scrolls. Westing helped him into the coat and ensured he was suitably smart for his sweetheart, and David swept into the drawing room.

Cassandra was on her feet in an instant, crossing the room to greet him. David smiled at her, and she beamed back at him.

Yes, it was only a matter of how soon they might marry.

He slid his hands around the waist of her gown of striped blue cotton. As he bowed his head to kiss her, however, a movement behind her caught his eye, and he looked up. Cassandra’s older sister, Helen, sat on the couch, hands

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folded primly in her lap. David released Cassandra's waist.

"Oh, um, good afternoon, Helen." He glanced over his shoulder at Westing, who shrugged an apology.

"How do you do?"

"Well?" He intended for that to be a statement, but his inflection turned it into a question, betraying the unspoken one in his mind: *what are you doing here?* He received Cassandra at least three times a week and unless the occasion was something formal, she usually came alone, allowing Westing and his newest cook to act as chaperones of a sort. With her uncle working in the office downstairs, they were virtually always being watched.

He met Helen's eyes again. Watched in a very different way.

Amusement dawned behind Cassandra's smile. "Will you not kiss me in front of my sister?"

David allowed a little laugh. He had before and he would again, and he did so now, but it was not the kiss he'd been anticipating. He didn't think a simple kiss would scandalize Helen, but he could not imagine proposing marriage with an audience.

"I'm sorry, dearest," Cassandra murmured. "I think Temperance has finally persuaded everyone that Winthrop Morley will come courting soon, and Aunt Anne is worried about giving her too much freedom."

The freedom they'd had, she meant?

"For her sake," David said, "I hope Temperance is wrong." He'd already heard too many rumors about the governor's son to trust him with any woman, but especially not his future wife's cousin.

"Dinner is served," Westing announced. David offered his arm to Cassandra and she accepted, that same clever little smile lurking behind her amber brown eyes if not on her lips.

When he'd first met her, he'd taken that smile as pretended superiority. Now he knew it wasn't, but if it had been, he would have said she merited it. He loved her wit, and he couldn't help sparring with her whenever she presented the opportunity.

He seated both Cassandra and her sister on either side of his place at the head of the table. Fortunately, Westing had already surreptitiously added a place setting. Hopefully this new cook wouldn't ruin the meal. He'd been through four already, and if he hadn't been so sure that his family didn't miss him, he might have worried they were attempting to poison him all the way from England. The most recent cook had earnestly expected him to eat gruel.

Between the matter he wished to discuss with Cassandra and the misfortunes he'd experienced at this table for the last few months, David's stomach seemed to be entirely tied in knots. As if sensing his apprehension, Helen eyed him suspiciously until David released Cassandra's hand.

Was this to be how all future visits would be conducted? An unhappy sister or cousin conscripted into supervising them, constantly scrutinizing their every little affection?

If it was not a question of whether but when, the answer had better be *almost immediately*.

"We have a new cook today," David murmured while Westing was getting the first course from the kitchen. "So I hope dinner is presentable."

Westing served the first course, a roasted leg of lamb. Cassandra glanced at David. Apparently she hadn't forgotten the failure of last month, when his third cook offered a lamb that was practically leather.

Cassandra patted his hand, as if anything he offered her would be satisfactory. He wasn't really trying to impress her with his cook's prowess, but he couldn't imagine she would

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want to marry a man who couldn't provide her with a decent meal.

Westing served the lamb to each of their plates. David tentatively poked his serving with his fork. If this newest cook would be no better, he'd rather be the one to discover it than sacrifice his poor beloved.

The meat was perfectly tender, however, and he ventured to taste it. The seasoning brought out the flavor of the lamb with more subtlety than he'd tasted in months, possibly years. Possibly ever.

"Are you well?" Helen asked.

Oh, was his reaction showing in his expression. "Very; try the lamb."

Cassandra and her sister both tried the meat at last and their eyes both grew wide. "This is excellent," Cassandra said first.

David grinned in relief. "A promising first day."

"Indeed," Helen agreed. She seemed to be watching Cassandra a little too closely.

Was something the matter? Or did Helen not like him?

Why would she not? He'd tried very hard to give Cassandra anything she could want—not simply material goods, but attention, affection, appreciation, admiration. He could hardly imagine refusing anything she asked that was in his power to give. In fact, he tried not to wait for her to ask.

He opened his mouth to express that affection, but caught sight of Helen's disapproval again. "Is something the matter?" he asked her instead.

"Oh, no, not at all." She dismissed him with a light tone. Perhaps a little too light.

Cassandra snuck a glance at her sister between bites, then turned to David. "*Je te dirai plus tard*," she murmured. They'd found that few colonists spoke French, but the secret message

did not reassure him. She'd tell him later? Tell him what?

“Je parle aussi français, chère,” Helen reminded her sister. Of course she also spoke French. There would be no secrets shared at this table, then.

“I haven't forgotten.” Cassandra smiled as if that could smooth over the tension beginning to creep into the conversation. “Aren't these carrots perfectly cooked?”

David agreed, allowing her to change the subject. They shared the stories of his last failed cooks, and he tried not to be too chagrined as even Helen joined in their laughter. Would Helen think he wasn't a suitable match for her sister if he couldn't seem to find a cook to produce anything edible?

Westing added delicate, lofty rolls with a perfect crust to the table, and to David's relief, conversation lapsed while they ate. This was certainly leagues better than the second cook, who'd tried to pass off an old, stale loaf as her own. He wasn't sure whether the bad bread or the fact that she would want to claim such a thing was worst.

As if the first course were not enough, the second course featured a perfectly spiced pudding as well as an almond tart.

“Do you remember the pudding that Cavan woman served?” Cassandra asked.

David couldn't help a laugh. It had been long enough since his first cook that he could finally see the humor in someone who purported to make a living preparing food but couldn't seem to taste the difference between salt and flour. “It was like trying to eat a solid block of burned salt.”

“It wasn't that bad,” Helen said. She'd been there that day? Perhaps so. “Nothing could be as bad as the food on the ship.”

The three of them groaned in unison. “Only the city of Philadelphia being leveled would be enough to force me to endure weeks of hard tack again,” David vowed.

“Even then.” Cassandra shook her head. “There would

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have to be somewhere else in the colonies we could live.”

We? David beamed at her. Was she as sure as he was about their future? Then he'd hardly have to ask. Perhaps he should just go speak to the rector.

Well, no, he would have to at least make sure she had everything she might need.

On the other hand, he'd be more than happy to provide whatever bride clothes she could dream up.

“Oh, dearest.” Cassandra set aside her fork after her last bite of tart. She was the first to finish. “I just remembered Westing said you found my copy of *Tom Jones*. He said it was in your study?”

What was she talking about? Cassandra lifted her eyebrows and tipped her chin down ever so slightly as if trying to lead him along to the right conclusion.

It wasn't working. “Did you want me to . . . look for it?”

“Oh, I'm sure he's put it somewhere I'll find it instantly. If you'll excuse me.”

David nodded, of course. Was Cassandra intending to leave him with Helen? Or did she wish for him to help her find this book? Had she ever brought a book over? They'd certainly spent some lovely afternoons reading together, but both Cassandra and her sister had only been able to bring a few volumes with them from England.

Cassandra stood and scrutinized him a moment. He tried to smile, but he really didn't know what she was hoping for from him. Did she want a copy of *Tom Jones* of her own? To borrow his copy?

“If I'm not back in a moment, I may need some assistance,” Cassandra said. For the briefest second, her eyes darted to her sister, still eating her tart. Then Cassandra nodded subtly toward the study.

Oh—oh! “Yes, of course, my love,” David said. As soon as

she was out of the room, he cut the last portion of his pudding into two bites to finish quickly.

Perhaps he could ask her now.

“David.” Helen broke into his thoughts and he looked to her, fork halfway to his mouth.

“Yes?”

“Do you wish to marry my sister?”

He laughed. He hardly wished to speak with Helen about that before he’d spoken to Cassandra. “Why, did she say something?”

“Not directly.” Helen shifted in her seat and focused on her almost untouched tart. “Please understand that we neither of us have a dowry to speak of. We could never ask Uncle Josiah to provide one for us, not with five daughters of his own.”

David arched one eyebrow. “What on earth would I do with a dowry from your uncle?”

“I know—we know you have no need of . . . anything, really. But . . .” Helen sighed. “It seems as though there’s ever more for us to lose this last year or so.”

Cassandra was just as affected by their father’s death, and obviously losing their home had forced them onto the ship that had carried all three of them here. But David hadn’t realized they’d been left completely destitute.

He should have, naturally. The Croftons scarcely had a shilling between them when they’d arrived. But they hadn’t even a small dowry? What would Helen do when she found someone to marry?

Perhaps she’d let him offer a dowry? It was the least he could do.

“I hope you understand,” Helen said.

Wait. Had Cassandra left on purpose to allow Helen to tell him this?

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Did she think that would stop him from marrying her? Did Helen?

Then they knew him very little.

“Thank you for the information. It appears Cassandra can’t find her book. Please excuse me.”

Helen gave her leave, and David headed to his study to steal a moment with Cassandra. The sooner he could take her into his home, the better.

It really was only a matter of how soon.



Cassandra tried not to tap her foot. What was taking David so long? He had to realize the only copy of *Tom Jones* she’d read this year had come directly from his bookshelves.

All she wanted was a little time to properly greet him away from Helen’s gaze. Did he not want a moment to themselves?

Finally, the door opened and David stepped in. Cassandra waited until he closed the door most of the way behind him before she approached.

She couldn’t interpret his expression, but he took her in his arms without hesitation. “Is all well?” she asked.

“Perfectly.”

She slid her arms around his neck and drew him closer. He lowered his lips to hers, finally greeting her with the kiss she’d expected. She pulled him closer, breaking the kiss just long enough to whisper, “Good afternoon.”

“How do you do?” David kissed her again.

“Better at every moment.” She traced her fingers down the line of his jaw, drawing him in for another kiss, sweet and slow. Finally, whatever tension had held David back eased

and he took the kiss deeper.

Until something stirred outside the room. They both looked to the door, but no one appeared. David gave her a sheepish smile and took her hand and kissed it. "Come," he said, "let's find this book of yours."

"Dearest." She attempted to tug him back into an embrace, but he didn't yield. "That was a pretext."

He laughed and led her to his desk. "I see." He took the seat behind his desk, and Cassandra settled on his knee.

David opened a drawer of the desk and pulled out an almanac. He shifted Cassandra closer to open the book with both hands, and she leaned against his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. She traced the daffodils embroidered on his waistcoat up to his shirt ruffle before he caught her hand. She looked up to him. He was so close to her that there was no choice but to kiss him again.

"You're trying to distract me."

"I'm not trying," she protested between kisses. "But I might be succeeding."

David laughed and Cassandra settled back against his shoulder again. He kissed her forehead and flipped to a specific page of the almanac: a calendar of 1770.

"Apologies. Did I distract you so much you forgot the date?" Cassandra teased.

"No, my love. I was simply thinking about marrying."

She looked at him, but he looked at the book. "Marrying?"

"To my mind," he said, "it isn't a question of if, it's a question of when."

Cassandra sat up, pushing away from him. Was he serious? She nearly laughed, but when he finally met her eyes, David's blue eyes held perfect sincerity.

Of all the presumptuous—"Rest assured, my love, it's a question of if."

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Shock wiped any shadow of a smile from David's face, replacing it with surprise. "Oh." He snapped the almanac shut. "I see." He replaced it in the drawer and slid it closed.

Oh—she hadn't meant to hurt him. Before Cassandra could reassure him he need only ask, a knock sounded at the door. "Westing," David murmured. "Enter," he called. Was it her imagination, or was he trying a little too hard to appear as highborn and unaffected as ever?

Rather than Westing, Helen stepped in. Cassandra jumped to her feet.

"I'm sorry," Helen said, "but Aunt Anne did want us to come home after dinner. We have to determine what we'll need as far as a winter wardrobe."

Cassandra nodded, glancing back at David. She had no desire to leave, and she definitely didn't wish to part without explaining herself.

She'd hoped—she'd barely dared to hope—that David might be thinking of marriage. She just hadn't expected him to bring up the subject in those terms, presuming she had already accepted like some sort of a swooning simpleton.

It wasn't too much to expect a man—even one who'd been born noble—to actually ask a woman to marry him, was it? She was not another fawning servant to do his bidding. David knew that. Didn't he?

"Would you care to accompany us?" Cassandra ventured.

His mouth worked a moment before he found words. "I'm afraid I won't be of much assistance in telling you what this clime will require in the coming months. Unless you wished for me to provide that winter wardrobe."

Cassandra would have thought that was another attempt to presume she'd already accepted his proposal or possibly a jest, but David actually appeared a little indignant with his brows lifted that way.

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First, she'd rebuffed his proposal—if that counted as a proposal—and now somehow she'd made him think she only cared for his purse? “I meant for you to escort us home, so I can spend a little more time with you.”

He appeared to be searching his desk for an excuse, so Cassandra turned to block more of his view and held out a hand. “Please, my love?”

David took her hand. “Anything for you.”

He stood and she presented her lips for a kiss. He obliged her, perfunctorily, and escorted them the mile home. David participated in the light conversation—the lovely fall weather, what winter in the colonies might bring, how Helen's newest dress was coming at the mantua maker's. David was likely only interested in that because he was paying for it.

Perhaps it wasn't so unbelievable that he might feel she was taking advantage of him. Perhaps he meant for them to turn down his generous, repeated offers.

Cassandra tried to signal to Helen to give them some space, but her sister seemed to miss all her attempts. At the Hayes house, David bowed to them at the front steps.

She couldn't let him walk away under all these misunderstandings. “Won't you come in?” she invited.

“As I said, I'm afraid I'm little help in this discussion.”

“Yes, but oughtn't you determine what you might need for the winter?”

“Westing or Josiah Hayes would likely be better able to advise me, don't you think?”

She conceded that point. “Could I please just speak with you for a moment?”

David straightened and he nodded, quick and sharp. He followed Cassandra and Helen into the house.

“Oh good!” Temperance greeted them in the entryway.

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“They’re back!” she called, as if their arrival would calm some panic. They hadn’t been gone that long, had they?

“Come quickly.” Temperance seized hold of Cassandra’s arm. “Mercy’s turned her ankle and we’re all hopeless at bandaging it.”

Cassandra glanced back at David, who signaled for her to proceed. “I’ll be back shortly,” she promised. “I need to ask you something.”

Surely they could talk through this. Couldn’t they?



David wanted to be anywhere but here. Whatever Cassandra wanted to ask him after the disaster in his study, it couldn’t be good.

As soon as Cassandra left the entryway, Helen turned to him. “I’m very sorry, but I’m afraid I might have overheard a bit much at your apartment.”

He swallowed a groan. It could, apparently, get worse.

“You still wish to marry Cassandra?”

“Of course, but my wishes are not the only ones required for that.”

Helen cocked her head. “Did you want my permission? Uncle Josiah’s?”

“No.” Although hadn’t this woman just tried to warn him off asking?

“Then I suggest you ask again—no, I mean *actually* ask.”

David started to argue back, but stopped short. Hadn’t he asked?

Not really, no.

Helen swept from the entryway. That was certainly surprising. He would have assumed she didn’t want him as a

brother-in-law, but if she were encouraging him . . .

David only had a moment to contemplate that possibility before Cassandra returned. “How is your patient?” he asked.

“She’ll be well within a week, but it certainly hurts now.”

David offered a grimace, but when Cassandra took his hand, his grimace was more for himself. What did she wish to ask him?

Should he really ask her again?

“David.” Cassandra stared at his hand in hers.

This couldn’t be good.

“Do you feel taken advantage of?”

What? That wasn’t what he was expecting. That didn’t even make sense. “Dearest?”

“That . . . I’m using you for your purse.”

“No—why, are you?” He tried very hard to infuse humor into his tone.

She laughed, but it was not the laugh of relief.

“Cassandra.” He took her other hand. “I would be more than happy to provide everything for you. Everything I can, at least.”

She met his eyes and a true smile finally lit her eyes.

Was he really trusting Helen?

Did he have a choice?

“I love you,” he said. “I can only hope I’ve made you even half as happy as you’ve made me.”

“Oh, you have,” Cassandra said, beaming. “Happier, no doubt, since you never vex me the way I do you.”

“Oh, I’m certain I do.”

He couldn’t ignore the sickening swell in his stomach. This was precisely why he hadn’t asked directly earlier. What if she said no? His mutinying middle threatened to rid him of his delightful dinner, quite like the pitching of the ship had done months ago.

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That ship had brought them here, together, though. Perhaps it was a good omen after all.

David took a deep breath. “Cassandra Isabelle Artemis Crofton, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? And spending every penny as you wish?”

She laughed. “A thousand times yes, Lord David Beaufort.”

He cringed a little to hear the old title he’d known so long. “A thousand times the pennies you wish?” he teased her, pulling her closer.

“Well, if that’s what *you* wish.”

“A trillion times.” David leaned in to kiss her, but Cassandra stopped him.

“Yes, but when?” she asked.

He leveled her with a mock-glare. “As soon as possible, and every day for the rest of our lives.”

“A trillion pennies a day?” Cassandra shrugged. “As you wish, my love.”

David laughed and kissed her at last. She did wish to marry him after all, and they would be married very soon, and for the rest of their lives.

The End