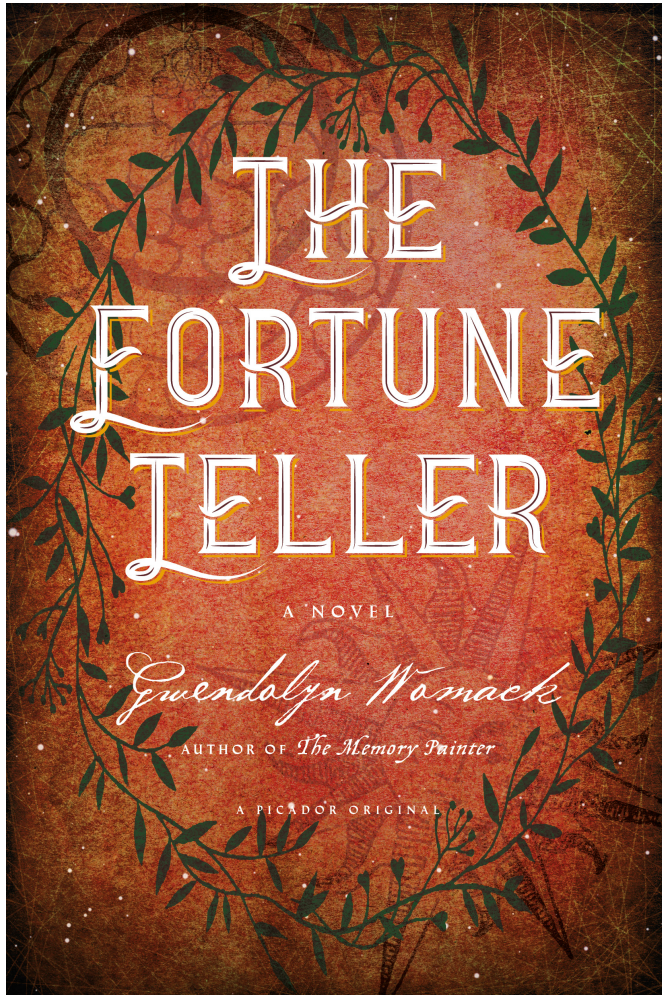


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Gwendolyn Womack's *The Fortune Teller*



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“What a mesmerizing journey. The suspense increases steadily throughout the novel, as Semele realizes her identity is caught up in the mysterious manuscript and that the truth of her own abilities is a secret people will kill for. Readers who enjoy the novels of Katherine Neville, Kate Mosse, and Diana Gabaldon will savor this treat.”

—NANCY BILYEAU, AUTHOR OF *THE CROWN*

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The Fool

The fireplace stood like a sentry in the room. Embers crackled and popped behind the grate, breaking the silence, and a log fell forward in a rain of sparks.

The flames bent and bloomed, spreading out their warmth, but Marcel could feel only coldness. His heart slowed and beat out of time, making each breath more difficult to take.

The glass of cognac slipped from his hand and tumbled across the carpet.

Unable to call out from his chair in the study, he looked toward the door and gripped his arm. The muscles of his heart closed tightly like a fist and squeezed until his body began to tremor.

Panic consumed him as his mind rode the pain to its pinnacle. He needed to tell Theo he had found her. He needed to tell Theo what to do—to warn him the manuscript was no longer safe.

He slid from his chair and tried to crawl to the phone at his desk. With a gasp, he rolled to his side and stared up at the framed photographs on the wall. His family looked down on him like angels.

Had he failed them?

His wife gazed at him with eyes full of peace. She had already made this journey. Three years ago he had watched her die—three long years. She would be waiting for him on the other side.

The certainty calmed him.

Relinquishing his last hold on life, his eyes glazed over and settled back onto the fire. His spirit departed like a thousand collapsing stars, leaving all his thoughts, all his secrets to burn away like paper.

The Magician

Semele was struck with *déjà vu* when she read Marcel Bossard's commemorative piece in *Art Conservator*, and the feeling wouldn't let her go.

She had never met Marcel Bossard personally, but she knew all about him. She knew his collection's history, the works that made up the collection, and over the years she'd tracked his pieces as they were donated or sold internationally.

Marcel had collected for the love of preserving history's fragile remnants. Now Semele was en route to his estate in Switzerland to place his treasures in the hands of people who could preserve them just as well.

On the plane ride from New York, she read countless articles and tributes she'd gathered over the past weeks. Only twenty individuals in the world had private collections like Marcel Bossard's, galleries that could be mistaken for rare manuscript museums, and his death last month had garnered a lot of media attention.

In the Manuscript Society's quarterly journal, there was an extensive piece on him titled "Marcel Bossard: A Personal History." It described him as the "last of the great collectors," a "Man of Letters," and "the epitome of grace and culture."

Fine Books & Collections magazine put him on the cover and included a four-page biographical piece celebrating his life. The photographer had taken a picture of him in his study at his château near Montreux. Marcel stood tall and elegant, a striking figure in a three-piece suit. An antique pocket watch dangled

from his waist, and he held a bowler hat in his hand. His sandy brown hair and old-fashioned mustache made him look straight out of a saloon, and the mischievous laughter lurking in his eyes said he knew it.

From what Semele could gather, Marcel was a private man and quite eccentric. He was born into the family that owned Bossard & Vogle, one of Switzerland's oldest and most prestigious private banks dating back to the eighteenth century. He had remained at its helm until his death.

When the president of Semele's firm chose her to appraise and dismantle the Bossard Collection, her mouth had dropped open—not with surprise that she was going, but because she'd always hoped that one day she would. There were only a handful of appraisers qualified to oversee his collection, and Semele had spent years striving to be one of them.

From the moment Mikhail gave her the assignment to board the flight to Geneva, she could barely work or eat or sleep from the excitement. She couldn't help feeling that her whole career, everything she had worked toward, had been for this moment. The honor and responsibility was staggering.

Her anticipation heightened when the Bossards' driver met her at the airport and drove her straight to Marcel's château instead of her hotel. As they turned up the long drive and climbed the tree-lined slope toward a manor house, she caught herself biting her thumbnail and dropped her hand back into her lap. The estate looked like a Renaissance castle perched high on a hill.

In a few minutes she would be meeting her client, Marcel's only child, Theo Bossard. She didn't know much about him except that he was Marcel's only living relative and the heir to his estate. Theo had requested his father's entire collection be disbanded, not wanting to keep even one piece, a directive Semele found hard to fathom.

The driver parked and hurried to escort her from the car. She smoothed her hair and skirt when she stepped out, glad she had

instinctively dressed for the meeting. Her vintage ribbed-knit dress and pillbox black jacket looked elegant yet comfortable. It would have to do.

The estate attorney, a stylish Swiss woman in her late forties, answered the door.

“Ms. Cawnow, so good of you to come,” the woman said, clasping both of Semele’s hands as if she were a friend.

“Thank you. The honor’s mine.” Semele stepped inside, momentarily feeling like Alice in the Looking Glass transported to a different world. It wasn’t the grandeur that was unsettling so much as the feeling that she had been there before, as though she had buried a time capsule and suddenly rediscovered it.

Her feet felt like they were floating as she crossed the foyer; the black-and-white Art Deco marble drew her eyes. The entry hall was downright operatic and had more square footage than her apartment back in Brooklyn. It rose three stories high with a spiraling staircase that announced itself on a high C from the front door.

She crossed the hall and walked under a carved archway to the living room, where she was greeted with a breathtaking view. A wall of glass windows framed the distant Alps, and sofas divided the room geometrically. The space reminded her of a cozy ski lodge with its earth tones and leather—there was even a roaring fire in the stone fireplace.

Theo Bossard stood in front of the mantel. He was staring at the fire with his back to the door.

When Semele entered he turned around. She stopped walking, struck by the force of him. She fought to push the sensation away—the same *déjà vu* she’d had on the plane ride, only now it was stronger.

The feeling that they had met—would meet—vibrated at her core. Somehow she already knew this moment, down to the last detail: Theo, in his cashmere sweater; the way he stood; the way he emanated poise; his black hair and amber eyes, which added to the austere air surrounding him.

When their gazes met, she tugged at her jacket, self-consciously pulling it around her. “My condolences on your father’s passing,” she offered, finding her voice.

Theo inclined his head, seeming to see straight through her carefully crafted persona, the expert manuscript appraiser, only thirty-two, remarkably young for her achievements. She dressed in high-fashion vintage, wore only mascara and lipstick, and sported a sleek Ziegfeld bob that looked straight from the twenties.

Theo Bossard should have been charmed, been charming—given her a smile, a handshake, a welcoming gesture—but instead he looked at her with an unsettling seriousness, as if he had something important to say. The whole encounter left her unbalanced.

“Thank you, Semele,” he murmured in a voice so soft she barely heard him at all. Then he said nothing more the entire meeting.

If their introduction seemed odd, the attorney was happy to fill the silence. She launched into a monologue about the expectations of the estate, though she had already discussed the details with Semele over the phone.

“We’ve reserved you a room at the Grand Hôtel Suisse Majestic, right across from Lake Geneva,” the attorney explained. “The family driver will pick you up in the mornings; the château’s chef can prepare your meals. . . .”

Semele could barely focus on what the woman was saying—she was too distracted by Theo. He was trailing several steps behind, keeping his gaze on her the entire time. Never had she been so unnerved by someone.

They headed to the room that housed the collection. Marcel Bossard had a special gallery situated off the main library, cloistered off from the rest of the estate.

Semele stepped inside and momentarily held her breath.

The enormous wood-paneled room contained every scroll, book, manuscript, and codex of the collection. A high-tech sys-

tem controlled the temperature, humidity, and lighting, and all the works were locked away in electronic glass cases.

The attorney handed Semele several keys along with the codes to deactivate the security system, so she could come and go as needed.

“Four times a year a conservator from Geneva’s Rath Museum comes to inspect the works for any damage and readjust the temperature settings,” the woman explained, giving Semele a crisp nod. “Marcel took every precaution to protect his investment.”

“Very impressive.” Semele agreed.

She glanced at Theo and gave him an encouraging smile that he didn’t reciprocate. He continued staring at her with unwavering intensity. She cleared her throat and turned away, deciding it would be best to ignore him.



When Semele arrived at the château the next day, she was filled with jittery nerves at the thought of seeing Theo again. Eager for a distraction, she spent long hours holed up in the gallery, appraising each piece and deciding its fate.

Most of the Bossard collection spanned from around A.D. 300 to the end of the Renaissance. She also cataloged twenty significant works from Classical Antiquity.

The collection included gospel books illuminated with pictures so stunning they looked like stained glass brought to life, scrolls of parchment detailing Roman battles, letters written by St. Augustine in A.D. 412, and a pristine collection of Greek manuscripts on botany, zoology, astrology, and astronomy from about A.D. 350. There was also a Bible embellished in twenty-four-karat gold from Constantinople, but the most jaw-dropping piece was an original *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* from the 1400s, the first book ever printed in the English language. Only eighteen copies existed.

Semele was already looking ahead to the work she would need

to do once she got back home. This was going to be the auction of the year, if not the decade. Her firm would hold a sale in New York for the most valuable pieces, and she would create smaller collections to donate to a select list of libraries and museums. The three weeks she had in Switzerland were barely enough time to sort everything out.

Each afternoon Theo would step into the gallery and ask, “Everything going well, Semele?” to which she would answer, “Quite well, thank you.”

They would then stare at each other for a suspended moment, the air charged between them. Theo would eventually give her a slight nod and leave.

In her hotel room she would think about that day’s encounter, reading more into their almost-conversations—the way he studied her, how he said her name—with each passing day. Then she would force herself to dismiss it all and try to sleep. She would lie restless in bed until she drifted off, unable to stop herself from imagining their next meeting.

In the morning, she found herself taking extra care with her appearance, to the point where every stroke of mascara felt like a guilty thought. She chose siren-red lipstick instead of her typical soft sienna, and wore her lavender angora sweater more times than not, knowing its feminine lines flattered her figure. She would turn from side to side in the mirror with critical precision, until the act of dressing for that single exchange with Theo began to feel like an infidelity to her boyfriend, Bren, back home.

Maybe she had acted the same way when getting ready for her first string of dates with Bren, but she couldn’t remember her appearance ever having mattered this much. That’s what bothered her the most. She wanted Theo to find her attractive.

Every day she tried not to look at the clock and wonder when he would stop by. She tried reasoning with herself. The château, its romanticism, and its eccentric owner were simply cloud-

ing her judgment. She enjoyed a good gothic novel as much as the next person, but that was not her real life.



One day Theo stayed longer. He looked as if he was about to leave, but instead he stopped at the door and turned back to her, his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

“You know, I met your father once,” he said.

Semele stared at him, speechless. That was the last thing she thought he would say.

Theo must have sensed her confusion. “At one of the World Book summits years ago,” he clarified. “He was keynote speaker for the International Federation of Library Associations. I had just begun working with UNESCO.”

Semele had no idea Theo was connected to UNESCO. “What kind of work were you doing for them?” she asked.

“I head one of the subcommittees that assesses nominations for the Memory of the World Register.”

She couldn’t have been more surprised if he had told her he was an astronaut and had landed on the moon.

Her father had been a curator at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, and she knew all about UNESCO’s global conservation programs, including MOW nominations. Memory of the World was an international initiative to preserve archives and library collections that transcended the boundaries of culture. Being listed on the register was just as impressive as getting a National Historic Site designation and ensured that those works would survive.

“He gave a wonderful speech about the history of the world’s libraries and their effects on different time periods.” Theo gave her his first real smile.

Semele couldn’t help giving a faint smile back. She could just imagine her father talking about his favorite subject. How every second a book somewhere in the world disappeared,

destroyed by the divine hand of time for any number of reasons—natural disasters, worms, insects, rats, humans. Even the acid in paper worked against a book’s survival. It drove him mad.

“Well,” Theo said, looking uncomfortable, “please give him my best.”

Semele only nodded, unable to explain that her father had passed away earlier this year. The loss still gripped her like it was yesterday. She and Theo had more in common than he knew. That he had met her father made her look at him differently.

When she went back to the hotel that night, she decided to google Theo. What she discovered surprised her even more.

Theo owned a computer software company that specialized in storing high-value information. His client list included Fortune 500 companies and government institutions. They were also working with the Japanese IT specialists who were archiving the Vatican’s library—over 82,000 manuscripts and 41 million pages.

She read every news article and press release she could find, both impressed and intimidated at the same time. Talk about out of her league—the pope was his client.

In one interview he discussed the vital need for engineering long-term digital preservation, explaining that the digital world had its own set of threats and needed to be safeguarded, or one day, digital archives would vanish too. Files were no different from papyrus or parchment.

Semele devoured every word. Astounded by how similar their philosophies were, her attraction to him only became more real and unsettling. She liked it better when she had assumed he was just an eccentric heir.

Now she was beginning to feel serious guilt over her fixation. People in relationships didn’t spend all night on the Internet reading about their clients for personal interest, especially not when they were in a relationship with someone like Bren.

While she was in Switzerland, he had been leaving her the sweetest voice mails. She had listened to one yesterday on the drive to the estate, and it still made her smile.

“This one is Yeats.” He recited the poem, his voice soft and intimate. “*When you are old and grey and full of sleep, and nodding by the fire, take down this book, and slowly read and dream. . .*”

But the car had started to pull up the drive and she’d saved the message, promising herself she would listen to the rest later. With a pang of guilt, she realized she hadn’t finished it yet, or the two others he’d left her.

Even when she wasn’t traveling he liked to leave her poems, from classical to contemporary to his own creations. Bren was an English professor at CUNY, a published poet, and unapologetically sentimental. They had been together for almost two years—her longest relationship to date—and she had never thought twice about another man, until now.

She began to count down the days until she left Montreux. It would be a relief to put an ocean between her and Theo. During her last week, she would wake up and sit outside on her hotel balcony, feeling the future looming across the lake, imminent and inescapable. Something was going to happen here. She could feel it. And she had no idea if she was ready.



When the last day of her assignment finally arrived, anticipation tightened inside her like a coil ready to snap. She awoke early that morning, unable to sleep, and arrived at the château two hours before her usual start time, to finish preparing all the shipments and review the letters of export.

A deep sense of melancholy hit her as she sealed the crates. Marcel had devoted his whole life to preserving these antiquities, and now they would never reside under his roof again. Disbanding a collection sometimes felt like lowering the curtain on closing night; it had to be the hardest part of her job. She only hoped that Marcel would approve of her decisions if he were still alive.

For a moment she gave in to the sadness and sat down, staring at all the crates. The longer she sat there, the more uneasy she began to feel that she’d missed something.

She got up and double-checked the official collection registry against her shipping schedules. Then she looked in all the display cases to make sure nothing had been left behind. Every item was accounted for and ready for transport. Still, anxiety consumed her.

Somehow she knew she had made a mistake.

She told herself the feeling was normal, nothing more than the stress of having to ship priceless manuscripts halfway around the world. But as hard as she tried to calm her nerves, she wouldn't rest easy until she had checked all the rosters again. Luckily, it was still morning; she had plenty of time. She would review the shipments after she had a quick coffee in the kitchen. Perhaps the chef had even made some of his fresh-baked *bürli* and marmalade. She hadn't eaten anything yet today.

When she went to set the security alarm in the gallery, her eyes landed on the wooden cabinet underneath the examination table.

Her hand stilled on the keypad.

She had never looked inside, assuming the cabinet held supplies, but it had been catching her eye all week.

She knelt down and opened the door to find an industrial safe bolted to the ground. The cabinet was just a decorative cover. It was steel-gauge with two electronic keypad locks. She tried using the gallery security codes, not sure if they would work.

To her surprise, they did, and her excitement skyrocketed. She opened the door to find only one object inside, a thick leather-bound book wrapped in linen. Goose bumps ran down her arms.

She brought the heavy book to the examining table and unwrapped the fabric to unveil a glorious codex.

"Oh my God," she whispered. The hairs on her arms rose and the silence in the room magnified. Even the air turned electric. The years this artifact had weathered seemed to radiate from it, hovering like a band of energy.

In her years of appraising she had come to understand that, sometimes, collectors kept secrets. She had just found Marcel's.

She hurried to the bathroom to wash her hands so she could touch the parchment without damaging the pages. She returned, now completely in the zone, and opened the cover with hands like a surgeon's.

When she saw the writing, her body had a visceral reaction. The penmanship was exquisite, a treasure in and of itself. The carbon-black ink remained rich and unfaded, and the script stood out from the parchment with a strength untarnished by the years.

Engraved on the first parchment leaf were four words in flowing ancient Greek script. She began to translate:

My Chronicles Through Time

The symbols resembled works of art. What was this exquisite work, and why wasn't it in the collection's registry?

Semele turned over the first leaf and gasped.

A piece of stationery was wedged between the leaves. Slowly, she removed the paper, wondering who on earth could have been so careless.

Her heart stopped when she read the note:

Semele,

Tell no one what you find written in these pages.

Translate the words and you will understand.

You can trust no one now.

Marcel

Semele felt as if she'd been touched by a ghost. She reread the note over and over in disbelief. Marcel Bossard had written to her—which was impossible. The man had died before his estate ever contacted her firm.

How had he known her name?