

#1 *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

"Weaves together ancient Greek myth with suspenseful mystery and beguiling romance. . . . Utterly irresistible." —JENNIFER SAINT, author of *Ariadne*



PANDORA



SUSAN STOKES-CHAPMAN



PANDORA

Written by

SUSAN STOKES-CHAPMAN

A Novel in **THREE PARTS**



VINTAGE

Contents

PROLOGUE

LOCATION SETTING

PART I.

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PART II.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE
CHAPTER THIRTY
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

PART III.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT
CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE
CHAPTER FORTY
CHAPTER FORTY-ONE
CHAPTER FORTY-TWO
CHAPTER FORTY-THREE
CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR
CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX
CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

LOCATION SETTING

LETTER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE
CHAPTER THIRTY
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

PART III.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT
CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE
CHAPTER FORTY
CHAPTER FORTY-ONE
CHAPTER FORTY-TWO
CHAPTER FORTY-THREE
CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR
CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX
CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

LOCATION SETTING

LETTER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

About the Author

Susan Stokes-Chapman was born in 1985 and grew up in the historic Georgian city of Lichfield, Staffordshire. She studied for four years at Aberystwyth University, graduating with a BA in Education & English Literature and an MA in Creative Writing. Her debut novel, *Pandora*, was shortlisted for the Lucy Cavendish Fiction prize 2020 as well as longlisted for the Bath Novel Award that same year. You can find Susan on Instagram and Twitter under the handle @SStokesChapman. Her website is www.susanstokeschapman.com.

About the Author

Susan Stokes-Chapman was born in 1985 and grew up in the historic Georgian city of Lichfield, Staffordshire. She studied for four years at Aberystwyth University, graduating with a BA in Education & English Literature and an MA in Creative Writing. Her debut novel, *Pandora*, was shortlisted for the Lucy Cavendish Fiction prize 2020 as well as longlisted for the Bath Novel Award that same year. You can find Susan on Instagram and Twitter under the handle @SStokesChapman. Her website is www.susanstokeschapman.com.

For J

For J

*But he that once embarks, too surely finds
A sullen Sky, black Storms, and angry Winds.
Cares, Fears, and Anguish, hov'ring on the Coast,
And Wrecks of Wretches by their Folly lost.*

SAMUEL GARTH

*Dedication to Richard, Earl of Burlington
in translated edition of Ovid's Art of Love (1709)*

*But he that once embarks, too surely finds
A sullen Sky, black Storms, and angry Winds.
Cares, Fears, and Anguish, hov'ring on the Coast,
And Wrecks of Wretches by their Folly lost.*

SAMUEL GARTH

*Dedication to Richard, Earl of Burlington
in translated edition of Ovid's Art of Love (1709)*

Samson, The Scilly Isles December 1798

He had not allowed for the weight. The cold he anticipated, the water's sluggish buoyancy, this too he considered. The darkness? The lantern does well enough, and his memory allows for shortfalls in sight. But the weight ... this is something else altogether.

The lantern itself is manageable. It is bound to his wrist with thick twine, affording movement in both hands, but it pulls down uncomfortably on his arm and the salt water stings where the twine has already rubbed the skin. The ropes looped under each armpit – one for the salvage, one to raise him again – are cumbersome, but they help balance his body as he descends. The sinking weights, too, although bulky, can be endured.

The problem is the harness. Strong tin plate. Domed and airy around his head, further down it constricts his torso like an unforgiving corset. On deck it did not feel so heavy. Below the surface, however, the restrictive leather suit, the iron hoop skeleton that pinches meanly, together with the pressure of water and the winter currents ... He will demand more money once the job is done.

Luck has been with him so far this night. The sky's inky cradle is starred, the moon full and fat. During the storm he took careful note of his surroundings – the ship finally succumbed on the shoals of two small islands separated by an isthmus, their inlands pitted with stone ruins. In the moonlight these ruins shone white, a beacon for their small sailboat, and despite the December squalls the ship's starboard beam end is still visible above the waves. No, the wreck was not difficult to find.

So why is it he feels he has been led here?

Thankfully the ship rests in the shallows. He has not used this apparatus before and will not venture any deeper than he must. Twenty feet below the surface. No danger there, he tells himself. And he knows exactly where to look. Under careful instruction the object he seeks was safely hidden within the starboard bow, away from the other shipments tightly packed in the hold, but the ship broke apart in the storm; he hopes his luck stays true.

that the crate has not strayed too far along the seabed, that no one else has managed to retrieve it.

The icy water needles his legs and arms. Cocooned in the heavy suit he descends further, breathing with effort, tasting the sharp taint of metal. The air pipes leading from the harness to the surface are long, and he imagines them stretching behind him like a hangman's rope. He holds the lantern in front of his body, looks through the eyeglass of the harness dome, relieved to see the shadow of the ship's ribs. Down he goes, then, searching, squinting into the murk. He thinks he hears a sound below him, something low and plaintive. He tilts his head, feels his ears pop, continues on.

His feet land. Beneath them, shifting grit. He angles his head and tries to look down. But carefully. Too sudden a movement, he was warned, and the water will seep through the harness. Slowly, yes, slowly. There. The corner of something. Using the ball of his foot he pushes himself off, back into the current. Then he sinks again, making contact with the seabed, raising the lantern to eye level. Six feet or so from the ship's remains he just makes out the dark corners of a crate. The blood pulses loudly in his ears. This is it, he is sure. He edges slowly forward, puts one leg in front of him, then another, his feet dragging through the water. He jumps as something brushes against his shins, and lowering the lantern he watches seaweed dance around his calves.

The crate balances precariously on a large rock. He inches closer, raises the lantern again. The X he painted on its side when the ship left Palermo is clear, even in this deep aquatic dark. For a moment he marvels at how easy all this has been but then the lantern flickers and dips before flaring once again, and he knows that now is not the time to dawdle.

Releasing the twine from his wrist, he places the lantern between two hunks of wreckage so it will not turn up in the current, then unhooks one of the ropes from his arms and begins the painstaking task of securing the crate. He must be careful – there is no room for error – and the rock is a blessing it seems, for without it he would have struggled to lift the crate from the seabed at all. As he works small fish dash and dart about him. At one point he stops, strains to hear within the tin plates of the harness. Is that singing? No, it is the water sickness, it must be. Was he not told that staying under too long can be deadly?

But so soon?

He works fast now, as fast as he is able with the harness weighing him down. He wraps the rope around the crate four times and though his fingers are stiff with cold, he ties knots so tight the rope will need cutting free. When he is satisfied he pulls sharply on it – once, twice – signalling

to the surface. The length jumps, slackens, becomes taut. Then, triumphant, he watches the crate ascend in a cloud of billowing sand. He hears the muffled groan of wood, the sluggish surge of stirring water and, so quietly he believes he has imagined it, the soft, haunting, almost-whisper of a woman, sighing.

|

)

f

to the surface. The length jumps, slackens, becomes taut. Then, triumphant, he watches the crate ascend in a cloud of billowing sand. He hears the muffled groan of wood, the sluggish surge of stirring water and, so quietly he believes he has imagined it, the soft, haunting, almost-whisper of a woman, sighing.

London
January 1799

London
January 1799

PART I.

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

JOHN MILTON
Paradise Lost (1667)

PART I.

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

JOHN MILTON
Paradise Lost (1667)

CHAPTER ONE

Dora Blake has been hunched over her desk since dawn. The stool she sits on is too tall but she has become accustomed to its awkward height. Every now and then she lays down her pliers, removes her spectacles and pinches the bridge of her nose. Often she kneads the knots in her neck, stretches her back until she feels the pleasant crack of spine.

The attic room is north-facing and offers little light. In frustration Dora has moved her desk and stool beneath the small window for this is intricate work, and her lone candle is not fit for purpose. She shifts uncomfortably on the hard seat, replaces her spectacles and applies herself once more, doing her best to ignore the cold. The window is open at its widest, despite the New Year chill. Any moment she expects Hermes to return with a new treasure, something to crown this latest creation of hers, and she has opened his cage door in readiness, the remains of her stolen breakfast scattered beneath the perch to reward what she hopes will be a fruitful morning's hunt.

She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, angles the pliers against her thumb.

To replicate cannetille was ambitious of her but Dora is, if anything, an optimist. Some might call this optimism mere wilfulness, but she feels her ambition is justified. She knows – *knows* – she has a talent. She is positively convinced it will be recognised one day, that her designs will be worn all across the city. Perhaps, Dora muses, the corner of her mouth twitching as she eases a particularly tiny wire into place, across Europe. But then she shakes her head, tries to pluck her lofty dreams from the woodwormed beams above her and concentrate. It will not do to be distracted and ruin hours of work at the last hurdle.

Dora cuts another piece of wire from the roll hooked over a nail on the wall.

The beauty of cannetille is that it imitates fine lace. She has seen parure sets on display in Rundell & Bridge and marvelled at their intricate designs; a necklace, earrings, bracelet, brooch and tiara would have been the work of months. Briefly Dora had contemplated creating the matching