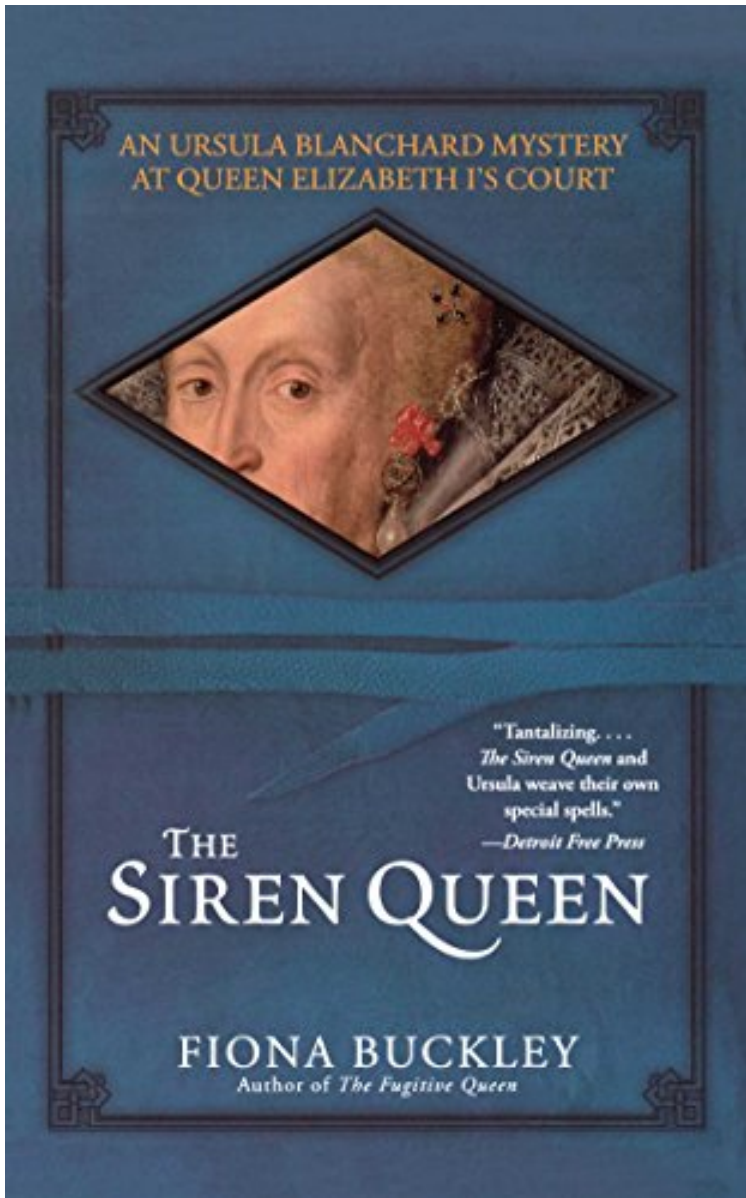


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The Siren Queen: An Ursula Blanchard Mystery at Queen Elizabeth I's



Par Fiona Buckley
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe year is 1569. Ursula Blanchard, illegitimate half sister to Queen Elizabeth I and sometime spy on the Queen's behalf, is happily married to wealthy Hugh Stannard and living quietly in the country. Ursula's thoughts are on domestic matters as she watches her daughter, Meg, grow up. Meg will soon be fourteen, so perhaps it is time to think of a betrothal. When an invitation to visit arrives from the powerful Duke of Norfolk, Ursula and Hugh welcome the chance for Meg to meet an apparently worthy

young man of the Duke's household, Edmund Dean. Is he a possible husband for Meg? It's love at first sight, at least on Meg's part. Young Dean seems to admire Meg as well, and he's even more impressed with her promised dowry. Ursula, though, has her doubts. Does she see something cruel in the man's eyes? Soon, more weighty matters demand Ursula's attention. Two men are dead under mysterious circumstances, and there may be a new plot to put Mary, Queen of Scots, on the English throne. A letter written in cipher may contain the information Ursula needs -- but can she decode the letter in time to save the half sister and Queen she loves? And what shattering personal discovery will the letter reveal? Surrounded by treachery, Ursula wonders whom she can trust. Is the great Duke of Norfolk himself part of the plot against Queen Elizabeth? And what about the young man who would marry Meg? With richly drawn characters and riveting historical accuracy, *The Siren Queen* sweeps us into a suspenseful and passionate re-creation of one of the most tumultuous and colorful eras of English history.

Extrait Chapter One: The Perils of Passion

There are many dangerous forces in this world of ours, not all of them obvious. The perils of fire, flood, and storm are plain enough, and ambitious men (or women), especially those with armies at their command, are visible menaces too. But there are influences far more subtle and far more charming that can create trouble just as surely. I wouldn't have got myself caught up in the tangled, deceptive, and frankly nasty events of 1569 but for the perilous nature of love. More than one kind of love was involved that year. There was the golden-hazy enchantment that Mary Stuart of Scotland was so good at engendering in the male sex, even in men she hadn't actually met. Her magic was so strong that it worked even across distance, through repute alone, and if Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, also saw her as a route to power, that didn't stop him from mislaying his wits in her aureate mist. When that happens to a man, you can't mistake the symptoms. I saw them for myself. And there was the commonplace but painful love between a girl and an undesirable suitor, and an improbable passion that an aging man suddenly developed for, of all people, my equally ancient and -- to me -- unprepossessing hanger-on Gladys Morgan. People in their seventies, infertile, rheumatically, and nearly toothless, can fall in love as thoroughly as any youth or maiden, and that old fellow did. That wasn't all. There was also a devoted, lifetime love; the total surrender of mind and body that a woman called Mistress Joan Thomson, who lived in Faldene village in Sussex and was a tenant of my uncle Herbert, had for her deceased husband, Will. If any one of those loves had been absent from the amorous chessboard, so much might have been different. One other kind of love was caught up in the matter, too. Mine -- my tenderness and my lifelong sorrow for my mother, who died when I was sixteen. She was Uncle Herbert's sister and she went to court as a young woman, to attend Queen Anne Boleyn, the second wife of King Henry the Eighth. When she came home again, she was with child by a man she wouldn't name. I, Ursula Faldene, was that child. My mother's parents were outraged but they took her in, and after their deaths, Uncle Herbert and his wife, Aunt Tabitha, though also scandalized, did their duty by us. I even received an education. But life in a constant atmosphere of disapproval wore my mother away. At the age of thirty-six, she died. I, having the vitality of youth, escaped -- by eloping with Gerald Blanchard, the young man who was betrothed to my cousin Mary, the daughter of Uncle Herbert and Aunt Tabitha. I went to Antwerp with Gerald and there our daughter, Meg, was born. As she grew up, she became more like him every day, with her dark hair and her square little chin -- and her intelligence. Gerald had worked for an English financier in Spanish-ruled Antwerp, and had helped him to divert a good deal of Spanish treasure into the holds of ships bound for England. For all his lovely smile and his absolute honesty in regard to me, he had been as cunning as a serpent when dealing with the Spanish. I lost Gerald to the smallpox and came home to England, to serve the queen at court. Later on, I went to France with my second husband, Matthew de la Roche, but while I was on a visit to England, I learned that he had died of plague. At length, I ventured on marriage a third time, with a man much older than myself, calm and reliable, and with Hugh Stannard, I found a tranquility I had never known before.

We had two homes: my own Withysham, only five miles from my family home at Faldene, and Hugh's house, Hawkswood, twenty miles away, over the Surrey border. When we were at Withysham, which was quite often, I always paid at least one visit to my Faldene relatives. Despite our difficult past (which was very difficult indeed, due to the fact that I had not only stolen my cousin Mary's intended husband but had once been responsible for getting Uncle Herbert arrested), I was now on fairly polite terms with my aunt and uncle. I had eventually canceled out their understandable grudges by trying to help them in a family crisis. I failed, but at least I had tried and they were stiffly grateful. I was also in favor at court, which gave me considerable social standing. Aunt Tabitha appreciated that. Now my visits were courteously received. But my real reason for going there was to visit my mother's grave. If I hadn't done so on that bright, mild April day in 1569 -- if, by the time I was thirty-four, I had

managed to lay my mother's memory to rest and leave her to the quiet grass and the robins and thrushes that haunted the churchyard -- then the events of that year would have been so different. Yes, indeed. Love is perilous, because it is so powerful. It moves mountains far more easily than faith ever did. It can kill, too. There was no special pattern about my visits to Faldene. Usually I went accompanied just by my manservant, Roger Brockley, with my maid, Fran Dale (she was Brockley's wife but I still called her Dale out of habit), perched on his pillion. Now and then, Sybil Jester, the good-humored widow who was my companion and helped me to educate Meg, came along as well. This time, though, we had been formally invited to dine at Faldene House. The elder son, Francis, had just come home from a diplomatic posting overseas, bringing his wife and two small boys. The dinner was to welcome them back. So Hugh and Meg had been asked as well, and all of us were arrayed in best clothes and clean ruffs. I was wearing one of the fashionable open ruffs, stiffened with a new kind of starch. Even Gladys had a well-brushed brown dress and a fresh holland ruff. For Gladys Morgan was also in my entourage along with Sybil and the Brockleys. She was on a quiet donkey because she was past managing most horses. I thought it wise to bring her. Gladys Morgan was an aging Welshwoman who had attached herself to me during a visit I had once made to the Welsh marches. In fact, Brockley and I between us had rescued her from a charge of witchcraft. Unfortunately, the reasons why Gladys had been suspected of witchcraft held good in England just as they had in Wales. She was a skinny, ill-tempered creature whose few remaining teeth were discolored fangs and she had lately developed a deplorable habit of loudly cursing people who annoyed her. Even Brockley, once her gallant defender, had come to detest her. In addition, she was skilled in herbal remedies, which annoyed almost any physician with whom she came into contact. She had made herself so disliked in Hawkswood that I had moved her permanently to Withysham, but now I feared that when it was time to go back to Hawkswood, Withysham wouldn't be safe for her either. The week before our visit to Faldene, she had had a particularly unpleasant passage of arms with the Withysham physician. He was a pompous individual who had come to me complaining that Gladys was intruding on his work, by which he meant stealing his patients. The real root of the trouble was that her potions usually worked better than his. I was secretly convinced that some of his were lethal and that one of his unintentional victims had been my daughter's old nurse, Bridget, who had died of a lung fever the previous winter, probably speeded on her way by his regime of bleeding and purges. Someone had warned Gladys that he was calling on me, and she had walked in on us and told him to say anything he wanted to say to her face instead of behind her back. He obliged; they quarreled stormily, and finally, she pointed the forefinger and little finger of her left hand at him and in her strong Welsh accent, issued an imaginative curse, expressing the hope, among other things, that his balls would wither and drop off. I fetched Hugh and he dealt with it in the usual way, with money. He bribed the physician to forget the incident, forbade Gladys to physic the Withysham villagers anymore, and then collapsed onto a settle, literally mopping his brow, while I sent Sybil for mulled wine and reprimanded Gladys so thoroughly that since then, she had behaved herself. I didn't trust her out of my sight, though. If I were going to spend the day at Faldene, so was she. Gladys was a great trial to me, and yet, in a curious way, I was fond of her. She would always be ugly, but over time, I had insisted that she should wash with reasonable frequency and wear the decent garments I gave her, and she was now no worse-looking than most women of her age. Also, when not in a temper, she had a tough, humorous outlook and a sparkle in her dark Welsh eyes, which had a certain charm, for those who knew her well enough to notice it. Indeed, if you really took the trouble to look at Gladys, you could see that she hadn't always been ugly. Beyond the nutcracker nose and chin were the remains of what had once been considerable beauty. Meg was quite attached to her and Gladys sometimes amused my daughter by telling her, in her singsong voice, stories of her youth in the Black Mountains of Wales, where she had often spent nights out on the mountainsides, guarding sheep and marveling at the stars. Gladys had once, with her potions, saved the life of my dear Fran Dale. Dale, honest Dale, with her prominent blue eyes and the pockmarks left by a long-ago attack of smallpox, had a tendency to take cold and a habit of complaining that she couldn't abide this or that but for all her faults she was the most loyal of servants. For Dale's sake alone, I was prepared to protect and harbor Gladys to the end of her days. Faldene and Withysham both lay on the northern edge of the Sussex downs. Faldene House was on a hillside, above the village and the church, which was said to date from Saxon times. Aunt Tabitha's note had asked us to come in good time, "for Francis is full of news and tales of Austria," so we set out as soon as we had broken our fast, and arrived early. My plan, indeed, was to be so prompt that I could make an unhurried visit to my mother's grave before we rode up to the house. The village people were about when we dismounted at the churchyard gate, but although smoke was rising from the chimney of the

vicar's thatched cottage opposite the gate, we saw no sign of the vicar himself. This was a relief, though we knew we would probably find him among the dinner guests at Faldene House. His name was Dr. Fleet and Hugh and I didn't like him. He was a stiff and rigid individual, recently married to a young wife for whom we felt decidedly sorry. He was the sort who keeps rules for their own sake and, as Hugh put it, "If he doesn't think the existing rules sufficient, he invents a few more. Tiresome man!" "Just like Aunt Tabitha!" I had said. We were happy to be spared his company now. There were small trees beside the churchyard, to which we tethered our mounts. Then we went in all together. The place was quiet, or so it seemed at first, until Brockley uttered an exclamation, and pointed. To the left of the path through the churchyard were a couple of new graves. One, indeed, was not yet occupied. It was freshly dug, with a pile of clods beside it.

The other was filled in, but clearly it was recent. For some reason, there seemed to be a pile of furs and blankets on top of it. Then Meg exclaimed: "Oh! It's a person!" and I saw that the pile contained a human being, and that a face was peering at us from amid the coverings. We stopped to stare, and the person sat up.

The wrappings, damp from last night's dew, fell away, revealing a middle-aged woman, clad in a thick woolen dress and shawl and a grimy cap, with wisps of gray hair escaping from it. Her plump face should have been good-natured, but her expression now was one of resentment and alarm. She clutched at her rugs as if for protection and stared mutely back at us. Brockley began to say something reassuring, but Hugh cut him short. "What in the world is this? Mistress, have you been lying out here on that grave all night long?" He spoke from concern, I knew, not anger, but he sounded a little sharp and the woman shrank into her damp

rugs, her eyes widening, her mouth opening as if to speak, but failing to produce any words. "The poor soul," said Fran Dale compassionately. "Ma'am, perhaps she's simple?" People who are in their right senses are usually indignant if anyone suggests otherwise. It worked on this woman, too. "I b'ain't simple!" She had a village woman's accent. "And if I choose to spend my nights out here, where's the harm? I don't hurt

nothing!" "But..." I began. I got no further, however. There was a sound of angrily striding feet on the path behind us, and there was Dr. Fleet after all, black gown billowing in the breeze, and a scowl on his otherwise quite fresh-skinned and handsome features. "What is this? I saw you all from my window, gathered about Will Thomson's grave and I knew at once! So you are here again, woman! Have you no shame, no sense of acceptance of God's will? Have you once again been here all night?" The woman huddled her rugs around her and looked at Dr. Fleet with hatred. "It's my business! It don't harm anyone! I loved my husband and if I want to lie the night on his bed, then you've no right to deny me!" "I've every right. I'm responsible for the proper upkeep of this churchyard, and for the proper conduct of all in this village of Faldene, and I tell you, woman, that this is a scandal and a disgrace. If it has pleased God to take your husband to Himself, then it's

not for you to..." "You don't know what was between Will and me! Thirty years we was wed! If I choose to..." "You will not choose in my churchyard!" roared Fleet. "Up, woman, up! Go back to your home. You have a cottage; you have a hearth, a bed, the means to live. You have a son in Westwater, down the valley. What would he say if he could see you now? Up, I say! Up!" "Gently, now," said Brockley. Hugh glanced at him and suddenly smiled at me. "Brockley's being Sir Galahad again," I whispered. My manservant was a dignified individual in his fifties. He had sandy hair, graying at the temples, a high forehead dusted with pale freckles, calm gray-blue eyes, and expressionless features. He also had a soothing countryman's voice and as kind a heart as any I have known. He was particularly apt to take the part of beleaguered elderly women. He

was eyeing Dr. Fleet with annoyance. "There's no need to shout at the poor soul," he said. "Isn't there, indeed?" Fleet fumed. "She's been doing this on and off for two months, since we buried Will Thomson. Any time there's a night that's even halfway mild, even in February, she's out here, sleeping on his grave! Why she hasn't died herself of a lung congestion, I can't imagine. But anyway, it's shameful, a lack of the grace of acceptance..." "I loved him," said Mistress Thomson. "If he can't sleep in my bed then I'll sleep on his. You don't understand." "Do I not? You reveal your mind very clearly, woman. You are obsessed with the flesh, with pleasure that should only be sought for purposes of bringing forth children. It is that which brings you here, that which you call love but is only lust." "Easy, now. Easy!" Brockley protested, and Meg, troubled by

Dr. Fleet's fury, shrank against my side. "It's true that you really shouldn't do it," said Hugh reasonably to Mistress Thomson. "Or are you trying to kill yourself so that you can be buried with him?" "Master Stannard is right," said Sybil anxiously, joining in. "You will become ill, if you go on sleeping out." "She won't listen," said Fleet harshly. "Do you think I haven't said all this, a dozen times over? Do you think her neighbors

haven't? I've come in here in the evening and found Mistress Minton that has the cottage next to hers, and the Nutleys, who live opposite, all pleading with her to come home and be sensible, and what did it get them but abuse? You might as well talk to a gravestone! Now, listen to me, Mistress Thomson. If I find you here

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again, I'll have you doing penance in the church porch every Sunday for a month. You know what is said of women who haunt churchyards in the night. It's said they do it to call up demons and worship the devil. Do you want to be charged with witchcraft?" I might have known it. Up to now, Gladys, though glowering, had held her peace, standing between Fran Dale and Sybil and glancing from one protagonist to the other, taking the situation in. But Gladys was never one to keep her tongue still for long and Gladys knew from personal experience what it was like to face an accusation of witchcraft. Now she stumped forward, planted herself in front of Dr. Fleet, between him and Mistress Thomson, and looked him in the eye. "Why don't you leave her alone? What wrong's she done to you or anyone? What's amiss with a woman liking her husband's body?" The words came out clearly and loudly, if in slightly spluttery fashion, due to Gladys's lack of teeth. "Let her be, can't you? She'll come round in her own time and her own way." "Who is this?" Fleet demanded, turning to me and Hugh. "Your serving woman? Tell her to mind her manners to her betters!" "Gladys," I said quietly, "come away, now. Come here." Gladys ignored me. "There's ain't no such thing as witchcraft, look you. There's just women that aren't happy and women that are a bit odd. Leave her alone!" "That's right," said Mistress Thomson resentfully. "Why can't everyone let me be? If I want to sleep out here..." "I forbid it. For the last time, woman, I forbid it. Must I have you locked in your cottage until you learn sense? Come with me!" "Leave her be!" yelled Gladys again, but Fleet strode forward, pulled Mistress Thomson's rugs away, and seized her by the arm. Brockley said, "Easy now," once again, and Hugh half moved to intervene, but Gladys's volatile temper had flared and she acted faster than any of them. Stooping, she picked up a clod of earth from the pile beside the empty grave, and hurled it at Fleet. It struck him on the chest and broke, spattering earth all over him, and before either Hugh or I could reach her, Gladys had followed it up with another. Abandoning Mistress Thomson, Fleet started angrily toward Gladys, who straightened up, dodged behind the pile of clods, and peered malevolently at him around the corner. "Leave her be, you bully! Leave her be! Cold heart, that's what you've got! You don't know nothing about men and women. Let her alone! If you don't, I'll curse ye!" "Oh no," I moaned. "Gladys! Gladys! Stop that! Come here!" "I'll get her," said Brockley, and both he and Hugh ran toward her. For a moment, I thought that a most irreverent game of tag was about to begin among the graves. But Gladys, though her walk was something of a hobble, could be surprisingly spry when she wanted to. She evaded them, retreating quickly behind a yew tree. Then, to my horror, she reappeared on the other side of it, pointing at Fleet with the forefinger and little finger of her left hand. I picked up my skirts and I too ran toward her, shouting: "No, Gladys!" She sidestepped me, however, and then I tripped on the edge of a grave and almost fell. It had a headstone, which I caught at to steady myself, and meanwhile, Gladys, her threatening fingers leveled straight at Dr. Fleet, was well away. "I curse ye!" Her voice cut in eldritch fashion through the spring morning. "A cold curse for a cold heart!" It struck me that Gladys's way with ill-wishing was improving with practice, if improving were the right word. Even when she quarreled with our physician, she hadn't sounded so vicious or so powerful. This was actually frightening. "I curse ye by a cold hearth and a cold bed..." "Gladys!" I pleaded aloud, but in vain. "...a cold heart and a cold head, a cold belly and cold breath..." "Gladys!" wailed Fran Dale and Meg both together. "...a cold life and a cold death!" "For the love of God!" gasped Brockley. He had gone quite pale. Dale ran up and stood close to him as if for comfort. Hugh similarly hastened back to my side and we gazed at each other, appalled. Meg began to cry, and Sybil actually crossed herself, in the old-fashioned way. Fleet said grimly: "I think there is unquestionably one real witch here in this churchyard. Don't you?" My memory of how we got Gladys away from that churchyard isn't very distinct. I recall that Hugh fetched my uncle Herbert and aunt Tabitha from the house, and while bringing them back to the churchyard, somehow made them believe that Gladys was an old woman who had gone weak in the head, but nothing worse. Somewhat bemusedly, they added their persuasions to ours and Hugh again resorted to that useful and universal solvent, money -- this time in the form of a really large contribution to a fund that Fleet had started in order to put a new stained-glass window in the church. This conversation took place in the vicarage, in the presence of Fleet's wife. She was a wispy little thing, who seemed very nervous of him, which I could well understand. At one point she did say: "Poor Mistress Thomson! Shouldn't we be kind to her?" but her husband glared at her so savagely that she said no more. Fortunately, Brockley and Dale had already shown Mistress Thomson the recommended kindness, by persuading her to let them take her home. They rejoined us as we left the vicarage, saying that they had made her some broth and found a neighbor to stay with her. We put aside the visit to my mother's grave and cried off the dinner invitation. Francis would have to be welcomed home without us. Somehow or other, we got ourselves and Gladys safely back to Withysham. We knew, though, that the news would spread. Dr. Fleet would see that it did. The accusation was serious and no amount of

money or talk of weak-minded age could be relied on to stifle it for long. Neither Withysham nor Hawkswood were safe places for Gladys now. So when a messenger, most opportunely, arrived from a most unexpected quarter, with an invitation to visit London and perhaps consider an early betrothal for my daughter, Meg, we received him with pleasure. Had it not been for that appalling scene in Faldene churchyard, we might have declined. Meg wouldn't even be fourteen until June. But the proposal was only for a betrothal, with the actual marriage some years away, and there was no harm in looking at it. "We can take Gladys with us and get her away from both Hawkswood and Withysham for a while, until the storm passes," said Hugh. He added dryly: "She's becoming an expensive luxury! Yes -- I think we'd better all go to London." Copyright 2004 by Fiona Buckley Revue de presse "Tantalizing.... The Siren Queen and Ursula weave their own special spells." -- Detroit Free Press "[A] sixteenth-century mystery series as complicated and charming as an Elizabethan knot garden." -- The Tampa Tribune "Ursula is the essence of iron cloaked in velvet -- a heroine to reckon with." -- Kirkus s