



## The Fiancee Charade (The Pearl House Book 4)

By Fiona Brand



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*Some bonds can't be broken*

When billionaire Gabriel Messena sees that former fling Gemma O'Neill might be settling down with another man, he knows he has to act fast. He wants her, and he'll use any excuse to get her back. Luckily, he needs a fiancée to regain control of his family's business, and he wants Gemma for the part.

Gabriel's proposition is truly unexpected, though exactly what Gemma needs to secure permanent custody of her daughter. *Their* daughter. Being back in Gabriel's bed is amazing, but once he finds out what she's kept from him, how long will the honeymoon last?



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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

Fiona Brand lives in the sunny Bay of Islands, New Zealand. Now that both of her sons are grown, she continues to love writing books and gardening. After a life-changing time in which she met Christ, she has undertaken study for a bachelor of theology and has become a member of The Order of St. Luke, Christ's healing ministry.

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Zane Atraeus Dates Good-time Girl....

The tabloid headline halted billionaire banker and entrepreneur Gabriel Messena in his tracks.

A subtle tension gripped him as he paid the attendant at the Auckland International Airport newsstand and flipped the scandal sheet open to verify just which good-time girl, exactly, his wild cousin Zane Atraeus had been dating this time.

His gaze was drawn to the color photo that went with the story. Every muscle in his body tightened as he studied familiar Titian hair, creamy skin and dark eyes; a long, sensually curved body that possessed the engaging grace of a dancer.

Not just any woman, Gabriel thought with a bleak sense of inevitability as he studied the cheerful glint of Gemma O'Neill's gaze. Once again, Zane was dating *his* woman.

Emotion, sharp and clarifying, clenched his stomach muscles and banded his chest. When he had first discovered that Zane was dating Gemma, he had checked out the situation and had been satisfied that the dating was on a strictly business level. Although, according to the tabloid, at some point *that* had changed.

The attraction Zane felt for Gemma was a no-brainer. She was gorgeous and smart, with an impulsive nature and a fascinating bluntness that had captivated Gabriel when she had worked on the Messena estate as a gardener. Although, he couldn't understand what drew Gemma, who had never seemed to be the A-list party-girl type, to his younger, wilder cousin.

Jaw taut, he examined the fierce sense of possession that gripped him, the powerful desire to claim Gemma as his own, despite the fact that he hadn't seen her in almost six years. His growing fury that Zane, who had women lining up—and, apparently, enough time in his schedule to date them all—just couldn't seem to leave his former personal assistant alone.

Damn, he thought mildly. He had no problem identifying the emotion that held him in thrall, destroying his normal clarity. He was jealous of Zane: searingly, primitively jealous.

It was an emotion that made no sense given the length of time that had passed and the fact that what he and Gemma had shared had been nothing more than a steamy encounter that had spanned a few incandescent hours.

Hours that were still etched in his memory because they were literally the last fling of his carefree youth. Two days later his father had been killed in a car accident along with his mistress, the beautiful Katherine

Lyon, a woman who had also happened to be the family housekeeper.

Amidst the grief and the scandal, the responsibility of managing the family bank, his volatile family and the media had descended on Gabriel's shoulders like a lead weight. Any idea that he should echo his father's disastrous mistake by continuing a liaison with an employee, no matter how attractive, had been shelved. Until now.

Frowning at the sudden sharp desire to pick up the threads of a relationship that had its basis in the same kind of obsessive fatal attraction that had brought his father to ruin, Gabriel refolded the paper.

Strolling to the first-class counter, he checked his luggage and handed his passport to the attendant. While he waited for his boarding pass, he glanced again at the sketchy article, which also chronicled a number of Zane's fiery liaisons. Affairs that Zane had apparently been conducting with other women while he had kept Gemma on the back burner.

Intense irritation gripped him at the idea that Gemma had clearly thrown away her pride and reputation in favor of pursuing Zane. That she would allow herself to be treated as some kind of standby date. It just didn't gel with the strong streak of independence that had always been such an attractive part of her personality.

His gaze snagged on a phrase that made every muscle lock tight. Suddenly, the anomaly in Gemma's behavior was crystal-clear.

She was no longer strictly single. At some point in the past couple of years, she'd had a child. Presumably, Zane's child.

Taking a measured breath, Gabriel forced the humming tension from his muscles, although there was nothing he could do about the slam of his heart, or the curious hollow feeling as he grappled with the information.

Too late to wish that he had listened to what the tabloids had been blaring for almost two years. That at some point, Zane had decided that having Gemma as his PA had not been enough, that he had installed her in his bed, as well.

He jerked at his dark blue silk tie, needing air. He needed to refocus, to reassert the control he'd worked so hard to instill in himself in place of the hot-blooded, passionate streak that was the bane of all Messena men. But something about the sheer intimacy of Gemma bearing a child cut deep. The fact that the child belonged to Zane, his own cousin, rubbed salt in the wound.

It was an intimacy that Gabriel, at age thirty, hadn't had time for in his life, and which was not in his foreseeable future.

But Zane, with all the irresponsibility of youth, had experienced that intimacy. And now, evidently, he no longer wanted the woman whom he had bound to him with a child.

But Gabriel did.

The thought dropped through the turmoil of his emotions like a stone dropping through cool, clear water.

Six years had passed. But in that moment the stretch of time barely registered. He felt like a sleeper waking up, all of his senses—the emotions he'd walked away from the night his father had died—flaring to intense,

heated life.

He studied the photograph again, this time noting the way Gemma clung to Zane's arm, the relaxed intimacy of the pose.

A hot jolt of fury cleared away any reservations he might have had about claiming the woman he had walked away from in order to preserve his family and business.

Gemma had had a child. A baby.

Logic didn't alter his sense of disorientation, the disbelief that the pressures of business and his high-maintenance family had somehow blinded him and he had missed some-thing...important.

Although the fact that he hadn't registered changes in Gemma's life shouldn't surprise him. Running an empire encumbered by an aging trustee who Gabriel now believed to be suffering from the early stages of dementia, in theory he didn't have time to sleep.

And he almost never had time for personal relationships. When he dated it was invariably for business or charity functions. The fact that he went home to an empty apartment every night he wasn't traveling hadn't bothered him.

Until now.

Taking his boarding pass with automatic thanks, he strolled through the busy airport, barely noticing the travelers jostling around him. In the midst of a crowd, it was an odd time to feel alone. An even odder time to examine the stark truth, that despite the constant demands on his time, his own personal life was as sterile and empty as a desert.

But that was about to change. He was on his way to the Mediterranean island of Medinos, the ancestral home of the Messena family. And the place where Gemma just happened to presently reside.

If he had a mystical streak, he would be tempted to say that the coincidence that he and Gemma would finally be together at the same location was kismet. But mysticism had never figured in the Messena psyche. Aside from the passionate streak, Messena men had another well-defined trait that went clear back to the Crusades. Ruthless and tactical, fighting for the Couer de Lion, Richard the Li-onheart, they had flourished in battle, winning lands and fortresses. The habit of winning had been passed down a family line rich in sons, culminating in large holdings of land and enormous wealth.

Plundering was no longer in vogue. These days, Messena men usually leveraged what they wanted across boardroom tables, but the basic principle was still the same. Identify the objective, execute a plan, obtain the prize.

In this case the plan was simple: remove Gemma from Zane's clutches and install her back in *his* bed.

"Gabriel Messena...engaged before the month was out..."

The snatch of conversation flowing in off the sun-washed terrace of one of the Atraeus Resort's most luxurious suites stopped Gemma O'Neill in her tracks.

Her grip tightened on the tea tray she was carrying as fragments of the past surfaced like pieces of flotsam, taking her places that for six years she had refused to go, making her feel emotions she was usually very successful at avoiding.

*A still bay, a clear midnight sky, studded with stars and pierced by a sickle moon. Gabriel Messena, his long, muscular body entwined with hers; hair dark as night, the cut of his cheekbones spare and faintly exotic, reminding her of crowded souks and the inky shadowed alcoves of Moorish palaces...*

With an effort of will Gemma blinked away the too-vivid image, which was probably a result of being on Medinos, the kind of romantic destination that attracted newlyweds in droves.

Now, rattled instead of being simply on edge as she'd been before, she brought the trolley to a halt beside the dining table. The clatter attracted the attention of the two guests she had been tasked with settling in. They were VIPs in the most important sense of the word on Medinos, because they were close connections of the Atraeus family.

Although, in terms of Gemma's past, one of the guests was much more than that, even if Luisa Messena, Gabriel's mother, didn't seem to have a clue that the person serving afternoon tea and petit-fours was one of her ex-gardeners. And her son's ex-lover.

Pasting a professional smile on her mouth, Gemma apologized, all the while keeping her face averted in the hope that she could hang on to her anonymity.

With crisp movements, she snapped a damask cloth open, settled it on the glossy little table then began the precision task of aligning plates and napkins. As she offloaded a carved silver teapot that was probably worth more than the car she needed to buy but as a single mother just couldn't afford, she fiercely wished she hadn't offered to give the hotel staff a hand with the influx of VIP guests.

"He's certainly waited for her long enough...she's perfect.... The family's wealthy, of course..."

Despite the fact that she was doing her level best not to listen, because as far as she was concerned Gabriel Messena was old history, Gemma's jaw locked on a surge of annoyance. Clearly Gabriel was on the point of proposing to some perfect preselected creature, probably a beautiful debutante who had been groomed and educated within an inch of her life and who was now finally ready for the wedding nuptials.

She ripped the tab off a bottle of chilled sparkling mineral water and tossed it in the little trash can on the bottom shelf of her trolley. A tinkling sound indicated that the tab had bounced off the side of the trash can and rolled onto the floor. Retrieving the tab, she placed it in the trash can with careful precision and poured mineral water into two glasses. Her jaw tightened as some sloshed over the side and soaked into her trolley cloth.

The knowledge that Gabriel was finally getting around to marriage after years of bachelorhood in the hushed stratosphere of enormous wealth in which he moved shouldn't have impacted her. She was happy for Gabriel. Perfectly, sublimely happy. She would have to remember to send him a congratulatory card.

She could do that, because she had moved on.

The conversation out on the terrace had segued from Gabriel to the more innocuous topic of shopping, which was a relief. Gemma guessed she couldn't hope to feel a complete absence of emotion about Gabriel, because

as a teenager, he had been her focus; the man of her dreams. She had fallen in puppy love with him, and had mooned after him for years. Unfortunately she had been wasting her time because she hadn't had either the wealth or the family connections to be a viable part of his world.

One night, Gabriel had quenched the flare of passion that had bound them together as systematically as she imagined he would have vetoed an investment that lacked the required substance. He'd been polite, but he had made it clear they didn't have a future. He hadn't elaborated in any detail; he hadn't needed to. After the scandal that had hit the papers shortly after the one night they had spent together, Gemma had understood exactly why he had dropped her like the proverbial hot potato.

His father's affair with the family housekeeper had shaken the very foundations of the family banking business, which was based on wealthy clientele who were old-school and conservative. Gabriel had been in damage control mode. He hadn't wanted to inflame the scandal and undermine confidence in the bank any further by risking having his liaison with the gardener exposed to tabloid scrutiny.

Despite her heartache, Gemma had tried to see things from his perspective, to understand the battle he had faced. But the rejection, the knowledge that she had not been good enough to have a real, public relationship with Gabriel, had hurt in a way that had struck deep.

As soon as Gabriel had left after the short, awkward interview in which she had managed to remain superficially upbeat, she resolved to never look back or to even remember. It had been the emotional equivalent of sticking her head in the sand, but over the past six years, the tactic had worked.

Gemma took extra care transferring the bone china from the trolley to the table. Even so, an exquisitely delicate cup overturned on its saucer and a silver teaspoon that had been balanced on the saucer skidded off and hit a pretty bread and butter plate with a sharp ping.

She could feel the subtle tension and displeasure at the noise she was making. Her jaw set a fraction tighter. She had worked for the Atraeus Group for some years and normally didn't mind in the least helping out with any task that needed doing. The Atraeus family had given her a job when she desperately needed one, and they had treated her very well, but suddenly she was acutely aware of her role as a servant.

She dumped a glistening silver milk jug and sugar bowl down next to the teapot and swiped at an errant droplet of milk that marred the once pristine tablecloth.

Not that she had an issue with doing a good job, but it was a fact that she wasn't waitstaff. Just like she was no longer the gardener's daughter on the Messina estate.

She was a highly organized and well-qualified PA with a degree in performing arts on the side, and she was still trying to come to grips with the fact that by some errant trick of fate, she had ended up once more in the role of employee to a Messina.

Serene and perfectly groomed, Luisa looked exactly as she had when Gemma had last seen her in Dolphin Bay, New Zealand. The friend accompanying her, though casually dressed, looked just as wealthy and well-groomed; her dark hair smooth, nails perfect. Unlike Gemma's hair, which she'd been too tired after a near-sleepless night on the phone to New Zealand to do anything with except to coil the heavy waves into a knot.

As she placed the crowning glory of the afternoon tea setting, an exquisite three-tiered plate of tiny cakes, scones, pastries and mini sandwiches, in the center of the table, she caught a glimpse of herself in a wall

mirror.

She wasn't surprised that Luisa hadn't recognized her. The housemaid's smock she was wearing was at least a size too large and an unflattering pale blue, which leached all the color from her skin. With her hair pulled back into a severe knot, she didn't look either pretty or stylish.

Definitely not the gorgeous hothouse flower who by all accounts had been reserved for marriage to Gabriel, despite the fact that Gemma had borne his child.

The thought was overdramatic and inappropriate, and she regretted it the moment it was out.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **John Malcolm:**

The book *The Fiancee Charade* (*The Pearl House Book 4*) make you feel enjoy for your spare time. You need to use to make your capable a lot more increase. Book can to get your best friend when you getting strain or having big problem with the subject. If you can make examining a book *The Fiancee Charade* (*The Pearl House Book 4*) being your habit, you can get more advantages, like add your personal capable, increase your knowledge about several or all subjects. You can know everything if you like start and read a book *The Fiancee Charade* (*The Pearl House Book 4*). Kinds of book are several. It means that, science reserve or encyclopedia or others. So , how do you think about this book?

#### **James Rodriguez:**

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**Ronald Meyers:**

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