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Opening Extract from...

Perfect People

Written by Peter James

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PERFECT PEOPLE

PETER JAMES

MACMILLAN



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FOR TONY MULLIKEN,

TO WHOM I OWE SO MUCH.

1

Late on an April afternoon, thirty nautical miles east of Cape Cod, a wind-blown young couple with luggage and worried faces are standing on the helicopter deck of a converted cruise liner, gripping the handrail.

Both of them know it is too late for doubts.

The *Serendipity Rose* is forty years old, her dents and cracks and rivets caked in paint like make-up on an old tart's face. As she ploughs through the freshening sea, a Panamanian flag of convenience crackling from her stern, her single yellow funnel trails a ribbon of smoke that is shredded in seconds by the wind. Making just sufficient way to keep the stabilizers working, she's not in any hurry, she's not heading towards any destination. She's just meandering around safely beyond the twelve-nautical-mile limit of the territorial waters of the United States. Safely beyond the reaches of US federal law.

John Klaesson, in a fleece-lined jacket, chinos and leather yachting shoes, is in his mid-thirties and has about him the rugged air of a mountaineer or an explorer, rather than the academic he is. Six feet tall, lean and strong with short blond hair and gentle blue eyes behind small oval glasses, he has a good-looking, serious face, with resolute Nordic features and a light Californian tan.

His wife, Naomi, concentrating to keep her balance, is huddled up in a long camel coat over a jumper, jeans and crêpe-soled black suede boots. Her fair hair is styled in a fashionable mid-length blowsy cut, the tangled strands batting over her attractive face accentuating the slight tomboy look she has about her, although her complexion is considerably paler at the moment than normal.

Yards above their heads the helicopter that has just delivered them hovers, haemorrhaging oily fumes into the mad air, dragging its shadow across the superstructure of the ship like some big empty sack. And that's how John's feeling right now; like he's been

tipped out of a sack. Head bowed against the din and the maelstrom, he puts out an arm, steadies his wife, grips her slender frame beneath the softness of her camel coat, feeling close to her, desperately close and protective.

And responsible.

The wind is blowing so hard he has to breathe in snatched gulps, the salt misting his glasses, the fumes parching his mouth and throat already arid with nerves. Strands of Naomi's hair flail his face, hard as whipcords. The deck drops away beneath him, then a moment later is rising, pressing up on his feet like an elevator floor, heaving his stomach up against his rib cage.

Through the thrashing of the rotors above him he can hear a scuffing noise. This is the first time he's been in a helicopter and after an hour of pitching and yawing through an Atlantic depression he's not keen to repeat the experience; he's feeling the queasiness you get from a bad funfair ride that swivels your brain one way on its axis, and your internal organs another. The fumes aren't helping, either. Nor is the strong reek of paint and boat varnish, and the deck vibrating beneath his feet.

Naomi's arm curls around his waist, squeezing him through the thick lining of his leather jacket. He has a pretty good idea what's going through her mind, because it's sure as hell going through his. This uncomfortable feeling of finality. Up until now it has all been just an idea, something they could walk away from at any point. But not any more. Looking at her he thinks, *I love you so much, Naomi darling. You're so brave. I think sometimes you are a lot braver than I am.*

The chopper slips sideways, the roar of the engine increasing, belly light winking, then it angles steeply away and clatters across the water, climbing sharply, abandoning them. For some moments John watches it, then his eyes drop towards the foaming grey ocean hissing with seahorses, stretching far off towards an indistinct horizon.

'OK? Follow me, please.'

Ahead of them, the polite, very serious-looking Filipino in a white jumpsuit who came out to greet them and to take their bags is holding a door open.

Stepping over the lip of the companionway, they follow him inside and the door slams shut on the elements behind them. In the sudden quiet they see a chart of the ocean in a frame on the wall, feel the sudden warmth, smell the reek of paint and varnish even stronger in here. The floor thrums beneath them. Naomi squeezes John's hand. She's a lousy sailor, always has been – she gets sick on boating ponds – and today she can take nothing for it. No pills, no medication, she's going to have to tough this one out. John squeezes back, trying to comfort her, and trying to comfort himself.

Are we doing the right thing?

It's a question he has asked himself a thousand times. He's going to go on asking it for many years. All he can do is keep convincing Naomi and himself that yes, it is the right thing. That's all. Doing the right thing.

Really we are.

2

In the sales brochure for this floating clinic, the cabin that was to be their home for the next month had been grandly described as a *stateroom*. It was furnished with a king-size bed, a tiny sofa, two equally small armchairs and a round table, on which sat a bowl of fruit, crammed into a space the size of a small hotel room. High up in one corner, a television with bad interference was showing CNN news. President Obama was talking, half his words distorted by static.

There was a marbled bathroom that, although cramped, felt distinctly luxurious – or at any rate would have done, Naomi thought, if it stopped heaving around and she could stand up in it without having to hang on to something. She knelt to scoop up the contents of John's wash-bag, which were rolling round on the floor, then stood up rapidly, feeling a dizzying bout of nausea.

'Do you need a hand?' John asked.

She shook her head. Then, unbalanced by a sudden lurch, she tottered across the floor and sat down sharply on the bed, narrowly missing his computer. 'I think I have about four minutes left to unpack before I become violently seasick.'

'I'm feeling queasy, too,' John said. He glanced at a safety notice. There was a layout of the muster stations and a diagram showing how to put on a life jacket.

'Why don't you take a seasick pill?' she said. 'You're allowed.'

'If you're not allowed one, I'm not taking one. I'll suffer with you.'

'Martyr!' She turned her head, leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, comforted by his warm, rough skin, and by the heady, musky smell of his cologne. Comforted by the sheer mental and physical strength he exuded. Watching movies, as a teenager, she'd always been attracted to strong, quietly intelligent men – the kind of father she would have liked to have had. When she had

first seen John, eight years ago in a ski lift queue in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, he'd struck her as having those same qualities of good looks and inner strength.

Then she kissed him again. 'I love you, John.'

Looking into her eyes, which were sometimes green, sometimes brown, always filled with a sparkle and with an incredible trust, his heart ached, suddenly, for her. 'And I adore you, Naomi. I adore you and I admire you.'

She smiled wistfully. 'I admire you, too. Sometimes you have no idea how much.'

There was a comfortable silence between them for some moments. It had taken a long time after the death of Halley for things to be good between them again, and there had been many times during those first two really dark years when Naomi had feared their marriage was over.

He'd been a strong kid. They'd named him after the comet because John had said he was special, that kids like him came along pretty rarely, maybe once every seventy-five years – and probably not even as often as that. Neither of them had known that he was born with a time bomb inside him.

Naomi still kept his photograph in her handbag. It showed a three-year-old boy in dungarees, with floppy blond hair all tangled up, as if he had just crawled out of a tumble dryer, teasing the camera with a big grin that showed two of his front teeth missing – knocked out when he fell off a swing.

For a long time after Halley's death John had been unwilling – or unable – to grieve or to talk about it, and had simply buried himself in his work, his chess and his photography, going out for hours on end and in all weather with his camera, taking photographs of absolutely anything he saw, obsessively and aimlessly.

She had tried to get back into work. Through a friend in Los Angeles she'd been given a good temporary position in a PR office, but she'd quit after a couple of weeks, unable to concentrate. Without Halley, everything had seemed to her to be shallow and pointless.

Eventually they had both gone into therapy, which they had ended only a few months ago.

John said, 'How do you feel about—'

'Being here?'

'Yes. Now that we are actually here.'

A tray on the dresser containing a bottle of mineral water and two glasses slid several inches across the surface then stopped.

'It suddenly seems very real. I feel nervous as hell. You?'

He stroked her hair tenderly. 'If at any point, honey, you want to stop—'

They had taken a huge bank loan to fund this, and had had to borrow another hundred and fifty thousand dollars on top of that, which Naomi's mother and older sister, Harriet, in England, had insisted on lending them. The money, four hundred thousand dollars in total, had already been paid over, and it was non-refundable.

'We made our decision,' she said. 'We have to move on. We don't have to—'

They were interrupted by a rap on the door and a voice saying, 'Housekeeping!'

The door opened and a short, pleasant-looking Filipino maid, dressed in a white jumpsuit and plimsolls, smiled at them. 'Welcome aboard, Dr and Mrs Klaesson. I'm Leah, I'm going to be your cabin stewardess. Is there anything I can get you?'

'We're both feeling pretty queasy,' John said. 'Is there anything my wife is allowed to take?'

'Oh sure – I get you something right away.'

'There is?' he said, surprised. 'I thought there was no medication—'

The maid closed the door, then less than a minute later reappeared with two pairs of wrist bands and two tiny patches. Pulling her cuffs back, she revealed she was wearing similar bands, and then she showed them the patch behind her ear. 'You wear these and you won't get sick,' she said, and showed the correct position for them.

Whether it was psychological or they really did work, Naomi couldn't be sure, but within minutes of the maid leaving she felt a little better. At least well enough to carry on unpacking. She stood up and stared for a moment out of one of the twin portholes at the

darkening ocean. Then she turned away, the sight of the waves bringing her queasiness straight back.

John turned his attention again to his laptop. They had a rule when they travelled together: Naomi unpacked and John kept out of the way. He was the world's worst packer and an even worse unpacker. Naomi stared despairingly at the contents of his suitcase strewn all around him after his search for the adaptor. Some of his clothes were on the counterpane, some were tossed over an armchair and some lay on the floor. John peered closely at his screen, oblivious to the chaos he had caused around him.

Naomi grinned, scooping up a cluster of his ties, and shook her head. There wasn't any point in getting angry.

John fiddled with his new wristbands and touched the patch that he had stuck behind his ear, not feeling any appreciable change in his nausea. Trying to ignore the motion of the ship, he focused on the chess game he was playing with a man called Gus Santiano, whom he'd met in a chess chatroom, and who lived in Brisbane, Australia.

He had been playing with this man for the past couple of years. They'd never met outside of cyberspace and John didn't even know what his opponent looked like. The Aussie played mean chess, but recently he'd been taking longer and longer between moves, prolonging a hopeless position from which there was no possible coming back, for no other reason than sheer cussedness, and John, getting bored, was starting to think about finding a new opponent. Now the man had made yet another pointless move.

'Sod you, Mr Santiano.'

John had the man in check – he was a queen, both bishops and a rook down, he didn't have a prayer – so why the hell not just resign and have done with it? He typed out an email suggesting this, then connected his cellphone to his computer to send it. But there was no carrier signal.

Too far out to sea, he realized. There was a phone by the bed that had a satellite link to the mainland, but at nine dollars a minute, according to the instruction tag, it was too expensive. Gus Santiano would just have to wait in suspense.

He closed the chess file, and opened his email inbox to start

working through the dozens of messages he'd downloaded this morning but had not yet had a chance to read, feeling panicky about how he was going to send and receive mail if they were going to remain out of cellphone range for the next month. At the University of Southern California, where he was based and ran his research laboratory, he received an average of one hundred and fifty emails a day. Today's intake was closer to two hundred.

'This is amazing, darling! Do you remember reading this?'

John looked up and saw she had the brochure open. 'I was going to read it again in a minute.'

'They have only twenty private cabins for *clients*. That's a nice euphemism. Nice to know we're *clients*, not *patients*.' She read on. 'The ship used to take five hundred passengers, now the two main decks where the cabins were are completely taken up with computers. They have *five hundred* supercomputers on board! That's awesome! Why do they need so much computing power?'

'Genetics requires massive number crunching. That's part of what we're paying for. Let me see.'

She handed him the brochure. He looked at a photograph of a long, narrow bank of blue computer casings, with a solitary technician dressed in white, checking something on a monitor. Then he flicked to the start of the brochure, and stared at the photograph he recognized instantly from the scientist's website, from the interviews with him on television and from the numerous pictures of him that had appeared both in the scientific and the popular press. Then, although he knew most of it already, he scanned the scientist's biography.

Dr Leo Dettore had been a child prodigy. Graduating magna cum laude in biology from MIT at sixteen, he then did a combined PhD MD at Stanford University, followed by biotechnology postdoctoral research at USC and then the Pasteur Institute in France, before identifying and patenting a modification of a crucial enzyme that allowed efficient high-fidelity replication of genes that made the polymerase chain reaction obsolete, and, which made him a billionaire, and for which he was made a MacArthur Fellow, and offered a Nobel Prize he would not accept, upsetting the scientific

community by saying he believed all prizes were tarnished by politics.

The maverick geneticist had further upset the medical establishment by being one of the first people to start patenting human genes, and was actively battling the legislation that had subsequently reversed patents on them.

Leo Dettore was among the richest scientists in the world at this moment, and arguably the most controversial. Pilloried by religious leaders across the United States and many other countries, disbarred from practising medicine in the United States after he had publicly admitted to genetic experiments on embryos that had subsequently gone to term, he was unshakeable in his beliefs.

And he was knocking on their cabin door.

3

Naomi opened the door to be greeted by a tall man holding a manila envelope and wearing the white jumpsuit and plimsolls that seemed to be the ship's standard uniform. Recognizing him instantly, John stood up.

He was surprised at just how imposing the geneticist was in the flesh, far taller than he had imagined, a good head higher than himself, six-foot-six at least. He recognized the voice also, the disarming but assertive Southern Californian accent, from the phone conversations they had had in recent months.

'Dr Klaesson? Mrs Klaesson? I'm Leo Dettore. Hope I'm not disturbing you folks!'

The man to whom they had handed over just about every cent they had in the world, plus one hundred and fifty thousand dollars they didn't, gave Naomi's hand a firm, unhurried shake, fixing her eyes with his own, which were a soft grey colour, sharp and alert and sparkling with warmth. She mustered a smile back, shooting a fleeting, horrified glance at the mess of clothes all around John, desperately wishing she'd had a chance to tidy up. 'No, you're not disturbing us at all. Come in,' she said.

'Just wanted to swing by and introduce myself, and give you a bunch of stuff to read.' The geneticist had to duck his head as he entered the cabin. 'Great to meet you in person at last, Dr Klaesson.'

'And you too, Dr Dettore.'

Dettore's grip was strong, taking charge of the handshake the way he clearly took charge of everything else. John felt a moment of awkwardness between them. Dettore seemed to be signalling something in his smile, as if there was some secret pact between the two men. Perhaps an implied agreement between two scientists who understood a whole lot more what this was about than Naomi possibly could.

Except that was not the way John ever intended it should be. He and Naomi had made this decision together from day one, eyes wide open, equal partners. There was nothing he would hide from her and nothing he would twist or distort that he presented to her. Period.

Lean and tanned, with distinguished Latin looks, Leo Dettore exuded confidence and charm. His teeth were perfect, he had great hair, dark and luxuriant, swept immaculately back and tinged with elegant silver streaks at the temples. And although sixty-two years old, he could easily have passed for someone a good decade younger.

Naomi watched him carefully, looking for any chinks in his facade, trying to read this stranger to whom they were effectively entrusting their entire future, studying his face, his body language. Her instant impression was one of disappointment. He had that aura, she had noticed in her work in public relations, that only the very rich and very successful had; some almost indefinable quality that great wealth alone seemed able to buy. He looked too slick, too mediagenic, too much like a White House candidate purring for votes, too much like a captain of industry schmoozing a shareholders' meeting. But oddly, she found the more she looked at him, the more her confidence in him grew. Despite everything, there seemed something genuine about him, as well.

She noticed his hands. He had fine fingers. Not a politician's, nor a businessman's, but true surgeon's fingers, long, hairy, with immaculate nails. She liked his voice, also, finding it sincere and calming. And there was something reassuring about his sheer physical presence. Then she reminded herself, as she had done so often these past weeks, that only a couple of months ago, beneath a photograph of Leo Dettore's face, the front cover of *Time* magazine had borne the question, TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FRANKENSTEIN?

'You know,' Dettore said, 'I'm actually really intrigued by your work, Dr Klaesson – maybe we can talk about it some time over the next few days. I read that paper you published in *Nature* a few months back – was it the February issue?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'The *virtual dog* genes. Fascinating work.'

'It was a big experiment,' John said. 'It took nearly four years.'

John had developed a computer simulation showing the evolution of a dog for one thousand generations into the future, using a set of selectors.

'And your conclusion was that they have become so linked with humans that as we evolve the dogs will evolve too. In effect they will grow smarter as man's domination of the planet increases. I liked that. I thought that was ingenious thinking.'

John was flattered that a scientist of Dettore's eminence should have read his work, let alone praise it. 'It was really the development of a few key algorithms devoted to how overcoming epistasis is the rate-limiting step in adaptation,' he replied, modestly.

'And you haven't yet run a simulation on how man will evolve over the next thousand generations?'

'That's a whole new set of parameters. Apart from the challenge of creating the program, there isn't that kind of computing power available for academic research at USC. I—'

Interrupting him, Dettore said, 'I think we should talk about that. I'd be interested in giving a donation, if that would drive it forward?'

'I'd be happy to talk about it,' John said, excited by the thought that funding from Dettore could make a difference to his research work, but not wanting to get sidetracked at this moment. On this ship it was Naomi who was important, not his work.

'Good. We'll have plenty of time over the next few weeks.' Then Dettore paused, looking first at John then at Naomi. 'I'm really sorry about what happened with your son.'

She shrugged, feeling the same twist of pain she always felt when she talked about it. 'Thanks,' she mouthed, emotion choking her voice.

'Tough call.' Fixing those grey eyes on her he said, 'Folks who've never experienced the death of a child can't even begin to understand.'

Naomi nodded.

Dettore, looking sad, suddenly, glanced at John as if to include him. 'My ex-wife and I lost two kids – one at a year old from an inherited genetic disease, and one at six from meningitis.'

'I – I didn't know that. I'm really sorry,' Naomi said, turning to John. 'You didn't tell me.'

'I didn't know either,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

'You had no reason to, it's not something I go around broadcasting. We made a decision to keep that private. But—' The geneticist opened out the palms of his hands. 'It's a big part of why I'm here. There are certain things in life that happen which shouldn't happen – which don't need to happen – and which science can now prevent from happening. That essentially is what we're about at this clinic.'

'It's why we're here, too,' Naomi said.

Dettore smiled. 'Anyhow, so how was your journey? You caught the red-eye from LA last night?'

'We took a day flight and spent last night in New York – had dinner with some friends. We like eating out in New York,' said John.

Butting in, Naomi said, 'One of my husband's interests is food – except he treats each course like it's some scientific experiment. Everyone else has a great time, but there's always something not quite right with his.' She grinned at John affectionately.

John rocked his head defensively, smiling back. 'Cooking is science. I don't expect to pay for some chef's laboratory tests.'

'I'll be interested how you rate the food on board here,' Dettore said.

'The way I'm feeling,' Naomi said, 'I'm not going to be able to face any food.'

'A little seasick?'

'A little.'

'Forecast is bad for the next few hours, then it's clearing – should be a great day tomorrow.' He hesitated and there was a moment of awkwardness between the three of them. The ship lurched suddenly, and he put a hand against the cabin wall to steady himself.

'So, here's the plan. I just want you guys to relax tonight, have dinner in your cabin.' He held out the envelope. 'There's a medical history form I need you to fill out for me, Naomi, and there's a consent form I need you both to sign. The nurse will be along to

take blood samples from you both shortly. We've already analysed the samples you had mailed to us and have had both your entire genomes mapped out; we'll start looking at them in the morning. We meet in my office at ten – meantime, is there anything I can do for you?'

Naomi had made a list of a million questions she wanted to ask, but at this moment with her whole insides spinning from motion sickness she had only one thought, which was trying to not throw up.

Dettore pulled a small container from his pocket and handed it to Naomi. 'I'd like you to take one of these, twice a day with food. We know they will help epigenetically modify the foetus right at the beginning of conception.' He smiled, then continued, 'If there's anything you think of you want to talk through, just pick up the phone and call my extension. See you in the morning. Have a good one.'

Then he was gone.

Naomi looked at John. 'Has he got great genes, or a great plastic surgeon and a great dentist?'

'What did you think of him?' John said. Then he looked at her in alarm; her face had turned grey and perspiration was rolling down her cheeks.

She dropped the container and lunged towards the bathroom.