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The Venus Conspiracy

Michael Cordy

About the Book

How can a drug that makes people fall madly in love be a bad thing?

So thinks Professor Carlos Bacci when he inadvertently unlocks the biochemical key to falling in love, and develops a drug capable of creating emotions indistinguishable from the real thing.

Determined that the world should benefit from his discovery, he seeks funding and business advice from a private Swiss bank, owned by the secretive Kappel family. Unknown to Bacci, however, Helmut Kappel sees love as a sickness to be exploited, and has his own plan for abusing the drug's power – a cynical nightmare of breathtaking arrogance far removed from Bacci's naïve dream of spreading love around the world.

Ripped from tomorrow's headlines, *The Venus Conspiracy* is Michael Cordy's latest glimpse of a compelling future where even human emotions can be bought and where true love can be faked ...

Previously published as *True*.

Michael Cordy worked for ten years in marketing before giving it all up to write. He lives in London with his wife and daughter. For more information on Michael Cordy and his books, see his website at www.michaelcody.com

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THE MESSIAH CODE
THE CRIME CODE
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THE VENUS CONSPIRACY

Michael Cordy



CORGI BOOKS

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For Jenny

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*Fetch me that flower, the herb I showed thee once,
The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid
Will make man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees . . .*

William Shakespeare (1596)

*Most of our products are nature-identical, which means
that their
chemical structures and properties cannot be
distinguished from
the ones found in plants or animals.*

Roche Pharmaceuticals (2003)

PROLOGUE

‘Wake up, Max. Wake up! We’ve got to leave.’

Max doesn’t hear his mother’s urgent whispers. He is lost in his dreams, riding the gleaming red bike he hopes to get for his ninth birthday tomorrow. A few hours ago he was so excited that his mother had to soothe him to sleep, stroking his forehead with her cool hand. Now nothing stirs him. Not the full Hawaiian moon, which shines through the thin curtains, bathing his tanned skin and white-blond hair in a blue glow. Not the waves breaking on the beach behind the isolated clapperboard house. Not even the harsh voices and heavy footsteps on the sandy deck outside.

Now the same cool hand that earlier soothed him to sleep shakes him. ‘Wake up, Max. Now.’

His eyes flicker open. His mother is in a white nightdress and looks anxious; her high cheekbones are etched into sharp relief by the shadows and her long fair hair shimmers in the blue light. ‘They’ve come for us, Max. We must leave. Quickly and quietly.’

He groans. ‘Not again, Mum. I’m sleepy.’

‘This isn’t a practice, Max. It’s real. They’re here.’

He hears the guttural voices outside and something cold uncoils in his stomach. He is suddenly wide awake, his birthday forgotten. ‘Is *he* here?’ he whispers.

Eyes wide, she nods and puts a finger to her lips.

As she leads him across the main corridor to her bedroom there’s a rending crash. The front door buckles and an axe blade appears through the splintered wood. The

bungalow's secluded position on the north-western shore of Kauai, the most westerly of the Hawaiian Islands, concealed them once. Now its isolation renders them defenceless.

Inside her bedroom his mother locks the door and they push the chest of drawers in front of it. She reaches under the bed and pulls out a baseball bat, two ready-packed rucksacks and a plastic bag, which contains a wad of US dollars and three passports: a United States passport in her maiden name, Collins, and two passports bearing Max's photograph - one Swiss, the other American. The Swiss passport carries his full name Max William Kappel. The American passport carries his middle name and his mother's maiden name: William Collins. She rolls back the rug, pulls a brass latch embedded in the wooden floor and opens a trap-door to the crawl-space beneath the house.

They drop on to the sand, and as they wriggle between the struts supporting the house Max hears heavy footsteps on the floorboards above. His mother pulls him towards the front, but he can see legs pacing by the porch. He shakes his head and points to the frangipani by the side of the house. It will take longer, but the trees provide cover.

The warm air is thick with the cloying scent of frangipani blossom as they crawl away from the sea to firmer ground. When the moon disappears behind the cloud they use the darkness to hurry across the dirt track by the front gate and disappear into the carport where the old jeep is parked. Max is tall for a nine-year-old, bigger than some teenagers, but he is uncoordinated and runs awkwardly. When he reaches the shelter of the carport he is panting hard. As his mother unlocks the jeep he looks back at the house, which has been their home for the last two years. The fractured front door gapes like a broken tooth and torches flash inside. He looks to the jetty beyond,

and sees a large white yacht moored beside their small dinghy.

As he opens the car door he detects a distinctive odour in the air. He remembers the acrid smell from somewhere, but can't place it. She releases the handbrake, turns the ignition and presses her foot on the accelerator.

Nothing happens.

She tries again. Still nothing.

'Shit.'

For the first time he sees panic in her eyes and his stomach somersaults. This isn't like the other drills. This isn't fun at all.

She tries again.

Nothing.

A shadowy figure steps in front of the car and throws a tangle of severed cables on to the bonnet. A cigarette tip glows in the dark and Max now recognizes the familiar tobacco smell he detected earlier. His father is here somewhere.

Max's door is yanked open and strong hands pull him from the car. For all his size, he is no match for the man pinning him down. He yells and struggles, but his attacker is too strong. The man has long, jet-black hair tied into a ponytail and smells of seawater and sweat.

'Leave my son alone,' his mother shouts, clambering out of the car. She hits the man with the baseball bat, and Max jams two fingers into his left eye as hard as he can. The eyeball feels like a hard-boiled egg and the man screams, but Max keeps gouging, desperate to break his grip. Two more men appear, knock his mother to the ground and pull Max's hands behind his back. The first man pushes his face directly into Max's: his swelling eye socket glistens with

gore and his remaining eye glares with such fury that Max squeezes his own shut.

‘*Achtung*, Stein!’ a familiar voice warns from the shadows. ‘Don’t damage the boy. Take them to the boat.’

The men drag Max and his mother down the beach to the sleek white motor yacht. The wind is stronger now and the scudding clouds clear when they reach the jetty. In the moonlight Max sees his father. He is immaculately dressed in pressed trousers, blazer and tie. His neatly combed hair is as shockingly white as Max’s. A distinctive black cigarette glows in his lips. He barely glances at Max before he turns to his mother. His unblinking, pale blue eyes are cold. ‘You shouldn’t have reverted to your maiden name, Jean,’ he says matter-of-factly. ‘That’s what led us to you.’

She steps closer to him, unafraid. ‘Helmut, let us be. You’ve nothing to fear from me. If I’d wanted to tell the authorities anything I’d have gone ahead by now. I no longer care what you’ve done, but I can’t allow you to corrupt my son.’

‘*Your* son?’ Helmut Kappel swells before her, as if unable to contain his rage. Yet his voice is so quiet it is barely audible above the gusting wind. ‘He’s *my* son. The boy’s a Kappel. He has duties. A destiny.’ He pauses, and when he speaks again his voice is softer. ‘You shouldn’t have left, Jean. I can’t believe you did. No one leaves a Kappel.’

‘I don’t love you any more.’

His eyes darken. ‘What’s love got to do with it? Duty and loyalty are all I asked of you.’

She blinks as if he has slapped her face. ‘But I did love you once, Helmut. More than you’ll ever know. I just can’t accept the crimes you committed in the name of your family.’

‘It was *our* family.’ He takes the black cigarette from his lips, studies the gold filter and flicks it into the sea.

‘Enough of this.’ He turns to the man with the jet-black ponytail, who has wrapped a bandage over his bloody eye. ‘Your men can put her on board, Stein.’

‘I’ll stay with the boy, Helmut,’ says a stockier, bearded man, with similar pale eyes and white-blond hair. He is dressed in a formal lightweight suit, Max’s Uncle Klaus, his father’s younger brother. ‘Until you return.’

‘No, Klaus. I want him to see this.’ Max’s father turns away with a flourish, revealing a glimpse of scarlet lining in his sober blue blazer. ‘The boy must learn.’

The yacht is over fifty feet long with cabins in the bow, but the men bundle Max and his mother into the exposed stern. A man sits on each side of Max, holding his wrists, while Stein and another man sit with his mother. The anchor is raised and the yacht casts off. His father nods to Uncle Klaus at the wheel and the idling engine roars into life, taking the craft out into the Pacific.

His father looms over him like an Old Testament prophet. ‘I’m taking you back to Zurich to continue your education. You’re my heir, Max. Your mother stole two years of your life but you’ll catch up. You’re a Kappel.’

Max strains to see past his father but the men tighten their hold on his wrists. ‘What are you doing to Mutti?’

‘Forget about her, Max.’ The clouds again conceal the moon, darkening his father’s face. ‘You must learn, my son, that love brings nothing but sorrow and chaos. The world would be a better place without it. At best it is a trivial distraction. At worst it’s a dangerous sickness that softens the mind and clouds the judgement. It must be controlled.’ Helmut Kappel glances over his shoulder at the woman to whom he has been married for eleven years. ‘No one is immune to its poison. Duty and loyalty are all that matter in a family, but your mother never understood this.’

‘Don’t listen to him, Max,’ his mother says. ‘Duty and loyalty are meaningless without love.’

Helmut Kappel straightens, and Max sees that Stein has knotted a rope round his mother’s legs. His eyes follow the wet coils, which lie on the deck like a dormant python. His heart jumps when he sees the stone block by her feet.

‘How deep is it here?’ his father demands.

Uncle Klaus checks the charts, then peers through the rain and intermittent moonlight to the high, serrated cliffs of the Na Pali coast. ‘Drops straight to the ocean floor – over two thousand feet.’

‘Stand her up, Stein.’

‘No,’ Max shouts. ‘No, Vater, no.’ He reaches for his mother but the men tighten their grip on his arms.

His mother’s eyes are fierce with passion. ‘Don’t hate your father for this,’ she says. ‘Don’t let him make you like he is.’

Stein stands her on the side of the boat, stares at Max with his single eye, and smiles. As the clouds part again, the moon shines like a silver sun and his mother’s white nightdress glows in the ghostly light. At a signal from Kappel, Stein wrestles the block overboard and, as the slick coils slither after it, she raises her arms high above her head, as if preparing to dive. She looks so beautiful, so composed, that the men stare in awe and relax their grip.

‘Be good, Max,’ she says. ‘I love you.’

Marshalling all his strength, Max wrenches himself from the men’s grasp and lunges for her as the taut rope plucks her overboard.

‘Stop him!’ his father shouts, as Max grips her wrists and takes one last deep breath. When the water engulfs him he feels no fear. On land he is awkward but in water he is in his element. If he tries hard enough he will save her.

His mother was once an Olympic swimmer. Together they will swim against the weight of the block.

In the submarine moonlight her eyes widen with shock and bubbles issue from her mouth. The fall has winded her, driving precious air from her lungs. It is up to him now. He must pull her to the surface. He kicks against the weight of the block, straining with all his power, but it continues its inexorable descent.

Her hands pull at his, trying to release him from their bond, but he will not let go. When the inky blackness closes in, she stares up at him, imploring him to release her. But he continues to hold her. The cold floor of the ocean seems an infinitely warmer place than that which awaits him above. 'I love you,' he declares silently, staring into her eyes.

Then his body betrays him. The build-up of carbon dioxide in his blood triggers the need to breathe before he blacks out, and in its panic his body obeys only one involuntary imperative: to survive. He releases his mother's wrists and kicks for the surface. When he breaches it he gasps for air as greedily as a newborn. Rough hands grip him and lift him on to the boat.

Shivering on deck, he retches, hating himself for letting his mother die but hating himself more for living. His father scowls down at him. 'You'll learn never to do anything like that again, boy,' he says. 'You'll feel no emotion, show no pain.'

PART 1

NATURE IDENTICAL

Thirty Years Later: 28 July

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

The pitch of the entrance buzzer cut through the low hum of air-conditioners, the silky purr of expensive scientific apparatus and the Eagles singing 'Hotel California' on the CD deck. The noise startled Professor Carlo Bacci, who was sitting in the office of his small private laboratory in the northern suburbs of Turin. He looked up from his computer screen and reached instinctively for the still-warm vial of white powder on the deck beside him. Its label read: 'Test Sample. NiL Version #072. Trial #2. Imprint: Self'. He checked his watch. It was almost six o'clock in the afternoon. He had sent his technician home early so he could complete this final trial undisturbed.

He opened the top drawer of the desk and retrieved a reusable second-generation vaccine gun no bigger than a lipstick holder with PowerDermic embossed into its beige polypropylene shell. He inserted the vial of white powder into its hollow base, then slipped it into the worn cotton jacket hanging over the back of his chair.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

Despite the air-conditioning, beads of sweat formed on his high forehead and his heart beat faster. He was doing nothing wrong: how could bringing happiness to the person you love be wrong? Still, he knew that today's trial was unethical, and old ethics died hard. He was almost sixty and had spent all his professional life in scientific research

in the United States, working for Ivy League academic institutions and the big pharmaceutical companies. Years of dealing with profit-obsessed men in Armani suits, however, had taught him that paying lip-service to ethical guidelines didn't always mean doing the right thing.

And it never meant receiving the rewards and recognition he deserved.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

He decided to ignore the buzzer and return to the computer screen to finish what he had started. In late July Italy was always hot, but this week the mercury hovered in the high thirties Celsius. Whoever was standing on the baking Tarmac outside the anonymous rental unit at the rear of the Agnelli business park would return if it was important.

He smiled, and in the curved chrome of the desk lamp the olive skin around his dark eyes creased into a thousand wrinkles. He looked a little mad in the distorted reflection, but he didn't care. He glanced at the photograph of his daughter on his desk. Isabella would never approve of what he was doing, but his resolve hardened when he thought of what Leo had done to her. When eventually he revealed his work to the world he was sure she would understand: his discovery meant that no one need ever be unhappy again.

The screen showed a four-column spreadsheet entitled: 'NiL Testing Schedule. Version #069'. The first column was labelled 'Injection Date'; the second, 'Subject'; the third, 'Duration'. The fourth, 'Genetic Facial Imprint', contained computer-generated images of women's faces. Fifteen trials had been recorded, not enough for a statistically significant sample but enough for Bacci to know that his drug worked.

The 'Injection Date' column confirmed that the first twelve trials had taken place at weekly intervals over a three-month period. Each woman's full contact details were

noted below the image of her face, although none had been aware of the experiment. Most had never even met Bacci. The 'Duration' column showed that each trial had lasted between forty-seven and forty-nine hours. The same entry occurred on each line under 'Subject': 'Self'. The twelfth trial had ended over a year ago, followed by a break of almost three months.

When the trials had resumed, nine months ago, the pattern changed. The last three entries still occurred at weekly intervals, recorded duration was still around forty-eight hours, and employed the same subject. However, they featured only one 'Genetic Facial Imprint': the same woman's image appeared in each experiment - she had a wide, round face, a button nose, warm hazel eyes and curly chestnut hair. Beneath it was her name, Maria Danza, her age, forty-four, an address and phone number.

He scrolled down the table and a horizontal red line appeared. Under the line was a new heading: 'NiL Testing Schedule. Version #072'. There was only one entry, dated three months after the last Version #069 trial, with the same subject, and genetic facial imprint, Maria Danza, but there was one crucial difference: 'Duration' contained the word 'Ongoing'. That was six months ago.

Bacci felt for the primed PowerDermic vaccine gun in his jacket pocket, then typed a second entry into the Version #072 table. Although he hadn't yet injected the powder he planned to do it tonight, so he entered today's date. He left the 'Duration' column blank and double-clicked on the fourth, importing an image from the database linked to the Genescope in the adjoining laboratory. The face that appeared under 'Genetic Facial Imprint' wasn't a woman's but Bacci's. Beneath it he typed, 'Self'. Finally he moved his cursor to 'Subject' and paused.

The earlier trials had been unauthorized and unorthodox, but they had only affected himself. Today's

trial was different: he was stepping over an ethical line he had never crossed before. But it will be definitive, he told himself. It will prove beyond doubt that the drug works and guarantee funding. His cousin Marco Trapani had already recommended a private bank. Anyway, he thought, this is bigger than Maria and me, and if it makes us happy in the process, where's the harm? Anyone else would use the drug if they had the opportunity. He typed Maria Danza's name into the 'Subject' box of today's trial.

His shoulders tensed. His cellphone was pulsing. He picked it up and checked the display. '*Ciao*, Maria. I hope you're not calling to cancel.'

There was a smile in her voice. 'Of course not.'

'Good. It's our anniversary, after all. Three hundred and sixty-five days.' He detected a sigh. 'Don't worry,' he said quickly. 'We'll keep it light, I promise.' Maria was fiercely independent: she had her own business, had survived a poisonous divorce and couldn't have children. She had told him on at least three occasions that she didn't want their relationship to become too serious – she certainly didn't want to get married again.

'Let's just have a good time, okay? Where are you?'

'In my lab.'

'You must be busy.'

'Just finishing. I'll cycle home to get my car and pick you up at seven.' Maria owned and managed a chain of mid-price jewellery shops in Turin. She lived in an apartment above the flagship store near the Duomo. 'We can go on to the restaurant.'

'I've a better idea. I'll pick you up in my car.'

He smiled. 'Okay, meet me at my house.'

'Not at the lab?'

He looked through the glass partition dividing his office from the laboratory. Eppendorf tubes, a Petri dish containing two strands of his hair, a pipette and other debris from today's sample lay scattered on the workbench. He would need to put everything in the autoclave and clear up all trace of what he had done before the technician returned in the morning. 'I've got to change.'

'I'll drive you home.'

This wasn't what he had planned. He checked his watch and put on his jacket. 'I'd rather meet you there. I'm leaving now.'

'And I'd rather meet you at your laboratory.'

'Why?'

She laughed. 'Two reasons. One, I've never seen inside it. And, two, I'm already there.'

Panic rippled through him and his eyes leapt to the computer screen. Her face stared out at him. Calm down, he told himself, quelling a rush of nerves.

'What do you mean?'

'I've been standing outside pressing the bell for the last fifteen minutes and it's hot. Please, hurry up and let me in, Carlo.'

He took the PowerDermic vaccine gun out of his jacket pocket and held it in his trembling hand. The device was a needle-free, second-generation hypodermic designed for children and patients with needle phobias. It used compressed helium to fire micro-fine powdered drugs at three times the speed of sound through the stratum corneum. Once past this thin but tough surface layer of human skin, the drug dissolved into the bloodstream. The process was silent, painless and left no mark. She would never know what he had done.

He took a deep breath. I'm doing nothing wrong, he told himself again. Then he walked to the door, careful to conceal the gun in his right palm. 'Give me a minute, Maria. I'm coming.'

A Week Later: 5 August

Isabella Bacci's father had left two voicemail messages: one at the neurology department of Milan University Hospital where she worked, and one at Phoebe Davenport's Milan apartment where she had been staying since Leo ended their engagement exactly twenty-six days ago. In both he had sounded excited and had summoned her to dinner: 'Bella, there's something I want to tell you. Something I want you to be the first to know.'

When she had called back to confirm, she'd got his voicemail. As she steered the small Fiat through the northern outskirts of Turin she wondered what her father wanted to tell her. The drive from Milan took an hour and a half but in the Fiat, which strained on the *autostrada* like a souped-up lawnmower, it seemed longer. She changed the CD for a mix she had burned on her Mac and turned up the volume. Pink belted out 'Just Like A Pill' just loud enough to compete with the whining engine. She had bought the tiny car when she first arrived in Italy, almost a year ago, because it was ideal for parking and driving around congested Milan. For longer trips, though, they had used Leo's car. But now Leo had pushed her out of his life, and everything had changed.

She flexed her stiff shoulders and looked down at the solitaire diamond engagement ring, which she had moved to her right hand. She should take it off altogether - but not yet. As long as she continued to wear it there was hope that he might return to her. She hated herself for being weak,

but she could remember her joy when Leo had proposed to her back home in the States. He was Italian, studying international law in Baltimore, and when he had asked her to follow him to Milan she had agreed, giving up her life in the States without a thought, including a medical and research career at the prestigious Johns Hopkins University. It had been a romantic leap of faith, but her father was in Turin and her oldest friend Phoebe was based in Milan; Isabella had quickly found a post at Milan University Hospital. She had been so certain and full of hope.

She turned into the neglected drive that led to her father's villa. It was a modest, wisteria-clad house in a pleasant residential suburb, and in the soft golden light of early evening it looked almost beautiful. His battered old Lancia stood in the drive and his Cannondale mountain bike, which he rode every day to the Agnelli business park where he rented a laboratory, leaned against the porch. Looking at the ramshackle scene, it was hard to believe that six or seven years ago he had inherited enough money to allow him to wash his hands of big business in the States and set up on his own here in the Old Country.

The only time he had allowed her into his laboratory, however, she had seen where the money had gone: his equipment was easily as good as what she had access to in the laboratories at the university hospital. But whenever she probed about his work, he always said: 'When I'm ready, Bella, I'll show you everything.' Perhaps that was what he wanted to share with her today.

She parked the car beside her father's and checked her face in the mirror. She brushed her shoulder-length black hair off her face - large brown eyes, full lips and a strong nose. At least her eyes weren't red from crying like the last time she had visited.