

## THE EMERALD PIN

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“A hundred thousand dollars plus a lot of sweat should do it,” he said. “Enough to build a demonstration system and sell the idea to the utility companies. I’ll put up fifty grand and I’m looking for venture capital to put up another fifty.”

She could not deny his sincerity, in everything he said, a man incapable of guile. “Will it really work?” she asked.

And he again explained the electronics of it, how the power grid covered America, with outlets in every home and office, how the radio signal, free of commercial interruptions, could be tunable everywhere. A hundred clear channels carrying everything from classical music to talk to rap. Just plug a normal FM radio into a little decoding box and tune in—for a fee, of course. And no dead zones like satellite radio services. But she listened only vaguely, his voice a stream of honey. Instead, she thought that *she* could be that venture capitalist. Fifty thousand dollars represented virtually all her savings, the result of her divorce settlement and squirreling away the part of her earnings left after paying for her mother’s assisted living arrangement. His voice a cascade of confidence filled with exotic terms like noise suppression, Kalman filtering, data compression, bandwidth limiting, all illuminated by the bright light of enthusiasm in his eyes.

“Words alone don’t mean a thing,” he was saying. “Ideas are a dime a dozen. If you can’t demonstrate a working system nobody will listen to you. A successful demo will get the utility companies to invest. Why not? They’ve got this enormous and expensive infrastructure in place. Why not use it for more than just transmitting power?” And he went on, his speech a kind of seduction.

It would make them partners, she thought, would tie him closer to her, but she said nothing, held back by the size of the commitment and the apprehension that, even with the best of intentions, many new ideas were often failures.

Patricia Engle was a pediatrician, her husband gone two years now, run off with a paralegal at his law firm. She blamed herself, her inability to have children. Heaven knows, they had tried. Using an ovulation kit, she tested herself twice a day, seeking the LH surge that meant she was fertile. They had sex repeatedly in the two days following the surge. Nothing. Then, in vitro fertilization (she pictured a drama unfolding in a Petri dish, his sperm, tails wagging, struggling greedily and ardently toward her eggs that waited demurely in the center), suffered through the indignities and embarrassment of it, and the cost, but the fertilized eggs would not attach to her uterus and no one could explain why. Her mother had had a similar problem and had not conceived Pat, her only child, until she was forty and given up all hope of motherhood. Pat imagined her mother's aging genes sighing at their work, she the late season product of a tired womb. Pat's husband shook his head at adoption; he left her after the paralegal became pregnant.

Pat's father as well had run off with a younger woman. She recalled her father as a remote figure who practiced his golf swing by knocking the heads off dandelion in their backyard. "He's got a heart the size of a dot and the scruples of a slave trader," is the way Pat's mother characterized him after he was gone.

As Pat attended to ear infections, colds, diarrhea, colics, the high fevers that children were prone to, the empathy for these innocents that had drawn her to pediatrics intensified. She considered it the supreme irony of her life that she, who all day and every day, ministered to these little miracles, could not produce one of her own.

Pat's mother, her face a corrugated relief map of a long life, plagued by arthritis, vascular deficiencies, and various indistinct ailments, now resided in one of Southern California's more exclu-

sive assisted living facilities, Sunset Manor, which she and Pat had chosen after long investigation and for which Pat paid. But Pat considered her mother a woman blessed with a shrewd and pragmatic intelligence and valued her judgment in all things. With the possible exception of God, the old woman only believed what she could see, touch, taste, or smell. After Pat's husband left, her mother held her hand and said, "You'll get over it, sweetheart. I know it's perfectly awful in the beginning. There are lots of fish in the sea. Maybe you'll catch another one, even if I never did." She tilted her head, squinted at her daughter. "The clothes you're wearing look bullet-proof. You might want to dress a little provocatively. As the Madison Avenue guys will tell you, packaging is everything."

But Patricia knew that though there may be many fish in the sea, those left in the marriage marketplace, after the best were long ago snapped up, were mostly misfits. Misfits with problems in a variety of flavors—emotional, physical, sexual. She became painfully aware of time, the weeks and months and years an unstoppable herd of tramping oxen. After a year of loneliness, she tried a dating service, was introduced to a man who claimed to be forty. They met for coffee, his hair a flat black, incongruous with the crows feet radiating from the corners of his eyes or the lines incised around his mouth. His too-white smile made her think of a door-to-door salesman peddling some shoddy product. She escaped after coffee.

She considered putting an ad in the paper, or answering an ad, but worried about the risk. A friend invited her for brunch and, to Pat's surprise, was accompanied by her father. He seemed a nice enough person, erudite and witty, and she thought nothing further. But he called and invited her to dinner where, it became clear, his intentions were amorous. She, sex starved, accepted the invitation to his home. In bed, the old man's hands were glacial—he explained this by saying that he was apprehensive—and this icy touch, that felt like death itself, extinguished whatever glimmer of passion she had felt at the onset. She fled, his pleading that it was a

shame to waste a Viagra that he had taken an hour earlier making her escape more urgent.

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Patricia Engle met Michael Prince at Tower Records, in Westwood. She had just left a UCLA seminar on the resurgence of certain childhood diseases, mumps and whooping cough, and had decided to buy a recording of Schubert's Trout Quintet, music she had heard that morning while driving to the university. She noticed him browsing through the collection, open shirt, fashionably unshaven, brow furrowed as he studied one CD then another. She searched through the Schuberts then he was beside her. "If you like Schubert, you'll love this," he said, and handed her a CD of Schubert's Octet. "It's a profound work. It's hard to believe he wrote it when he was only twenty-seven and dying of syphilis." His voice was easy, unforced, pleasant. He wore no marriage band.

Pat searched for something clever to say, pictured the young Schubert bent over a table, scribbling his Octet by the light of a kerosene lamp, in a desperate race against the spirochete eating its way up his spinal column toward his brain. "Maybe music was his way of cheating death."

"You have to admire his courage," Prince said. "I'd be paralyzed knowing that soon I would be dead."

Pat, not sure where to take the conversation but not wanting the man to leave, opted for Darwin. "I sometimes wonder where music comes from," she said, gesturing toward the racks of CDs around them. "Why all this? Why do people like music at all?"

"That's a tough question.... Tell you what. I was about to go lunch. There's an Italian restaurant down the block. Will you join me? We can sort out the origins of music over pasta."

"First, let me buy the Octet."

"It was my recommendation. Let me buy it for you." At that moment their eyes met and Pat had the feeling that their destinies had clicked and locked.

Over lunch, she learned his name, that he was an engineer with an electronics company in Culver City, and had only recently transferred to Los Angeles from an assignment at Cape Canaveral. And no, he was not married, had never been married, though he had lived with a woman for a while in Florida. She judged him younger than she, not exactly handsome but with a controlled intensity about him.

That weekend, he invited her to the theater, to Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," picked her up at her condo, his car an old Ford Taurus. After the theater, he invited her to his apartment. "This is just a transient place," he apologized, "until I can find something to buy. I can't believe how expensive houses are around here. Anyway, this is all rented,"—his hand swept across the spavined couch, the mismatched chairs, an old Sony TV, the lamp with a torn shade—"until I find a place. My furniture is all in storage." He gave a wry smile, as charming and lovely as Pat had ever seen.

He was good in bed, unhurried. She told him of her work and by his comments knew that he listened, listened with interest. He took her to the Walt Disney Concert Hall, the featured work Brahms Violin Concerto. "Brahms said that when he composed the piece he felt in tune with the infinite," Michael said.

"Maybe all great composers do," Pat said. "Handel swore that when he wrote *The Messiah* he saw all of paradise before him."

It was at that moment that Prince broached his idea of using the power grid to transmit radio signals. "I have to confess that when the idea came to me it came all at once, like a Biblical revelation, an epiphany, and I felt the way Brahms and Handel must have felt."

Pat could tell by the quickening of his voice, the champagne bubbles of enthusiasm in it, that he had brought up something important. He went on with the idea, gave details that she did not follow, then seemed to tire of it. "When I'm settled in L.A. I'll look into it further, see about constructing a demonstration system. You can't sell an idea like this without hardware."

Pat invited him to her condo, cooked dinner for him. He spoke knowledgeably about books, architecture, even cooking. She could

detect no faking in his speech: when he was unsure about something he said so, and when he disagreed with her on some political issue, he told her why in a good-natured way that defused any tension. He worked on a classified government project and could not even mention the subject of the work except that it was for the CIA, in a top secret facility where he could not receive phone calls. He seemed uncomfortable when he said this, as if he had let slip too much. She mentioned her mother and that they were close and he said he'd like to meet her. Of his family he spoke hardly at all except that his father was a retired book editor and his mother an elementary school teacher and violinist who never played professionally, only with groups of friends. They had spent most of their lives in New York and his parents still lived in an apartment on the west side. "I grew up in the city, a child of asphalt," he said. He, too, was an only child. Pat had the impression there had been a falling out between Michael and his parents but she did not want to pry. As he spoke, Pat was stricken by a sense of destiny: never again would she meet someone so perfectly suited to herself.

Whenever they met, he brought a gift: flowers, a CD, a bottle of wine, and once an emerald pin, her birthstone, the green matching the color of her eyes, her finest feature. "This will drive away evil spirits, increase fertility, ease childbirth—and besides all that, it's a symbol of immortality... Do you like it? She did indeed like it; fervently, she gave of herself that night.

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"I'm so pleased to meet you, Mrs. Engle," Prince said, and took her hand as he gave her a pleasant smile.

"You're the young man my daughter has been telling me about," Mrs. Engle said without returning the smile.

"I trust she's only been telling you good things."

"Too good. Only saints are that good and there aren't many of those around."

"I'm not a saint, Mrs. Engle, whatever your daughter told you."

Pat had to admit, Michael Prince could be totally disarming.

Mrs. Engle rose with creaking difficulty and led the couple to a corner of the dining room, ordered tea and cakes, then peered thoughtfully at Michael. "How come you're not married, Mr. Prince? Are you divorced or gay?"

"Neither," he replied good humouredly. "Just haven't come across Ms. Right. Please call me Michael."

She asked about his family then, finally, "What do you want out of life, Mr. Prince?"

"To be happy. To be successful. To develop this idea I have."

"And what is that idea?"

He started to explain the transmission of radio signals, commercial free, over power lines but Mrs. Engle, refusing to be dragged into the details, interrupted. "Others must have thought of this," she said.

"Perhaps they have, but nobody has done it."

"Maybe it can't be done.... Have you applied for a patent?"

"Not yet. First, I want to build a demonstration model then find a top notch patent attorney. *How* you write a patent is everything."

"Why would anyone take notice of your idea?"

"Because it's disruptive, innovative, and brings convenience to people with almost no effort on their part."

"What are the risks? Maybe your idea just won't work."

"The big risk is something I call the unknown unknowns. If you have a problem and *know* you have a problem, you can take steps to solve it. But if there's a problem that you don't even know exists, then you can do nothing until the problem surfaces, and that always happens late and destructively."

"What can you do to avoid that?"

"Do lots of what-if analysis, build demonstration hardware—" Prince smiled at Mrs. Engle, a smile that Pat thought could melt granite "—and pray a lot."

Pat observed that her mother seemed to enjoy this exchange, this interrogation. The old woman took a dainty bite of a madeleine, flicked a crumb from her sleeve, sipped her tea. "Do you think it's possible to be happy?"

“Not always, no,” he replied. “I think we’re genetically programmed to be restless, to never be content with what we have, to always want more.”

“What is your job?”

“I’m an electrical engineer, working on a secret government project.”

“Do you enjoy your work?”

“Mostly yes. But I want to be on my own. Not take orders from people. Develop my own business.”

The old woman suddenly appeared tired. “Were you a happy child?”

He paused before answering, brow furrowed. “Tough to say. But I was rarely sick and seldom missed school. My parents were busy so I was pretty much a loner. I guess I still am.” He gave his wry smile. “I suppose I was run-of-the-mill happy.”

Before they left, Michael took Mrs. Engle’s hand. “You should go out. Pat and I could take you to a concert. I’m sure you would enjoy that.” He leaned toward her, kissed her cheek.

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Pat could not resist calling her mother. “Well, what do you think?”

“He’s certainly a charming guy, I’ll say that for him. But there’s something about him that bothers me. He’s smart and knowledgeable, but... I don’t know... He’s too glib. The answers come too easily.”

“Maybe he just knows himself.”

“Maybe. But I would go slowly, Patricia. Very slowly. Do not be too avid. Give the relationship time.”

But Pat *was* avid, avid for something more than dinners together, concerts, theater, and sex, no matter how good. But Michael never mentioned marriage or living together. She wondered whether she should take the initiative and suggest a trial partnership. Her condo was certainly large enough for two. But she could not bring herself to do this. Then he began to complain

about his job, though without bitterness: the need to take orders, orders from someone he did not respect.

“What about your radio project?”

“It takes money. I have some but it’ll take about twice what I have.”

“What would it take?”

“About a hundred-thousand dollars to build a demo unit. I’ve saved fifty-thousand. I could use a new car, would like to buy a house, but I skimp, put my seed money together. The payoff will come later, after I get venture capital to provide the rest.”

It was at that moment that the thought of her providing the money came to Pat Engle: a partnership that would meld their lives. But an inner voice cautioned against a precipitous proposal; she needed greater certainty. In a tone that despite herself became professional, formal, she asked, “Do you have a business plan, market data? When you’re looking for an investor, don’t you need that sort of thing?”

“I’ll show them the analysis I’ve done. That’s pretty persuasive. But business plans...you can make those at the rate of one a week. But they don’t matter. All that matters is a demonstration. If that’s successful then the business plan will write itself. If the demo doesn’t work, then nothing will matter. Fifty-thousand is not that much for a venture capitalist to put up given the potential of the idea.”

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Pat had received her MD at UCLA and done her pediatrics residency at the UCLA Medical Center. She called one of her old professors and through him arranged a meeting with the dean of the school’s electrical engineering department. She explained the system to him as best she could. “Do you think it will work?” she finished.

The dean, who had the dryness of one long married to academe, answered in a didactic voice. “It’s a long shot. Power lines go through transformers that take the high voltage from power

stations and transform it down to the 120 volts you receive at home. Transformers are built for sixty cycle operation, not radio frequencies. Then long power lines at high frequencies would act as antennas, radiating away part of the signal, and so reducing it further...Still, some signal might get through.” Then the dean discoursed on signal-to-noise ratio and filtering that Pat did not follow. “It’s the details that matter. It’ll take much, and I mean much, ingenuity for it to work at all.”

Pat agonized alone then visited her mother and told her that she was thinking of investing in Michael’s idea, named the sum, then gave her the judgment of the electrical engineering dean. “Do you really want to do this?” her mother asked. “That’s an awful lot of money.”

“I’m conflicted. I believe in the man. I think he’s honest. But even with the best of intentions, the idea might not work. The UCLA professor said it was a long shot. But even when he said that I thought he was being charitable. The question is do I want to invest my savings in a long shot, maybe a very long shot.”

“Do you love him?”

“I think so. When I’m not with him, I miss him terribly.”

“Is he interested in marriage?”

“We’ve never talked about it.”

The old woman heaved a long ambiguous sigh; like an old hunting dog, she could smell trouble. “I don’t like the feel of this. If you invest and his idea doesn’t work the first time, then he’ll want more money to finish the job. Let him dig up that venture capital money he talks about...and by the way, he hasn’t invited me to a concert yet.”

And so Pat left, as conflicted as she had been before she’d seen her mother.

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They had dinner together at an Italian restaurant on Ocean Boulevard in Santa Monica. “Tell me,” Pat said with a half-smile

as she sipped her glass of Pinot Grigio, “Why is this the greatest concept since the birth control pill?”

Michael leaned forward, a man fevered by an idea, and once again reviewed the technical details, had immediate answers to the qualms raised by the engineering dean, then talked to market size, opportunity, his voice filled with light. And Pat, who had promised herself to listen objectively, skeptically, a beady-eyed investor, nevertheless found herself drawn into Prince’s demonstration. She was astonished at how, in his hands, it all assumed a naturalness, a perfect logic, that swept aside such mundane details as feasibility, engineering, financing, management. It occurred to her that Prince, like a gifted evangelist, was selling belief. But then she knew that belief, like the placebo effect, was a powerful force. From religion to medicine to the stock market, what people believed controlled their lives. There was no hard line that separated belief from reality. But aside from sales ability, there was something in Prince’s demeanor—charm, magnetism, a quality of leadership, an inner coolness—that gave Pat the impression she was in the presence of greatness. She experienced a swooning within, a disappearance of doubt.

At that moment, despite the inner voice of caution—distant, almost inaudible—that persisted, Pat said, “Why don’t I be your venture capitalist? I’ll make the investment.” She felt a great flooding of relief, as if she had taken a decisive step to secure her future.

Michael stared at her. “I can’t let you do that,” he said and seemed genuinely agitated. “I’m confident this will work. But I can’t be absolutely certain...No. That’s very sweet of you, and I do appreciate the offer, but I’ll find a professional investor. Keep your money, Pat. It’s okay.”

Astonished that she was being rebuffed and certain now that she wanted to invest, Pat said, “I want to do this, Michael.”

“Think about it some more. There’s plenty of time.”

Feeling that something was being snatched from her, as if her whole future was at stake, she said, “But I *have* thought about it.”

He contemplated her for a long while. "All right then," he finally said. "If you're certain." Then he leaned toward her, never had she seen such sincerity. "I'll never forget this, Pat. We'll do this together, partners, create a great enterprise." He held his hands out, cradling the thought like an infant.

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The following morning, a Saturday, Pat Engle handed Michael Prince a cashier's check for \$50,000. She told herself, repeated to herself, that this was an investment in far more than an idea; it was an investment in a man, a relationship, her future. "You will never regret this," he said and they kissed. She had not asked for a contract, an agreement, or anything else. It didn't seem to matter. They celebrated by going to an afternoon concert at the Music Center, she wearing the emerald pin, held hands through Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, did not stay for Beethoven's Seventh but hurried to her condo and made love all that evening. The following morning, though it was Sunday, he left early. "To work!" he said.

Pat passed the day in a glow of well-being; she felt a kinship with the world, mysterious and enthralling, as she waited for Michael's call. It did not come. She called his apartment that afternoon. No answer. She called again in the evening and with rising anxiety that night and the following morning. Still no answer. Perhaps he was traveling, but then he would have told her. Finally, a day later, she drove to his apartment, found the manager. "The guy skipped out Sunday," he said. "In a hurry. The son of a bitch still owes me three months rent." A shiver ran through her and contracted her uterus.

Pat called the personnel office of the electronics company in Culver City where Prince said he worked. "No one by that name is employed here," the woman told her. "And as far as I know, we have no programs with the CIA." Stupidly, Pat asked, "Are you sure?" The thought that she would never see Michael again spread through her like an oil slick.

“You poor thing,” her mother said. “It’s a lot bigger than fifty-thousand dollars, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is,” Pat said through her tears.

Her mother gave her a consoling hug, handed her a Kleenex, then sighed a long sigh. “Are you going to the police?” Pat stared at her mother—the thought had not occurred to her, but then what would she tell them—then shook her head.

A bitter gray fog settled over Pat Engle. Evenings, she found herself waiting for the phone to ring, a phone call she knew would never come. It had all been fake, he an accomplished actor who had smelled in her the rich scent of possibility. How clever of him to manipulate her into *offering* the money! Had he felt anything at all, even a glimmer, just a whisper, of love? Dread entered her life: she felt threatened by moving things: cars, trucks, busses, passerby, as if something malevolent, bent on her destruction, lurked behind the everyday face of the world. When she returned to her condo, it struck her as dispirited and alien, an impersonal hotel in a foreign country. Silence filled every corner of the house, the rooms shrunken, unfriendly, funereal, about them the smell of failure. In bed at night she stared into the dark, could not sleep, her throat dry as straw, assailed by fears she knew were childish. Strange beasts were roaming the earth, smashing everything before them. Prehistoric creatures were incubating, coming to life, wandering the earth, fracturing the ground with each step, the world receding in time, regenerating into its primal self.

Once, sleepless, she heard a fly buzzing against her window as if trying to cut through it with a minute circular saw. She switched on the light and with a magazine mashed the fly against the glass. This gave her a sense of satisfaction and she was able to sleep. The following morning, guiltily, she cleaned the mess. She went about her job robot-like, an automaton that checked her baby and child patients, comforted their mothers—each day one long repetitive action like a busy signal—while the rest of her remembered Michael, their first encounter, the concerts, their love making.

“Stop steeping like a tea bag in your misery,” Pat’s mother exclaimed. “Let’s go out—to dinner, a movie, the zoo, anything.”

That month Pat’s period, which was regular as clockwork, was late. She attributed this to stress and thought nothing of it. Then she began to experience a strange metallic taste, tingling in her breasts, and finally morning nausea. Disbelieving, thinking it some psychological aberration, she took a pregnancy test kit from the office. She urinated on the end of the test stick—prayed that the hormone chorionic gonadotrophin was coursing through her blood—and, to her astonishment and delight, watched the color of the stick change to a rosy and beautiful pink. Though she was the least superstitious of women, she thought of the emerald pin.

“Mom, you can’t guess what’s happened to me,” she said.

“Your Prince Charming is back.”

“In a way, yes. I’m pregnant!”

There was a moment of silence. “Was it worth fifty grand?”

“You bet!” Pat answered.

When she hung up, a ray of light swung across her memory: hadn’t Michael also said that the emerald would ease childbirth? She decided to wear the pin throughout her pregnancy. She would not check whether the emerald was genuine: though everything else Prince said or did was surely false, this she would believe.