

**CHARLIE THORNE IS A GENIUS.
CHARLIE THORNE IS A THIEF.
CHARLIE THORNE IS NOT OLD ENOUGH TO DRIVE.
AND NOW IT'S UP TO HER TO SAVE THE WORLD.**

Decades ago, Albert Einstein devised an equation that could benefit all life on earth—or destroy it. Fearing what would happen if the equation fell into the wrong hands, he hid it.

But now a diabolical group known as the Furies is closing in on its location. In desperation, a team of CIA agents drags Charlie into the hunt, needing her brilliance to help them find it first—even though this means placing her life in grave danger.

In a breakneck adventure that spans the globe, Charlie must crack a complex code created by Einstein himself, struggle to survive in a world where no one can be trusted, and fight to keep the last equation safe once and for all.

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**CHARLIE
THORNE
AND THE
LAST EQUATION**

PROLOGUE

Princeton, New Jersey

April 18, 1955

2:55 a.m.



Albert Einstein was dying.

In the great man's bedroom on the second floor of his white clapboard house, a young doctor held a vigil by his side.

It was a quirk of fate that the young doctor was even there. Einstein's regular physician, a man who had been his friend and confidant for years, was sick himself that night. The young doctor was filling in for him and had answered the emergency call, never expecting that he would end up witnessing history.

The doctor was at once awestruck and saddened. He couldn't believe he was here, treating Albert Einstein himself—and yet he knew the old man's time was quickly running out. Einstein was in agony, fading in and out of consciousness. There was nothing the doctor could do for him except try to ease his pain.

To the doctor's surprise, the housekeeper—a stern older woman named Helen—had argued vehemently against giving Einstein painkillers, even trying to throw them out the window. Ultimately, the doctor had to drag the old woman from the room and lock her out. He had felt guilty about this—especially when Helen had pounded on the door, desperately pleading for him to listen to her—but he had administered the drugs anyhow. His responsibility was to the patient. It would have been a violation of his oath to let Einstein continue suffering.

Eventually, Helen had stopped pleading and gone to make a frantic phone call.

Now Einstein seemed to be asleep, his head propped on the pillows, his breath coming in ragged heaves. However, his pulse was still racing, indicating that his body wasn't truly resting.

The doctor heard a car screech to a stop on the street outside and then Helen answering the front door downstairs. Whomever she had called had arrived. It hadn't taken long—perhaps five minutes. The doctor wondered if this new visitor would be more willing to listen to reason. . . .

Einstein's hand suddenly clasped the doctor's wrist, startling him. The great scientist snapped upright in bed, his eyes wide open but unfocused—the wild stare of a morphine haze. He pulled the doctor toward him with

surprising strength and hissed, “*Die Gleichung muss geschützt werden!*”

“I—I’m sorry,” the doctor stammered. “I don’t understand.”

Einstein stared at him, seeming both confused and aggravated. The doctor suspected delirium had set in, a side effect of the painkillers. Einstein probably had no idea where he was—or that he was even speaking German. And yet he spoke with startling conviction for a man who had been heavily sedated, as though his thoughts were so important, he was determined to express them at any cost.

“*Pandorabüchse!*” Einstein exclaimed urgently. “*Sie ist im Holmes. Die Gleichung muss geschützt werden!*”

The doctor could now hear footsteps racing up the stairs. He tried to lay Einstein back down in bed, to comfort him somehow, but Einstein remained upright, clutching him tightly.

“I don’t speak German,” the doctor explained. “Please. Try in English. . . .”

“*Pandorabü . . .*,” Einstein began again, but it was all he could manage. The light in his eyes faded. His pulse faltered. Then he collapsed back onto the bed, the final thought of his incredible life unfinished.

Ernst Klein burst through the door a second later, splintering the frame. He was the same age as Einstein, and they

had been friends since they had met during their freshman year at the Federal Polytechnic in Zurich nearly six decades earlier. Ernst wore only pajamas with a raincoat hastily pulled over them. He hadn't even taken the time to put on a pair of slippers; his feet were still bare.

The moment he saw Einstein, Ernst knew he was too late. His knees buckled slightly, as if all his years had suddenly descended upon him. Tears welled in his eyes. But this was all the remorse he had time for. He fought his emotions aside and turned to the young doctor. "I heard him speaking to you. What did he say?"

"I don't know." The doctor was surprised to find his hands were shaking. He had already witnessed many deaths in his thirty years, but this one had been different. His final moments with Einstein had left him strangely unsettled. "It was in German—I think. I couldn't understand it."

"Can you repeat it?" It wasn't a question so much as a demand. Despite his years, Ernst had a commanding presence.

"No. I don't think so."

"Please!" Ernst seized the doctor by his lapels with such force that he nearly lifted the young man off the floor. "You must try!"

The doctor forced himself to concentrate. "It was something like 'pander abuse. . . .'"

Worry flickered in Ernst's eyes. "*Pandorabüchse?*"

The doctor gasped, surprised. "That's it! How did you . . . ?"

"Did Albert say anything else?"

"Yes, but I can't recall it. It sounded urgent, though . . . like it was an order. Like he wanted me to do something."

Ernst relaxed his grip on the doctor, nodding sadly, aware the younger man had no more information to share. If only he had been here a few seconds earlier! If he had just driven a little faster, maybe taken Chestnut Street instead of Maple . . .

No, Ernst told himself. There was no point to wishing that history was different. As Einstein would have pointed out, time moved in only one direction. There was work to be done.

An anguished cry rang out behind him. Helen stood in the doorway, clutching the jamb for support, staring at Albert's lifeless body.

Ernst felt a pang of remorse. He wanted to comfort the woman. He wanted someone to comfort *him*. He wanted to sit by the bed, hold his old friend's hand one last time, and cry.

But he couldn't. Not now. Not when Einstein had spoken about *Pandorabüchse* on his deathbed. The worst-case scenario they had always feared had come to pass, and now Ernst had to deal with it. He grasped the

doctor's arm tightly, leading him from the room. "You must go," he said firmly.

"But I have to report the death. . . ."

"Do it tomorrow. Go home now. Get some rest. Then phone in your report. Say Albert died at seven a.m. . . ."

"I can't do that. It's against my oath. . . ."

"Do you know who that man is in there?" Ernst nodded toward the bedroom.

"Of course."

"Would you have ever questioned his judgment when he was alive?"

The doctor considered this, then shook his head.

Ernst fished an envelope from his pocket. It was creased and brown with age. "I'm not giving you *my* orders. They're *his*."

The doctor reluctantly opened the envelope. Inside were two yellowing pages. The first was a letter, typed and notarized:

To whom it may concern:

I, Albert Einstein, being of sound mind, name Ernst Klein to be the supreme executor of my estate. He is my closest friend and he is to be given your complete and utter trust.

If you are reading this, I have passed

on. I beg you to do whatever Ernst requests. He is acting in accordance with my wishes. Do not waste his time asking why; he does not know himself. Only I do, and my reasons shall die with me. Suffice it to say, I have a very good explanation for such extreme precautions.

I beg you: Never speak a word of this to anyone.

Thank you for your understanding,

Albert Einstein

The doctor looked back at Einstein, stunned, wondering what the old man could have had in mind. He began to turn to the second page of the documents, but Ernst snatched them away.

“I’m afraid the rest of this is for my eyes only.” Ernst took the doctor’s arm again and steered him down the stairs. “Now, if you’ll be so kind as to give us some time, we’d greatly appreciate it.”

The doctor was surprised to find himself nodding in agreement. He couldn’t explain why exactly; he simply had a sense that something far greater than himself was taking place. Something only an intellectual powerhouse like Einstein could conjure up—or comprehend. Before the doctor knew it, he was at the front door, shaking hands

with Ernst, devising a plan to falsify the time of Einstein's death.

Ernst closed the door on him and turned all three latches. Then he made a beeline for Einstein's study.

It was on the first floor, wedged between the living room and dining room, but lacking any of their formality. This was the place where Albert could be himself, and it was strewn with the residue of a thousand ideas in progress. Notebooks and papers covered every available surface: they were piled on the desk, couch, and chairs; floor-to-ceiling bookshelves buckled under their weight; even the fireplace was being used for storage, with sheaves of paper stacked upon the andirons. A double-sided blackboard in the corner was coated with dozens of equations, many half-erased and then written over again. As Albert had aged, his organizational skills had waned, although he had never stopped thinking.

Looking at the study, all Ernst could think was that he had a great deal of work to do.

Even so, he quickly read the second page from the envelope, the instructions Albert had given him ten years before. Ernst knew what they said, but what he was about to do seemed so radical—so sacrilegious—that he needed Albert's reassurance before he began.

It made sense to start with the papers in the fireplace. He found a box of matches, struck one, and set it to the

pile. Much of the paper was old and brittle; some might have been stacked there, forgotten, for a decade. The pile quickly burst into flame. Thousands of Einstein's calculations instantly turned to ash.

The next pages Ernst added to the fire were Einstein's instructions themselves. Then, working as quickly as his old muscles would allow, he began to burn everything else.

Over the crackle of the flames, Ernst heard two cars skid to a stop in front of the house. Men's voices echoed in the night.

They're already here, Ernst thought.

He was surprised. Not that Albert had been right about them—Albert was *always* right—but that they had arrived so quickly. They must have been stationed closer than he had realized.

Ernst stepped up his pace, throwing everything he could into the fire, racing to destroy as much as possible in the little time he had. He gave no thought to himself, only to the promise he had made to Albert, even though the fire was now blazing hot enough to scorch his skin and the smoke stung his eyes and filled his lungs. He continued feverishly stoking the flames, even as he heard the men break down the front door and shove Helen aside, even as they burst into the room and pulled their guns and screamed at him to stop, right up until their leader clubbed him from behind, crumpling him to the floor.

In the seconds before he lost consciousness, Ernst Klein prayed that, by some miracle, *Pandorabüchse* had been in the fraction of Einstein's work he'd been able to destroy—and that it was finally gone from the earth once and for all.