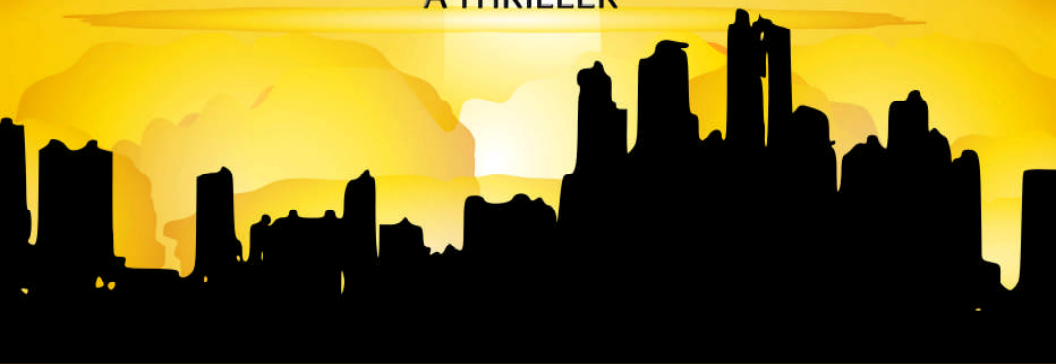


# QUANTUM ETHICS

A THRILLER



KEITH ELLIS

## Sample Chapter

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For Margie  
Chelley, Stephe, and Katie

# QUANTUM ETHICS

*A Thriller*

by Keith Ellis

“I think I can safely say that no one understands quantum mechanics. Do not keep saying to yourself ‘But how can it be like that?’ because you will get into a blind alley from which no one has yet escaped.”

—*Richard Feynman, winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics*

“Although quantum mechanics has been around for nearly 70 years, it is still not generally understood or appreciated, even by those that use it to do calculations.”

—*Stephen Hawking, Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University*

“It’s easy to understand quantum mechanics. Everything we know about reality is determined by our point of view. The rest is just math.”

—*Casy Geemunu*

## Chapter 1

*God has no conscience*, the old man thought. He dropped to his knees and prayed.

His granddaughter had been missing since yesterday morning, just after they set up camp. She was only four and couldn't wait to begin exploring. He took his eyes off her for only a minute or two and she was gone.

"It's all my fault, Lord," he explained to the Almighty. "Please don't take it out on her."

There was no reply.

Old Tom Krieger had passed the best times of his life in these mountains. His father brought him here to hunt and fish when he was a boy. Tom used to bring his own boys here when they were young and full of juice, before the older one stepped on an IED just south of Baghdad, and the younger one became a fancy corporate lawyer in New York City. He drank himself to death when his marriage went sour, or maybe it was the other way around. He left behind a very bitter widow and the most precious little girl in the world.

The new day dawned colder than the last, clear enough to see the smog over Helena more than a hundred miles away. A front was moving in loaded with the season's first snowfall, fully a month ahead of schedule. He shivered. He couldn't remember when the cold had come so early to these mountains. They had to find his little girl in the next few hours or it wouldn't matter any more.

The search teams were exhausted and chilled to the bone but they kept going, slogging through the underbrush and stumbling over jagged outcrops of stone that erupted like a rash along the mountainside. He knew they were cursing him for a fool for bringing a little girl into country like this and letting her wander away.

And they were right.

He was as tired as any man on the mountain that morning but he didn't feel it. He didn't feel anything but the need to find his dead son's baby girl. Remorse, anguish, guilt—ghosts that would haunt

him the rest of his days if he failed—all those were only glimmerings now, crowded from his consciousness by a sense of urgency that gutted him like a blade. He would keep going no matter how long it took to find Sally. If he dropped dead afterward it would only serve him right.

His sunken eyes reddened with tears as he watched wave after wave of searchers report in. All brought the same news they'd been bringing since yesterday afternoon when the first forest rangers began to arrive. No trace of his granddaughter. Not a footprint. Not a bent blade of grass. Not a lock of hair. *Nothing*. She'd simply vanished from the face of the earth as if her glowing smile had never existed and the laughter that sounded like a chorus of little bells had never warmed an old man's broken heart. He cradled his head in his hands. He would never be able face her mother again. Or anyone else.

By mid-morning, the storm clouds that were crowding dark and threatening on the horizon began to obscure the sun. Yet another mud-splattered Jeep bounced up the rocky canyon toward the base camp of the searchers, halfway up a mountain in the heart of the wilderness that claimed western Montana. The driver looked like all the other uniformed law enforcement officers who had been swarming over this rugged terrain for a day and a night. But the passenger was different.

He was dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt with a medium-weight jacket, like so many of the locals who poured in to help with the search. But he didn't look like a lumberjack, or a hunter, or a dirt farmer. His face was lean and darkened by the sun. His green eyes sparkled with flecks of gold. They glowed with an uncanny light, as if they were intimately familiar with the hardness of the world but could still gaze in wonder at its beauty. They were astonishingly alert, like the eyes of an animal bred to the wild. His thick, black hair was pulled into a ponytail that gave him an air of dignity, as if he were a young chief of some ancient and noble tribe. His striking features were shadowed by a few days' growth of heavy beard. But this was no movie star's trick to look masculine. On him it was real.

When he stepped from the Jeep, even the most casual observer would have been obliged to give him a second glance. He was tall, with broad shoulders, and rock solid, as if he'd been hand hewn from one of these mountains. Perhaps he once played linebacker in the NFL or won a medal in the Olympics. Or maybe he was just a young god fallen from the sky. Whatever his story, he moved up the hill with the grace and casual strength of a mountain lion. His eyes flashed with preternatural keenness, roaming everywhere and absorbing every detail. His actions were in such perfect harmony with the primal setting that it seemed to claim him as its own, as if he, too, were a force of nature.

The U.S. Marshal who had been driving now walked beside him. A large man in his own right, he seemed insignificant next to the newcomer. Against the backdrop of the wilderness, they were opposites. One of them clearly belonged in this ancient forest. The other just as clearly did not. They made a brief detour to study the ground surrounding what had once been a campfire at the base of a towering pine and then continued up the hill.

They stopped in front of Krieger who stared at them blankly, as if he had forgotten the meaning of either hope or despair. Art Peters, the marshal, cleared his throat. In a voice hoarse from twenty-four hours of shouting the name of the missing child, he said "Krieger, this is Mr. Thunder. He's here to help you find your little girl."

Krieger stared at the newcomer. "Is that an Indian name?" he asked, his voice rising with hope.

Thunder shook his head.

There was a pause as if the old man were waiting for the rest of the story. But Thunder had nothing more to say.

"He's supposed to be the best damn tracker in the country," the marshal added, though it was clear from his tone of voice that he no longer harbored much hope for the child no matter who was here to help. Art Peters knew damn well how cold it was in these mountains come nightfall and he knew that Krieger's granddaughter hadn't been dressed for the weather. He also knew how good the men were who

had been searching nonstop for her the past twenty-four hours. They were experienced hunters and trackers every one, most of them born and raised around here. They knew every nook and cranny of this unforgiving land, every crevice, and they hadn't found a thing. Not a footprint, not a thread from her clothing. Even the goddamn hound dogs had drawn a blank. The brutal truth was that they might never find the little girl—he'd seen that happen out here—and even if they did, there might not be much left of her to mourn. He'd seen that, too.

But if the marshal was willing to give up hope, he wasn't willing to give up the search. He turned to Thunder, pointed back the way they had come and said, "The little girl wandered off from that campfire yesterday morning." He swept the face of the mountain with his arm. "We dispatched four-man teams to comb every inch in every direction. They went as far out as a mile, then doubled back and traded search areas on the return in case somebody missed something." He paused and chewed on his lip for a moment. "Then they went out and did it all over again. And then again. They did it all night." He took off his hat and smoothed back his thinning hair. "Of course, the hounds haven't been out that far, but they've run circle after circle around this area and never found a damn thing."

That last comment seemed to strike Krieger like an arrow in the chest. Lips quivering, he gazed at Thunder. In a thin voice, he asked, "Do you think you can find her?" He stared off toward the top of a ridge where two more search teams were vanishing into the tree line, above which glowered a line of dark clouds. "Before it's too late?"

Thunder didn't answer. "Your granddaughter is deaf," he said. It wasn't a question.

Krieger nodded.

The marshal stared in disbelief. "She's what?" he shouted. "We've been on this goddamn mountain for a day and a night and you never told us she's deaf?"

"I didn't think about it," stammered Krieger, his sunken eyes somehow drawing farther into his skull. "I guess I didn't think it would make any difference."

“No difference? We’ve been screaming our goddamn lungs out hoping she’d hear us!”

Krieger’s head fell forward until his chin touched his bony chest.

The marshal turned away, disgusted, and kicked savagely at a stone by his feet. He spun back toward the old man. “Do you realize we could be ten yards away from her right now and she’d never even know it?”

“More like a hundred yards,” said Thunder, staring at a clump of bushes up the mountain.

The marshal glared at him, nursing his anger. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Thunder pointed to the bushes, “That’s where I’d go if it started to rain on me.”

The grandfather’s mouth fell open. “It did, Marshal, it started raining right after she disappeared.” He stared at Thunder. “Mister, how’d you know that?”

“If it hadn’t rained, the dogs would have found her,” Thunder replied.

“How the hell’d you know the girl was deaf?” the marshal asked.

Thunder shrugged, “Mr. Krieger hasn’t been yelling like the rest of you. If he had been, he’d be as hoarse as you are, Marshal. He didn’t bother to yell because he knew it wouldn’t do any good.”

The marshal thought about that for a moment, nodded, and shifted his attention to the spot where Thunder pointed. He cleared his throat and said, “You’re saying she’s hiding in those bushes?”

Thunder shook his head. “No, she’s probably asleep in the cave behind those bushes.”

“Cave?” the grandfather asked. “What cave?” He turned to the marshal. “What’s he talking about?”

But Peters was as clueless as the old man. He turned to say something to Thunder but the tracker simply smiled and began to head up the sharp incline toward the bushes. The other two scrambled after him followed by three state troopers and a forest ranger, all of whom had been on the periphery of the conversation. From time to time Thunder glanced at the ground but never said a

word. With long, relaxed strides he approached the bushes, a good twenty yards ahead of the others, and then he simply disappeared.

The others stopped in their tracks.

“What the hell?” said Peters, gulping air.

Krieger stepped around the marshal to get a better view.

“Where’d he go?” he asked, panting like an old dog, straining his weary eyes at the bushes where Thunder had vanished. “Where is he?”

The marshal shook his head. He turned to the others. “Did anybody see what happened?”

They all shook their heads and stared at the spot as if Thunder had been plucked from the side of the mountain by the hand of God.

Furious, Marshal Peters started after him. He turned to bark an order to one of the men behind him and somebody shouted, “Look!”

The marshal spun around so fast he nearly lost his footing. “I’ll be goddamned!”

Thunder emerged from the bushes. In the crook of his arm, he carried a small bundle of auburn hair and tennis shoes, wrapped loosely in his own jacket.

Krieger scratched and clawed his way up the hill. “My baby,” he cried, “My God, my poor baby!”

In a few strides, Thunder was standing before him. Gently, he placed the still bundle on the ground.

The old man dropped to his knees. Broken by grief and exhaustion, he stared at the tiny, lifeless form and began to wail.

She opened her eyes. With a pitiful moan, she stretched her arms toward him.

“You’re alive,” he shouted. His eyes flooded with tears. He scooped her from the ground and hugged her with all his might.

“Take it easy,” said Thunder, laying a hand on his shoulder. “She’s pretty fragile.” The old man relaxed and cradled his granddaughter ever so gently in his arms. They covered each other with kisses and tears.

Thunder turned to the marshal. “If you have a medic, get him up here. She’s suffering from dehydration and exposure.”

The marshal pushed the button on his walkie-talkie and shouted orders to the doctor assigned to the search party.

The growing cluster of people descended the slope. Krieger carried the little girl wrapped snugly in Thunder's jacket. The doctor met them halfway. The old man laid her gently on the ground so the doctor could tend to her.

Krieger scrambled to his feet. He used both hands to smudge the tracks of tears from his grimy cheeks. "I don't know what to say," he croaked at Thunder. "I don't know how to thank you."

His granddaughter started crying and he bent down to comfort her.

The marshal turned to Thunder, a look mingling suspicion and awe in his haggard eyes. "How did you know where she was? We've been searching non stop for twenty-four hours and you just...you..."

"I noticed two sets of tracks leading out from under that pine tree by the campfire," Thunder told him. "They pointed up the hill. One set belonged to the little girl. The other belonged to the rabbit she was following."

"But there aren't any tracks," the marshal insisted, "We checked. The rain washed them away."

"In the open spaces, yes," said Thunder. "But there were a few traces left under the tree. They pointed in the right direction."

"What traces?" the marshal growled. "Where?" He coughed and cleared his throat. It felt like he'd been swallowing gravel, from all the yelling he'd been doing. "How come nobody else saw 'em? We had the best trackers in the state up here. Even the goddamn Indians couldn't find anything."

Thunder shrugged.

"And how did you know there was a cave up there?" the marshal asked.

"Lay of the land," Thunder replied. "Bushes grow one way on the side of a hill and another in front of a cave. See where they seem to be growing into the mountain?"

The marshal stared as hard as he could but finally gave up. “I’ll take your word for it,” he said, “but that still doesn’t explain why the dogs couldn’t find her.”

“The air’s flowing into that cave instead of out. Must be another opening in the rock toward the rear. The dogs were always upwind of the little girl.”

The marshal chewed on that for awhile, still not satisfied. He gazed uncertainly up the incline. “Those bushes are a hundred yards away. And that’s a steep hill for a little girl to climb. What made you think she headed in that direction?”

Thunder glanced around. “This is pretty open country until you get to that ridge about half a mile away. Children rarely go in a straight line. They tend to wander, unless they’re following something.”

“Like a rabbit.”

Thunder nodded. “It would have been hard for the little girl to make it very far in the open without her grandfather noticing. So the chances were she was somewhere nearby.”

The marshal still wasn’t satisfied. “But how did you know she was up in the cave instead of somewhere else?” He nodded to his left. “Like behind those rocks over there or the blackberry patch we passed on the way up?”

Thunder smiled pleasantly. The marshal had to admit, it wasn’t hard to like the man.

“While we were climbing up from the Jeep, I noticed a couple of rabbits feeding near those bushes. When I saw the tracks under the pine, I figured the little girl probably headed in that direction. And since she was deaf—”

“And how the hell did you know that? I still find that hard to believe.”

Again, Thunder shrugged.

The marshal stared at him, trying to figure him out. “Damndest thing I ever saw. You didn’t really track her, you just kinda guessed where she ought to be.” He stared at the bushes that hid the cave. “And then, by God...” His voice trailed off.

“Your men already did the hard work, Marshal. They knew where she wasn’t. I just had to find out where she was.”

Peters was about to reply when his deputy cut him off.

“There’s a call for you,” the young man said, thrusting forward a satellite phone. The marshal reached for the handset. “Not you, sir,” said the deputy. “It’s for Mr. Thunder.”

The marshal blinked in confusion as the tracker took the phone.

“Thunder,” he said as if this happened to him all the time.

The marshal could tell that the caller got his immediate attention.

Thunder listened intently for a moment. “Thank you, Mr. President,” he replied. “Please return the compliment to the Secretary of Defense.”

Peters and his deputy stared with their mouths hanging open as Thunder listened for what seemed a long time.

“I appreciate that, sir,” Thunder said at last, “but I don’t see how I can help. I’ve never done that kind of work before.”

The voice on the other end of the line must not have liked that answer.

“I understand the seriousness of the situation,” Thunder replied, “but you must have dozens of good people working on this. What can I do that isn’t already being done?”

He listened some more and finally sighed, a sound weighted with resignation. “Yes sir, I can be there in forty-eight hours.”

The reply made him frown.

“Certainly, sir, if you insist. But there’s a front coming in. If you send a helicopter, he’ll have to get here in the next hour or else—”

The voice interrupted him. Thunder glanced toward the southwest horizon where a tiny, dark blot materialized against the translucent sky. “Yes sir, I can see him now. I’ll be there in a few hours, Mr. President.”

He handed the satellite phone back to the astonished deputy.

A Blackhawk helicopter with the markings of the United States Army raced over the tree tops and settled into a clearing a hundred yards away.

Thunder grabbed a small bag and a travel pack from the marshal's jeep. He bent at the waist, and trotted through the rotor wash toward the chopper.

The search party stared at him through the swirling dust.

The old man wiped his eyes and hugged his little girl.

Within moments, the ship was airborne and speeding back toward the horizon.

Hat in hand, the marshal shook his head slowly and said to no one in particular, "Who the hell is that guy?"

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## End of Chapter I

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And again, thanks for previewing **QUANTUM ETHICS**.

All the best,

Keith