

**What readers on the Internet have to say about
SONG OF THUNDER:**

“WARNING! Don't begin to read this book unless you are prepared to read it all, RIGHT NOW!
What a marvelous story!”

JWL, Kalamazoo, MI

“I've just experienced the advent of a brilliant new light in thrillers. I couldn't put this one down. Keith Ellis's new powerhouse read, *Song of Thunder* will resonate in the reader's mind long after he or she finishes feverishly turning the pages. It's that good. So run, don't walk, to get a copy of this fine book and soon you'll be singing the Song of Thunder!”

FRE, Half Moon Bay, CA

“If you are a fan of thought provoking thrillers this is a MUST READ! The characters display the kind of courage and intelligence that actually leave you feeling GOOD by the end of the story. Do yourself a favor and read this.”

GEM, Washington, DC

“A thrill ride! Ellis's dynamic style pulled me in so quickly that I'd covered 100 pages before I realized how completely I'd become a part of his fast-paced world of adventure.”

AME, Chicago, IL

“This one's a keeper. It's a real page turner with virtually nonstop action from front to back. A great read! *Song of Thunder* would make a movie that would put Indiana Jones to shame.”

RJB, Vienna, VA



SONG of
THUNDER

A THRILLER

KEITH ELLIS

SONG OF THUNDER

By Keith Ellis

Copyright ©2010 by Keith Ellis

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the author.

Cover design by Keith Ellis and Tim Turner
Cover ©2010 by Keith Ellis, all rights reserved.
Cover illustration © Madartists | Dreamstime.com

To contact the author send an email to:
keith(at sign)keithellis.com

Disclaimer

Song of Thunder is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Helen English Guthrie, Jim Small, Alan Ellis, and Rick Ellis for their help proofreading this manuscript and for their excellent suggestions on ways to improve it. Any shortcomings and mistakes that have made their way into the finished product are entirely mine

For Margie
Chelle, Steph, Katie
and Sadie

Chapter 1

God has no conscience, the old man decided. He sank 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 no more than 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 happiest days 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 south of Baghdad and the younger one stepped in front of a bus on Wall Street when the mortgage bubble burst. He left behind an alcoholic widow and the most precious little girl on earth.

The new day dawned even 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. Tom 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 anymore.

The search teams were exhausted and chilled to the marrow but they kept going, slogging through the underbrush and stumbling over jagged outcrops of stone that erupted like a nasty rash along the mountainside. He knew they were cursing him for a fool for bringing a little girl into such rough country and letting her wander away. He also knew 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—the ghosts he knew 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 him since yesterday afternoon when the first forest rangers began to arrive: There was 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-spattered 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, though intimately familiar with the harshness of the world, they 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 had 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 appeared 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 for the missing child, he said "Krieger, this is John 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.

Thunder had nothing more to say.

"He's supposed to be the best damn tracker in the country," the marshal explained, although 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 the little girl 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 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 don’t think of her that way,” the old man stammered, his sunken eyes somehow drawing deeper 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. There was a steady rain for about half an hour 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 scowled at him 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 when he reached there, 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 watery 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 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. Carefully, 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 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 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 to cry 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 nonstop 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 weren'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," said Thunder. "There 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 said. "Please return the compliment to the Secretary of Defense."

Peters and his deputy stared. Their mouths hung open.

"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, it'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 shielded his little girl and wiped his eyes.

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

Hat in hand, the marshal shook his head slowly and asked in wonder, “Who the hell is that guy?”

Thank you!

Thanks for reading the first chapter of *SONG OF THUNDER*. If you liked it, you can order your copy in paperback from here:

<https://www.createpace.com/3434226>

For your Kindle, iPad, or iPhone, visit www.Amazon.com (and search for *Song of Thunder on Kindle*).

For all other electronic formats, visit www.Smashwords.com (and search for *Song of Thunder*).

Thanks again!

To read more by Keith Ellis, check out his classic book about setting goals:

THE MAGIC LAMP

Goal Setting for People Who Hate Setting Goals

By Keith Ellis

**Here's what readers say about
THE MAGIC LAMP:**

***** *"The first new thinking about goal setting in decades."*

***** *"This book is a jewel, the best I've ever read on setting goals."*

***** *"Keith Ellis is a genius! If you read just one self-help book make it this one!"*

For more information, please visit:

www.KeithEllis.com