

THE END OF THE AGE

A NOVEL

PAT ROBERTSON



WORD PUBLISHING

Dallas • London • Vancouver • Melbourne

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THE END OF THE AGE by Pat Robertson.

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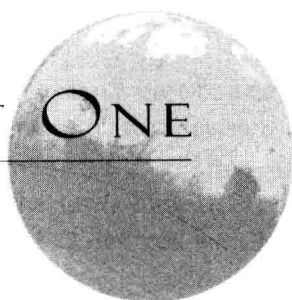
THE
END
OF THE
AGE

To my wife, Dede, with thanks
for her encouragement
and support . . .

*“This is how it will
be at the end of the age.”*

—The Gospel of Matthew

PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

CARL THRONEBERRY was having a bad day. Agitated, restless, and hot, he turned off the television in his den and walked outside. He was hit immediately by a blast of dry heat. The meteorologist on the news had just reported that the temperature had hit a searing 112 degrees, as it had nearly every day for the past three weeks.

Not that it's all that much cooler inside the house, Carl thought as he stood on the front porch of his spacious Mediterranean-style dwelling, surveying what was left of his once-green lawn. Brown-outs in southern California had become more and more frequent over the past several weeks, and despite the sweltering heat, the air conditioning was little more than a sometime luxury. There simply wasn't enough power in the system to support it.

Carl walked slowly around the grounds of his home, assessing the damage the heat had done to the hilltop lot he and his wife, Lori, had bought in Laguna Niguel ten years ago. The carefully manicured lawn was baked hard. The formal Italian gardens he and Lori had lovingly planted had been reduced to brown leaves hanging on brittle twigs. Not a single flower, not even a single blade of grass had survived the unrelenting heat.

The combination of the heat, a severe water shortage, and the brownouts had made people short-tempered, angry, and even violent. The television report Carl had just watched had shown gangs in South Central Los Angeles roaming the streets and looting. Reports of domestic violence had risen dramatically, as had assault-and-battery cases involving neighbors. California was out of control.

He walked around the house to the back of the property and stopped on the terrace. What had once been the most beautiful part of his home was now a wasteland. Everything had turned brown, and the trees were as bare as any in the Minnesota winter landscapes he had known as a boy. What he wouldn't give for a cold Minnesota winter now!

"Honey, will you grill the chicken?" Lori called from the kitchen.

Carl stepped inside the door. "Are you sure you want to barbecue, Lori?"

"Yes," she said, as she started taking vegetables out of the refrigerator. "Don't you like the idea? We can eat on the patio and maybe get a breeze off the ocean when the sun goes down."

With her tanned, flawless complexion, her blonde hair, and light blue eyes, Lori was a striking woman. She was thirty-eight, two years younger than Carl. They had married when she was twenty and he twenty-two, and Carl thought she had grown more beautiful over the years. *Part of it's her personality*, he thought. She had a free spirit and an infectious laugh that made people want to be around her. And, despite the heat, she managed to be cheerful and upbeat. Her short, multicolored sundress made her seem young and vibrant in bright contrast to the oppressive weather.

Carl looked at his wife, gave her a quick hug, and said, "Okay. Barbecue it is."

While Carl cooked the chicken, Lori made a big salad. They ate outside on the terrace and lingered over iced coffee as evening descended on the ravaged landscape. The sun went down peacefully, and indeed, as if on call, a breeze off the ocean slipped gently in, bringing welcome relief from the scorching heat of the day.

The air was surprisingly clean, and the stars seemed to sparkle above them. Carl had studied astronomy at Cal Tech, and, deep in his heart he had always wanted to be a full-time astronomer. But his life had taken a different turn.

He had met Lori while she was an interior design student at the Pasadena Arts Institute. A mutual friend decided to get the two displaced Minnesotans together. They were married while Lori was still in school. Then, fresh out of college, Carl took the first good job he could find—as a copy assistant at the prestigious advertising agency, JPT Worldwide. Just over a year later, a senior account executive let him try his hand at writing a TV spot. That first commercial was so successful that more assignments came his way. The senior executives soon realized that Carl was extraordinarily gifted. Besides his ability to write, he was good-looking and charming. The execs saw that he could sell anything to anybody—from airline tickets to disposable diapers. And that's just what he did.

The ads Carl created were seen all over America. A stack of Addy Awards testified to his position in the industry. He could have had a high-paying job anywhere in the ad world, but JPT Worldwide snapped on his wrists a very attractive set of golden handcuffs—a \$500,000 annual salary, generous performance bonuses, and enough stock options to squelch any thoughts he might have had of moving on.

Carl could dream of the stars in heaven, but for now he was a star in the advertising galaxy on Earth—and it appeared that nothing would ever change that fact.

“Look, Carl!” Lori exclaimed, pointing up at the night sky. “Look how bright that star is tonight! Isn't that Venus?”

Carl leaned back in his chair and looked up into the sky. “No,” he said, “that's not Venus, my love. We can't see Venus from here tonight.”

“Well, Galileo,” she said, laughing, “what is it, then? It's not the North Star, is it?”

"No, I'm not sure what that is, honey. It's not a star at all. It could be a low-level satellite, I suppose. But if so, it's in the wrong place. It can't be a comet—it's moving too slowly. Maybe a weather balloon—or maybe it's an asteroid like the one that missed the earth by six hours about ten years ago."

"An asteroid? What are you talking about?" Lori asked, looking intently at Carl. "Are you serious? An asteroid missed the earth by just six hours?"

"Sure," he said. "Don't you remember? There were stories in the newspapers—after the fact, of course. There was even a TV documentary, and a big cover story in *Newsweek*. I'm sure we talked about it at the time, but an asteroid really did pass through Earth's orbit just six hours after Earth passed by. It was the closest near miss of that magnitude in recorded history. If there had actually been a collision, it would have been disastrous."

"I didn't hear anything about an asteroid," Lori said, sitting up in her chair. She looked at him closely. "You're putting me on, right?"

"No, I'm not, Lori. It's true. That big black expanse of space out there is full of rocks and debris—some big and some little. The little ones are called meteors. The big ones—some of them the size of little planets—are called asteroids. Usually when meteors hit the earth's atmosphere, they just burn up. We call them shooting stars, and usually only a small amount of debris ever reaches the earth. But sometimes fragments of meteors do get through, and those are called meteorites. You've seen meteorites, haven't you?"

Lori nodded. "Yes, I think so."

"Big ones, like the ones they've found in Arizona and Mexico, can leave huge craters in the earth's surface. But if an asteroid were ever to hit our planet . . . hold on to your hat. Honolulu and Nome, Alaska, would probably trade places!"

Looking up again, Carl paused, considering his own words. "If a meteor hit southern California, the ride would be so bumpy that not many of us would still be around to talk about it."

"Carl," Lori said, "you're so insufferably morbid! I think this heat has made *everybody* morbid." She reached over and touched his arm. "That little flyspeck up there isn't going to hit us—is it?"

"Don't worry." Carl laughed. "If we were in any danger, the national weather service and the disaster relief agencies would be all over the radio and TV, telling us to get out of here. If that thing was a meteor, the whole world would know about it by now. You couldn't keep something like that secret for long."

Lori's face brightened perceptibly, and as she slowly walked her carefully manicured fingers up Carl's bare arm, she whispered, "Carl, let's get out of here. Okay?"

"What have you got in mind?" he asked.

"Let's go to Colorado."

"You mean permanently?"

"No, of course not, silly." She gave him a seductive look. "Let's take a long weekend and get away from this heat. You need a break. I just finished that design job for the Forresters' new home, so I need a break. Let's just go. *Now*."

Carl smiled. "Good idea, Lori, but you know I'm running the launch program for the new Hologram Sportswear campaign. That means big bucks for the agency and a healthy bonus for us. I'd like a break, but if I don't keep my eye on things the agency could really blow it. If that were to happen, JPT could kiss America's biggest advertiser good-bye."

"Carl, I know all that. But, for heaven's sake, going away for a couple of days to cool off won't make that much difference! Everybody knows how good you are, and Harvey will cover for you. Tell him you're going to sit on a mountaintop and meditate for a couple of days. And that you'll come back with a great new slogan for the world's greatest sportswear collection. He'll go for that."

"I don't know, honey," Carl said. "Even if we decided to go, and even if the agency wouldn't miss me for a few days, we couldn't possibly get airline tickets now—even if we turned over the mortgage to

the house. Greg Peterson told me last week that every flight to the mountains has been double-booked for weeks."

Lori smiled mischievously, then lifted her placemat and held up an envelope. "Two first-class tickets from L.A. to Colorado Springs leaving at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. Continental Airlines to the mountains and an air-conditioned luxury sedan waiting for us at the Hertz counter in Colorado Springs."

Carl looked at her in amazement.

"And besides," she continued, "we don't have to mortgage anything. I'm offering my love four days of cool mountain air, lush fairways, blue skies, and four nights of nuptial bliss. So, what do you say, handsome?"

"Are you serious, Lori? You already have the tickets?" Carl sat up in his chair, and Lori nodded, grinning at him like a mischievous child.

"You *are* incredible," her husband murmured. He leaned forward and gave her a kiss. "But please don't tell me how you got these tickets. I don't want to know." Then he added with a smile, "But *do* tell me you came by them honestly."

"Darling, you know honesty is the best policy. Haven't I always said that?"

Carl knew better than to ask any more questions. He wanted to get out of Los Angeles just as badly as Lori did, and suddenly here was the perfect opportunity. So the matter was settled. They were going to Colorado Springs.

AFTER A HASTY BREAKFAST the next morning, Carl and Lori eased their Mercedes diesel wagon onto the I-5 Freeway, which led, in turn, to the 405 Freeway and northward through Los Angeles. Most days, the Angelinos referred to the 405 as the largest moving parking lot in the world, and that day was no exception. Traffic was heavy, moving slowly without stopping. A light cloud of auto exhaust and pollution hung in the air around them.

Lori punched the radio dial to News Talk KABC. After a hardware commercial and traffic report was the weather forecast: "There will be no break in the heat wave," the announcer said. "The National Weather Service is warning California residents to prepare for more record-high temperatures—perhaps as high as one hundred twenty-four degrees in some places. No precipitation is predicted."

Carl reached over and gently squeezed Lori's hand. "We're getting out of this oven just in time," he said, smiling. "Only three hours to cool breezes and mountain streams!"

As he was speaking, a news bulletin interrupted the weather report. He reached over and turned up the volume on the radio. The reporter was saying, "Observatories in Australia, California, Canada, and the United Kingdom have been tracking a large meteor in space. According to Dr. Mack Collier, chief scientist at the Mount Wilson Observatory, the meteor is now on a path that could intersect with Earth's orbit in a matter of hours."

Carl and Lori looked at each other in shock. "That's what we were just talking about last night!" he exclaimed. "I can't believe this is happening!"

"Oh, no," Lori whispered and put her hand over her mouth.

The radio report continued, "Moments ago we spoke with Dr. Collier, who tells KABC News: 'The best we can determine at this point, an extremely large foreign body, perhaps as much as a kilometer in diameter, is on a path to enter the earth's atmosphere within the next several hours. There is a chance it will simply pass outside the gravitational field. But we must also consider the possibility that it may be drawn by the earth's magnetic field.'" There was a long pause. "And, in that case, it would likely impact somewhere off the coast of California . . . between seven and eight o'clock this evening."

Carl and Lori looked at each other, wide-eyed. Simultaneously they said, "Seven o'clock."

The radio announcer continued, "This interview with Dr. Mack Collier was taped just moments ago. The Center for Emergency Relief

requests that all southern California residents remain calm, and please stay tuned to this station for updates throughout the day as we track these developing events. In the meantime, residents of low-lying coastal regions are being asked to evacuate immediately and move to the east toward higher ground. We want to stress, however, that you should stay calm and move with extreme caution. There is no cause for panic at this point. We will keep you informed as events unfold.”

Carl angrily snapped off the radio and maneuvered the Mercedes off the freeway, onto Sepulveda Boulevard, and then onto Highway 1, which would take them straight north to LAX without the freeway delays.

“Those dirty, lying idiots!” he blurted. “How could they do that?”

Lori flinched at his sudden outburst. “What, Carl? What are you yelling about?”

“Those jerks! I can’t believe this! They didn’t say anything until it was too late! They’ve been tracking that blasted thing for days, weeks even. And no warning whatsoever, until now . . . when it’s too late to do anything. It’s criminal!”

“Maybe they didn’t want to start a panic, Carl.”

“Panic!” he shouted. “Lori, all hell’s going to break loose in less than ten hours. There will be *plenty* of panic then!”

“Maybe they didn’t know it was coming so close,” Lori persisted. “If they knew about that other one—the one you said came so close ten years ago—then maybe they thought this one would pass by the same way.”

“Lori, listen to me,” Carl said impatiently. “If that thing is as big as they say it is and if it hits anywhere near here, thousands of people—maybe hundreds of thousands—are going to die. It’s criminal not to warn the people of California what’s going on.”

Lori shifted nervously. “What are you saying, Carl? What does this mean, really?”

Suddenly Carl wished he didn’t know anything at all about astronomy—that he couldn’t see what was coming. But over the years

he had continued to educate himself about astronomy, keeping up with the latest books and articles. Reading about the movements of stars and the planets had always been a kind of intellectual consolation amid the mindless commercialism he lived with. But now he realized that if that huge chunk of rock came hurtling from the sky and landed off the California coast, it was going to wipe out everybody and everything for hundreds of miles. After that, a series of inevitable floods, fires, and earthquakes would leave a toll of devastation beyond human calculation. Nothing and no one could be saved, and it was already too late to help anybody else.

"Honey," he said, "what it means is we've got to hurry and get on that plane. Do you understand?"

Lori nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

As they approached the terminal, they could see hundreds of cars jamming every lane, in every direction. There was nowhere to park, so Carl pulled up onto the median and drove as far as he could before he stopped and turned off the engine. "Let's go," he said. "Grab your carry-on and just keep going straight ahead. Don't slow down and don't look back. Just keep moving, no matter what happens."

Carl reached over and touched his wife gently on the cheek. "Are you ready?"

She nodded again.

"Then, let's go."

They got out of their car and jogged the last hundred yards to the terminal, criss-crossing between cars and groups of people milling around on the sidewalk. When they entered the lobby, Carl took Lori's hand and pulled her through the crowds. At the checkpoint, they slipped into line, passed through the metal detectors, and made their way to the Continental gates with nothing but the bags in their hands. They were more than an hour early, but the flight was already in the final boarding stages.

Carl shoved the tickets toward the attendant behind the check-in desk.