

CHAPTER 1

The gathering... is a path of fate.

Paris, winter of 1999.

The world stood as if it was facing an apocalypse of natural disasters.

In the east, the tsunami bursts and buries faith beneath it; in Europe, the flood is threatening to return and the heavy rains are like a fierce warning about what might follow; in the west, a severe tornado strikes while the ego of civilization is wounded.

On New Year's Eve of the new millennium, overshadowed by the impending Year 2000 Problem, the weather was raging. The stuffy air in the spirit of Nostradamus's prophecies spread seeds of hope and fear among the people who filled the pubs, cafés, clubs, restaurants, and many other entertainment centers in the City of Lights. The storm that raged outside was just a reflection of the one that raged in the minds of the revelers.

“Earth is suffering,” declared the scientists. “It is warming up from season to season and its cycle of seasons is disrupted. The heat, the greenhouse effect, is caused by contaminated waste, which the earth's inhabitants release ruthlessly into the atmosphere. It is not 'the land consumes its inhabitants' as the

Europeans insist, but 'the land is consumed by its indifferent inhabitants'."

This winter, perhaps in contrast to its predecessors, the wrath of nature is wrapped up in the form of divine punishment.

As never before in the twentieth century, and perhaps since the days of The Flood, this weather was clear evidence that something, nourished by the fear of the millennium, was about to happen.

The clause 'Nostradamus said' was the phrase of the day, and if not today, then in 2012. "It is the end of the world," said the warmongers, "and soon the clock will start the countdown."

The Internet generation, used to instant gratification, was captivated with the numbers of the Gregorian calendar, and it seemed like the die would be cast, one second after the hands of the clock met at midnight.

The fear did not ease even when in Japan, China, and Russia, one nation after another, billions of people celebrated the New Year in peace, and TV screens all over the world reported in a variety of languages, "No, No, the world has not collapsed."

On the other side of the globe, people anxiously awaited the rising sun, to see whether it was coming in their direction, or whether they would be moving in the direction of the hot planet. In their hearts, the fear of the revolving motion into an unknown direction grew, and the arrival of the sun was no longer all that desirable.

It was still twilight in Paris and between then and sunrise a

very long night was about to begin, most likely threatening to shatter the conventional time-dimension.

The date that is displayed on the computer screens refers only to the last two digits of the year and the transition from 99 to 00 tormented the thoughts of those who managed to put man on the moon, but forgot to consider this minor detail. The computer golem is flexing its muscles and holding the entire human race captive; we are at the mercy of the technology that was originally meant to benefit us. It almost seemed as if the generation that invented the technology of the future was threatened by a revolution... between human thinkers and the computer.

The colorful lamps, which light up the evening, that sparkle everywhere and spread holiday cheer every year, they too are wrapped in a big question mark because of the unpredictable behavior of computer-based systems, which could crash as the hours go by.

In Paris, the transition of time is not as noticeable as in Jerusalem or Marrakesh. Due to the crowded tall buildings that fill the valley, the Parisians could not see the redness of the setting sun.

Even on days when the city is not covered in clouds or a fine gray fog, the sunset is only a function of progressive darkness. The time on the clock is just the time at the end of the work day, a time of happy hour, where over a cheap glass of beer, in small pubs near the workplace, the Parisians end their day with spontaneous meetings and smiles.

On my watch, a short tone reminds me that it is five o'clock,

a time that at home I meet with my children. Here, five o'clock has a special meaning only on Fridays. On the street where the Hebrew newspaper is sold at an outrageous price, all the kosher shops are shutting down and their owners going to Montmartre Street to have a drink at one of the bars, in honor of the Sabbath. This was an excellent opportunity for a traditional French aperitif on the day off organized by the Jewish community.

Paris was definitely a city of pubs. There was no street without a pub, restaurant, or corner bar. Here they were called Brasserie, from the word Brassier, meaning to collect money. Indeed, the French were known to be the ideal customers for coffee and alcohol... around the clock.

Equipped with a stack of newspapers fresh from Israel, I too rushed with the flow directly into the first café that protected me from the wind and the rain.

It was the printed chessboards on the bar tables that caught my attention together with the stormy weather which drew me there.

Or perhaps it was destiny calling... An important question to think about, considering the continuation of the story, which was totally unexpected.

Either way, the well-heated and cozily furnished café made me forget the storm that raged outside and relieved me from the urgency of reading the weekend newspapers.

The sounds of Black music, reggae and merengue, which rather reminded me of Africa, actually belonged to the Caribbean islands, very far from the Black continent. The soothing

melodies moved the bodies of those present in harmony with the sound waves. Strangers connected spontaneously, like a spark inflamed by a polite smile or a kind look.

Karl Marx would have argued: "It is not the human consciousness that reflects its spirit, but quite the contrary; it is its social spirit that determines its whole awareness."

It was enough for these people to share an evening together in the same place to turn them into intimate partners. Everyone was talking to everyone, everyone was friends with everyone, and everyone was dancing with everyone... impartially and without prejudice.

It was considered rude if a woman refused to dance with a man; it was not elegant if a man did not invite a woman to dance if she clearly expressed her desire to move her body to the sounds of the music.

In Paris, it was not a curse. On the contrary, it was a privilege and we are not talking about techno, disco, or folk dancing. Accompanied by all types of music, a man and a woman dance together, close to each other, moving their hips, her legs intertwined with his... extreme sensual evidence of the nature of the dance. At the end of the dance, it was customary to thank each other and say your goodbyes. If the husband or boyfriend of the woman was there, one had to accompany the woman back to her place and thank her again, in his presence and without further compliments.

In France, the rules of courtesy were a way of life. An entire set of laws, whose values were far above the hierarchy of the constitution. It was a way of life.

Jean-Marc, a tall young man with long curly hair who sat beside me at the bar, immediately noticed my inexperience with the local customs. I noticed his peculiar presence and tried to ignore his look.

That is just what I need... a gay man, I thought to myself with complete contempt. I could not have been more wrong about both my observation and my attitude. Like an animal in the wilderness, we are intimidated by what is different and strange. I learned his name later when others called out to him. It seemed that he knew the other visitors of the café and that they knew him as well from previous visits.

He radiated great self-confidence and seemed to be popular. He was a handsome young man with intelligent and smiling eyes; his presence was marked by a unique heavy scent of after-shave, which demarcated his own personal space.

“Bourbon sour,” he called to the slim bartender with the bleached hair, as he smiled at me.

“Thanks, but no thanks. No alcohol, in any case,” I said to him and declined his invitation without an explanation, leaving a polite opening for a continuation of an informal chat.

“Thanks anyway,” I repeated my words, this time turning to look at him.

His eyes expressed so much... sympathy, interest, curiosity, compassion...

“The main thing is the pitcher... and also what is in it,” he partially invented, partially quoted and with complete assertiveness glided his fingertips over the rim of the glass in front of him.

He rushed to explain when the tiny cocktail glass was put in front of me.

“There is no second chance for first impressions,” he stated and continued in the same tone. “I can see that you are not a local.”

I checked my clothes slowly, wondering about my European look. My old clothes were in the suitcase that had never followed me to my desired destination, and had probably been left behind in Budapest or Ben-Gurion Airport. Everything that I was wearing was new and perfectly Parisian.

“No, no, it is not because of your clothes,” Jean-Marc read my thoughts. “The local norms here require that whoever sits alone on the stools by the bar has to drink a contemporary drink, especially a lonely man during happy hour, or as we say in French 'two for the price of one'; he would never order a sparkling drink. Many places in Paris would refuse to serve you at all,” he added with a smile.

“And what would be a contemporary drink?” I asked with interest.

“Pure alcohol, frozen, with some liquid sugar and concentrated lemon juice. For rum lovers it would be the T-Punch, tequila lovers would get a Margarita, gin lovers ask for a Gin Fizz and vodka fanatics would request the Brazilian Caipirinha or a frozen Russian Caipiroska,” he explained in one continuous sentence.

“It is always the same recipe, the same cocktail only with a different type of alcohol?” I asked confused.

“The glass is different in its form,” he answered first, and

then continued: “The type of alcohol has a lot of importance. A girl with a Margarita in her hand is conveying her desire for passion, a lady with a long glass of Gin Fizz beside her, is expressing her chatty manner and her need for company. Those who sip their rum or vodka, imply a desire to dance, laugh, and have a good time. In this category, you can also find those who are looking for excitement, the outspoken ones, and the really daring types.”

“And what about a bourbon sour?” I was interested in the impression he wanted to leave me with, because he was the one who had ordered the drink for me.

“The sour is based on whiskey and means you have money—a lot of money—and not only because of the exorbitant price of this mini-cocktail,” he said. “It radiates: I am free and open to suggestions.” That is what he said, as if he had decided who I was going to be that evening.

“During happy hour it is customary to get two drinks for the price of one. Your neighbor at the bar pays for one and you pay for the next... It does not matter anyway; you drink twice and only pay once... and on top of that you get drunk and have a great night,” promised my neighbor at the bar.

“There is also a well-kept secret in this trendy mix,” he continued. “Alcohol numbs the senses; the sugar is exciting and depressing at the same time.”

“Depressing?” I repeated his words with a slight expression of mock surprise.

“Yes,” he answered without explaining and continued: “But the main thing is the lemon.”

And again, as was his wont, he did not explain. Skimming on the surface and never delving deeper, invoking curiosity but never delivering the goods. Jean-Marc quickly became my scrupulous guide in the buzzing center of the City of Sin.

He talked to me about science, medicine, psychology and almost every other subject; it seemed he had insights about everything. Something about the fervor of the conversation made me feel slightly uneasy.

Jean-Marc is a handsome forty-year-old, and of course, single, like most of the population in Paris. A doctor by profession, he says he feels like a teenager. He goes out every night, regularly, and his partying nightlife takes precedence over his daytime professional life. He is attracted to beautiful women—only beautiful women, he stresses.

His mischievous gaze picks up on all the dynamics in the hall, and he cunningly controls the room.

After a short chat with a woman, he moves on, always leaving them wanting more. He is always interested and always invoking curiosity. His body language projects intimacy and submission and his carefully chosen words leave no doubt as to the level of his intelligence.

The technique is to send the message that you are interested while at the same time acting disinterested. The general message is clear: “I can see your qualities but they do not impress me. I do not underestimate my worth and I am not for sale.” In other words, I have confidence in myself but it is not exaggerated. I am a social animal but without selfish interests.

“The challenging and the unattainable are pawns that Pari-

sian women love to struggle with. Look, the queen in white is showing an interest in you,” he explains in a whisper, and in the same breath murmured: “You look different to her, a foreigner, and that is why you are interesting.”

He was talking about the tall girl with the luscious golden hair who was sitting in the middle of a table at the end of the hall. The term queen was apparently given because of her place in the hall. She sat at the head of the third table from the left, out of eight tables in a row, up against the inner wall. Like a chess piece, she had grabbed the place of the queen. Or maybe her title was because of her white dress... or her exceptional height. Or maybe he just calls her that and I wander off in my mind to places that should not matter, and I am focused on the source of the name instead of on the message.

While we were talking about her, the woman apparently noticed us both staring; she got up and stood between us, and the aroma of her divine perfume overwhelmed the earthly mood of the place.

She leaned forward toward me.

As surprising as this entire night was turning out, it was not unusual when she placed her hands on my shoulders and her lips next to my ears. Her long hair softly brushed my cheeks. Her voice chilled my entire body and I could not remain indifferent to the sentences that echoed in my ears.

So clear, so true, so intelligent, that I could see and feel the depth of her words in every fiber of my being. And the tone... so soft and sensual... that it was hard to concentrate on the meaning of her words.

“When a man finds himself in the middle of the sea between two waves, and in front of him there is only the endless sea, the same wave that blocks his vision is also his inspiration. His struggle for existence comes from instincts of survival in his mind. In the water, as in nature, man's ignorance and isolation from the environment become overpowering. It may be that a ship is sailing close to him but his failure to acknowledge it means that it does not exist as far as he is concerned.”

These words would have been meaningful to anyone, but her courage and confidence especially touched me because of my curious nature.

Indeed, I flutter between two waves and fight for my existence. I am stuck in the middle of my life and it seems to me that I have even stopped rowing, but I have never stopped expressing joy, so it was not possible that I had revealed to her how sad I was.

Equipped with my broad smile, I had come here with a purpose—to forget a bit of my empty, meaningless life.

Next to her, I admit that my senses overcame my thoughts, my spirit was overwhelmed by her scent, and in my eyes her dazzling beauty only added to the intelligence that she radiated.

Contrary to my newfound friend's instructions, the queen pulled me to the dance floor without an invitation or attention to protocol. I had barely managed to put my drink down next to hers, and we were already diving into the music.

“The truth is never absolute,” she continued chanting in my ears as if answering my doubts, or as if asking forgiveness for a sin yet to be committed.