

# **The Apocalypse Syndrome: The Awakening**

**By L.K. Samuels**

## Chapter 1

I stared down at my sweating hands. A thin, pasty, white liquid coated my palms. I wiped it off onto my stained apron and watched as more of it oozed from my pores. What was this crazy white goo? Was I sick? I had to be. My hands were even starting to swell up, too. That was really freakish. And then I noticed tingling in my fingers. But other than that, I'd never felt healthier or more clear-headed. Odd. Whatever it was, my weirdness gauge was way off the Richter scale.

Again, I dried my hands. It didn't work. Why was I so distressed? There was no time to worry about exotic strains of flu or abnormal ailments. Another candle at table 5 had just flickered out. I hurried over to the supply cabinet and searched in vain for more. There were none to be found. In fact, a lot of things seemed missing. Someone was pilfering again.

Before I could figure out which items had disappeared, I stopped and turned around. Had someone or something darted behind me? I glanced across the nearly empty dining room. At first I thought a new customer had taken a seat without my approval. Hated that. But then I felt a blast of cold air. Immediately, I saw the problem: the wind had blown open the front glass door. I walked up to it, leaned forward, and peeked into the darkness. There was no wind. Everything was quiet and looked calm.

Suddenly, I got this strange feeling that something terrible was going to happen. I stepped outside and stood on the crumbling sidewalk. I stared up at the cold, white moon. Not a cloud in sight; no indication of an approaching storm. Still, something wasn't right. I wished I could put my finger on it. Something seemed out of place. Then again, this was not the first time I had come down with vague premonitions of danger.

Ever since my early childhood days, I somehow knew that our town was not burning on all streetlights. Little oddities kept cropping up, mostly harmless and insignificant. Like the funny looks I got when I announced my intention to someday leave California. And then there was that time when my father bought a wild rose plant. Father did it in secret, in a back alley. I watched him talk to a black-caped man who hid his face underneath a wide-brimmed hat. It was just creepy. To my way of thinking, Father could have bought the potted rose at a nursery. I mean, he could have—if the store hadn't gone out of business.

When I confronted Father, he denied buying anything. I was not amused, to say the least. Why would he lie about a stupid plant? Something else was going on. I began to see a pattern developing. These little oddball incidents were adding up. I mean, nothing ever happened for nothing. There had to be a larger

picture. Something or someone was doing something, weaving a plot, designing a plan, causing a problem. But for what purpose?

I looked at my hands. The swelling was subsiding. Maybe it was just nothing. Maybe I had been cooped up too long in my restaurant. Every time I had tried to solve these mysteries, I would run into solid roadblocks. I could never come up with good questions. That was because I did not know what I was looking for. Without the right questions, answers were meaningless.

I walked back inside. I had to get these crazy notions out of my head. I was starting to feel almost paranoid—and that was dangerous. Paranoia was a serious offense—everybody knew that. The health department could take away a deranged person and make him undergo months of treatment. I was in the food preparation business, not the serving-time-in jail profession.

I glanced around my café. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. But even that seemed so wrong. I grabbed one of the tables' candleholders and fingered it in my hand. A surge of anger came over me. I quickly hurled the glassy object at the wall, missing a man eating some old, reheated spaghetti. The glass shattered. Yet nobody looked up. Not even our Deputy Mayor, Chang Lee, at table 5.

I sat down in the far corner, near our small stage, and stared at the hardwood floor. What was happening to me? Maybe it was that white gunk dripping off my hands. I wanted to calm down, but my mind started to race. A slew of flashbacks invaded my thoughts. I tried to block them. Most were memories that caused me to question my sanity, especially the incident involving my very name. My mother had christened me "Spencer," after my grandfather, but officials at the Department of Marriage and Family had refused to allow that designation. They said that "Spencer" was not an officially recognized name. So she renamed me "Harry." I did not really care what people called me, but found it bizarre that someone else did.

My thoughts snapped back to an episode at home. When the authorities found out about my father's illegal purchase of the rose bush, they raided our home. The police threatened us, ransacked the house, broke several pieces of furniture, and smashed every Mason jar in the pantry. They handcuffed Father when he failed to produce an official receipt for the rose. But this was not unusual. Almost every adult had been detained or arrested for one type of violation or another. The secret was to carry some money to bribe the police officers. But Father refused to give the police any money. That was stupid.

But the really perplexing moment occurred moments later. After the officer confiscated the potted rose, he took it into the bathroom. Naturally, I had to peek inside. The man sat on the toilet and meticulously began to pluck off each petal, then munched them like salty potato chips. That was completely over the top, real bonkers. I was later told that this was the official policy for disposing of rose bushes. I never really believed that.

I began to see that these crazy incidents were happening everywhere. Most involved the authorities. For some reason, local officials promoted policies that were self-destructive. It was hard to believe. Everyone knew that our leaders were dedicated to helping the community. I knew that because that was what

they always proclaimed. Sure, they were considered selfless, generous, and compassionate, but nothing they did ever turned out right. I wanted to chalk it up to a comedy of accidents and mere coincidences. But their actions were causing widespread grief and pain. I could see that now, so clearly. So the only other explanation for our current hardships had to be sabotage. Could someone in our government be deliberately harming us? Could it be a hidden plot to subvert our way of life? Or maybe our foreign enemies were behind it. What else could explain all of our bad luck? Then again, maybe I was just cursed with an overactive imagination.

I knew I had to resist any form of paranoia. I could not be found wandering down a dark, delusional road. We had plenty of security to protect us from the overseas axis of evil. The Shadows and military forces kept us safe from terrorists and their sympathizers. And the Babushkas had eyes in every direction and fingers in every pie. Those heavysset women would be the first to alert us to any evil plan to harm us. And yet, I still got this freakish feeling that something was out there beyond our perception; something that had taken control so completely that we had no knowledge of its existence.

I once explained this strange suspicion to my next-door neighbor. He became nervous and remarked that I was talking pure nonsense. Henry, our property manager, was a bit more sympathetic. Still, he narrowed it down to one cryptic statement: “You don’t know what you don’t know.”

Sure, I knew what Henry meant—but it did nothing to help my jitters. I desperately wanted to shrug off these creepy feelings, but they bedeviled me like the aftermath of a gruesome nightmare.

I hurried over to table 7, grabbed its lit candle, and slammed it in front of Chang. There—no big bloody deal. Let them take me away for failure to fill out the proper forms. This was not my first criminal act, but this time I was belligerent and wanted people to see my defiance in plain sight. No longer would I hide my thoughts.

Nobody seemed to care.

I sat again. Unfortunately, our café was no longer the toast of Salinas. Tony’s Bistro had lost its glitter long ago. I’d never been sure why. Father had run the restaurant the best he could. But the war was slowly strangling our business. Wine was as scarce as satisfied customers. We operated on a stale shoestring and empty food shelves. Sure, we had a few dedicated patrons, mostly politicians who would brave the cold night with bodyguards and military-issued currency. They demanded the best of everything, but got only what we had—plenty of spaghetti, garlic, potatoes, and usually tomatoes, but everything else was sporadic and unreliable—meager at best.

Perhaps I had become so despondent of late because we were scraping the bottom of the cooking pot. We had only fried potatoes, and some old vegetables from the Valley. At least those who had to stomach our dreary food were going to be compensated with a performance by Sassy Cole. For some reason, Chang had ordered an alluring black woman to sing tonight. This was unprecedented, since singing in public was taboo. But Chang seemed to be full of himself tonight, and acted as though he were celebrating a great victory.

I stood and watched Sassy climb onto the old stage. She announced that she was going to perform a number from a Broadway musical, a melody by Gershwin—whoever that was. From her first few solo bars, I was taken in by her soothing, dusky-toned voice. The illicit music was eerie, lonesome, and hypnotic. I had never heard anything so beautiful. I froze in place, mesmerized, pinned under the wall-to-wall murals of Venetian canals and gondolas.

I barely knew Sassy, but I'd never before seen anybody glow like an angel. Her white gloves and hand-knit shawl accented her beauty. Her rosebud-red lips seemed so full.

"Hey, I need another round of potatoes!"

I glared over at table 5. Chang was shouting at me again. He was always complaining about something, but his power was nothing compared to the power of music. I remained steadfast, focused on my new obsession.

"Did you hear me, boy?" Chang bellowed louder.

I turned and stared at his big, pudgy face.

"I want some service!"

"Again?"

"You want me to send Frank over? Do you?"

"Fine!" A twinge of scorn shot across my face. "What kind of potatoes, sir: duchesse or dauphine?"

"You've only got fried, and you know it. Any more back talk and I'll have your sorry ass shipped off to the front, with or without that bum leg."

"Oh, Daddy," his daughter purred. "Leave poor Harry alone."

I glanced down at the bundle of wood, rope, and metal strapped to my right leg and wished I could forget about the accident.

"Well?" Chang demanded.

"Sure, I'll bring some." I said as Chang's bodyguards fingered their gun handles. No use offending one of my biggest customers, even if a brussels sprout had a higher IQ.

I limped back to the kitchen and found José cooking over a small pot of watered-down carrot soup. He sprinkled a dash of dill and stirred with the speed of an Alaskan glacier.

"*El gran Chango*, what eat now?" José asked in disjointed Spanglish. José Mendez was worse than dyslexic; he could barely hold a conversation with a five-year-old. It was not genetic; his brother was quick and brainy, but listed as MIA at the front. It seemed that only the defective and disabled were left abandoned at home.

"More potatoes. What else?" I said.

"Hey, those are the last ones!" Tina Shaw bellowed from the doorway.

I lowered my head. If only I could fire her. Secretly, I had applied for another waitress. Central Staffing never got back to me.

"So don't get any big ideas!" Tina marched over, squinting with her usual lopsided frown. "They're supposed to be for us. And nobody else."

What she actually meant was "me," not "us."

"Well?" Her eyes scowled, flashing like the red signal lights that used to operate at Main and Gabilan. I moved closer to the stove, trying to ignore her. If

only Martha were still here. She was my best waitress until Tina came along. They argued over everything, until two weeks ago. That was when Martha referred to Tina as a “fuckwitted vulture.” That did it. They writhed on the floor in a pot-throwing, eye-gouging catfight. Martha opened with a left hook. Tina concluded with a hammerhead to the face. Any week now they will release Martha from the hospital.

“Don’t give them to anyone.” Tina grabbed the pot of potatoes.

“They’re for Chang”

She lowered her hands. “That’s just great!”

“Sorry.”

“You’ve got to do something!” Tina demanded as she pulled out a wad of money and counted it.

“About what?”

“I don’t know. I’m just tired of everything. There’s just not enough of anything. We can’t live this way forever.”

“There’s nothing I can do.” That was my most common catchphrase. Actually, it had become a universal cliché throughout our town. Everyone mouthed it; especially when put under the monthly, two-hour-long lie-detector tests at City Hall. For me, I simply did not have the luxury to protest our conditions. I had to run a restaurant, and do it apparently without any professional staff of well-adjusted workers or edible food.

“You took!” José suddenly confronted Tina, arching a soup ladle over his left shoulder.

“No, I didn’t, you meathead!” Tina seized a rusty fork.

Like a fool, I stepped right into the line of kitchen-utensil fire. “Stop this now!”

“She steal,” José shouted.

The accusations were always the same. José would denounce Tina for short-changing patrons without sharing the booty with him. Then I would have to work out some stupid compromise.

“Who cares? You don’t do nothing!” Tina moved around my right flank and took a symbolic jab at José’s angry face. “You just stir soup all day.”

I found the incident amusing. From what I could observe, Tina’s restaurant skills were not much better than José’s. She was slower than a yoke of cattle at getting things approved by City Hall—if that was remotely possible. Still, she had a good excuse. She had been handicapped since birth, sporting a deformed right hand and suffering occasional bouts of epileptic seizures.

I handed several \$500 coins to José. It wasn’t much, but he seemed satisfied. He put down the ladle and returned to his soup-stirring.

Still clenching the fork, Tina faced me. “Just give Chang a small spoonful of potatoes. The pompous pig won’t starve.” She reached for several dishes and accidentally dropped one.

“He’s pretty demanding.”

“He doesn’t deserve anything.” Tina fired back, kicking the broken dish under a table. “I mean, look at what he’s done to you.”

For once, she was right. Chang acted as if he owned my father's restaurant. But then again, he seemed to think he owned our entire town and every single inhabitant. "I'll give him half the potatoes." I was lying. They were so old that someone might come down with food poisoning. To my way of thinking, Chang deserved them all.

"You're such a softy." Tina reached up and smacked my head, turned around and trudged back into the dining area.

I returned to the half-cracked propane burner and waited for the potatoes to warm. Bored, I glanced up at the new poster plastered on the wall. It was announcing another campaign to promote universal inoculation. Vaccinations were already mandatory—had been since the dawn of time. Personally, I hated anything that poked the skin and could result in bodily fluids gushing from my pores. At every opportunity, I avoided vaccine lines and considered myself lucky for missing most of my required appointments with Mister Needle.

Moving closer to the poster, I studied the fine print at the bottom. It warned of dire health consequences for anyone failing to get inoculated. That was patently untrue; I was in good health—except for my sweaty hands. But something else rubbed my skeptical bones the wrong way. We could barely rustle up enough food to cook, but the authorities could afford to print a full-color poster that covered half my kitchen wall. I supposed a food shortage was not a safety issue.

I decided to clean up the kitchen a little. Opening the back door, I prepared to throw out the garbage, still straining to hear the singing that drifted into my cooking dungeon. The words were about summertime and jumping fish. It was a poignant song, maybe a lullaby—but surely it meant the exact opposite of the words the singer was crooning. Nobody was ever that happy.

As I tossed a small residue of spoiled food into the alley, three small beggars drifted into the soft light, staring up with big pop-eyes. The light made the children appear like ghosts, hauntingly thin, no thicker than the weathered wooden grave markers that dotted most abandoned parking lots. They just stood there, silent—except for the little girl, maybe six or seven years old. She was fidgeting and eyeing the others, primed to rush them for a few scraps of food.

"Have anything?" The girl squeaked softer than a mouse.

"No," I said, swallowing the impending guilt that would try to overcome me. I thought *I* had it bad. But here were children bereft of food, a home, and parents. I should thank my lucky stars for what little I had.

"You know, I just might have something." I looked over my shoulder for José and Tina. They had both left the kitchen. Quickly, I found a piece of old bread, broke it into three pieces, and handed one to each child. The girl devoured her bread in two quick bites, but the other two just stared dumbly.

"Go on, eat it," I encouraged.

Without a sound, the children melted back into the darkness. I returned to my cooking and grabbed the pan off the stove.

As I walked back into the dining area, I wondered why I was feeding Chang for free. I supposed it was my civic duty. He was one of our local leaders and

deserved respect, but I did not want to pay homage out of my own pocket. He had only made matters worse for our town. For all his promises, he could not solve our chronic shortage of just about everything. One well-known punster joked that the only glut remaining was an oversupply of human misery. A week after he made that public statement, a janitor found him in a vat of moldy cheese, dead.

I returned to the dining room and dumped the lukewarm potatoes into Chang's chipped white bowl, then showered the rancid contents with a hail of pepper.

"You call this *food*?" Chang sneezed.

"That's what we got, and there ain't no more," I retorted harshly, pointing my large metal spoon at his fat head.

"Don't get insolent with me, Harry. I'll have—"

"I know," I interrupted, but somewhat more politely. "You'll have my ass on the front line before daybreak."

"So help me. What's wrong with you today?"

"You cannot send him off to the eastern front," Dorothy wrapped her arms around her father's large waistline. "Harry is handicapped. It would be against the law."

Chang huffed. "Yeah, well, I could change that. I could conscript him to the war factory down on Abbott Street."

"Sounds just wonderful," I said. "I think I would rather make guns than serve inedible food."

"Stop fooling around, Harry," Chang warned. "Do you want to be chained to the machines? They do that with the defiant ones."

"I already feel chained here. So what's the difference?"

One of Chang's guards moved over and pulled out his revolver, pointing it at my forehead. For a split moment, I weighed the risks of intensifying my verbal assault on the Deputy Mayor. What the heck?! Who else would rustle up food late at night after we were closed? Sometimes as late as midnight. Who would do that for him?

"Put it down, Frank," Chang commanded. "Everyone can have a bad day. Heaven knows, I've had a few stinkers."

"He's mocking you, sir," Frank said reluctantly lowering his gun. "He's an unpatriotic twerp. If it wasn't for his so-called bad leg, he'd be fighting on the front like everyone else."

Chang turned to me. "By the way, where did you get all of the potatoes for tonight's meal? I don't remember signing off on any food supplies."

"Not sure," I shrugged. "You'll have to ask my father. But then again, he's been rather occupied at the hospital."

"Of course, I know that. But everything must come from the cooperative. Someone better have the official paperwork, signed, stamped, and in triplicate. I can't keep protecting him forever. You think the hospital will protect him from being arrested again?"

“I know my father wouldn’t do anything illegal,” I said. I bit down on my tongue—it was an incredibly fat lie. Father had a perfectly good moral compass, but it often pointed to under-the-table dealings.

Chang frowned and turned to his daughter. “See, everyone lies about everything.”

“Harry doesn’t lie,” Dorothy protested.

“Sure he does. They all do. Nobody can trust anybody, these days.”

“You trust *me*, Daddy? Don’t you?”

“Well,” Chang backpedaled with a scowl. “Maybe you—but just you.” He looked away and surveyed the dark room. “Why is it so damn dark in here? Light some more candles.”

“We’re out,” I said. “We should get more in a few days.”

“Fine. Go away!”

I knew how to take a hint. I had teased the devil himself, and lived to breathe another day. I wiped my clammy hands on the dish towel as I wondered whether he would tip me. Actually, he had done that only once, last year, when I had found a case of good Merlot buried under some bricks in the floor in the storage room. Of course, he promptly monopolized it, sharing it only with his cadre of bodyguards and high government officials. He got stinking drunk for days, threw money around, and made big promises. Once the wine had run out, so did the promises.

I returned to the kitchen and sighed. My father’s illness was growing more ominous each day. If he died, I would inherit a restaurant with little food, lots of disagreeable customers, and mountains of debt. I guess misery is the price we pay for civilization. Then again, I began to wonder if that were true. The other night I had stumbled upon my grandfather’s secret diary. Seemed impossible, but a long time ago, life was fat with prosperity and peace.

Peace.

The war had gone on so long that nobody could remember what had started it. The official line was that towel-headed terrorists had instigated the bloodshed during the Fourth Gulf War, which soon escalated across the far corners of the globe. Many cities were lost, including most of San Francisco, to the north.

“Harry!” Dorothy had come into the kitchen. She put her hand on my arm. “I want to apologize for my father’s behavior. He’s been under a lot of pressure.”

“So have I.”

“You don’t understand. The war is going poorly. He’s been ordered to produce more men. He’s conscripting fifteen-year-olds, but even that resource is drying up. If we don’t do something soon, we’ll be at the mercy of terrorists.”

“So?”

She took her hand off my arm. “Harry! Don’t you have half a brain? What’s wrong with you tonight?”

“Maybe you could find out what happened to my brother?”

“Who?”

“My brother, Zackary. You know, the person you almost married. Hell, he was always over at your place trying to repair your ancient television set. Have

you forgotten already?” I could never understand what my brother saw in Dorothy. They had been engaged for years. When he got his marching orders, she paraded off with another guy. To me, she would always be just an empty dress.

“I don’t have any way of finding out.”

“You don’t?” I looked at her incredulously. “He was a tank commander in the 7<sup>th</sup> U.S. Armored Division. He couldn’t just disappear into thin air.”

“Are you sick?” Dorothy backed away.

“Just a dose of too many lies.”

“Are you drunk on hooch or something? You know that’s illegal.”

“I know what’s going on. And nothing is what it appears.”

“Oh, you and your metaphysical crap. You keep this up and I’ll take you to the re-education camp myself.”

“I still want to know what happened to my brother.”

“Things are changing. My father has very little authority anymore.”

“He has enough to push me around.”

“How dare you criticize my father? He’s kept this town alive. If it weren’t for him, we would be...”

“Healthy, wealthy, and wise.” I suppose sarcasm never was a good answer to dumb questions.

“You’re a damn gimp, and a dim-witted one at that. You’re not very American, are you? Perhaps that’s why I don’t see a flag flying outside. Perhaps you’re in league with the terrorists. You sure act that way.” After rattling off those serious allegations of high treason as though reciting a grocery list, she retreated back to her daddy.

“I’m not a traitor,” I mumbled in self-defense. I was just as patriotic as the next dope. I would bleed gallons of red, white, and blue blood to defend our homeland from marauding foreigners and suicide bombers. At least I think I would. I sat and wondered whether that was still true. Had I changed? Would I defend my country? It was becoming very confusing. I was no longer sure whether I wanted to belong to our society.

I looked for something to do again. By chance, I spotted raw potato on the floor, grabbed it, and peeled its mushy flesh. I had to think all of this through. I knew that Dorothy was not the enemy. She was just too beautiful, with her long black hair and exotic Asian eyes. Still, she represented the constrainers, the enforcers of the faith, the card-carrying apostles of the Party, and the perk-laden, upper-crust elite. I had few such privileges; most had none at all.

When I cut the potato in half, I found it completely black. I threw it away. I was reminded of how I originally felt about the diary: I’d wanted to toss it into the nearest waste bin and forget all about it. But my curiosity got the best of me.

After thumbing through a few pages, I was certain that the diary was nothing more than pure propaganda. Disinformation put out to exploit the weak-minded and disloyal. I wanted to dispute my grandfather’s lies, and then junk it on the garbage heap. But the pages began to speak to me. The diary rang true with too many tones of common sense.

I stared down at the black potato in the trash. Almost half of our produce was rotten or worm-eaten. I sure missed our vendor who'd been incarcerated. The grocery man had often joked about how the truth would set people free, making everyone a better person. That had to be a bold-faced lie. Not only was truth dangerous, it did not really exist—at least not with most people. I mean, everything said or written had to be verified and approved beforehand by the authorities. And they took a keen interest in anyone who thought they had their own separate version of the truth.

Tina stomped in front of me and frowned. She stood motionless, hands on her hips.

I mumbled a few inaudible words. We both glared at each other. It was another silent-off. Nobody was going to say a single word; we were just going to engage in a staring contest. This was nuts. I finally flinched and turned my head away. What was the point? Neither she nor anyone else had any idea what was happening in our little corner of the world. I barely knew, myself, but at least I knew that nothing was what it seemed.

“Is there any food left?” Tina suddenly yelled.

“Not sure.”

She began to search the kitchen and soon came up empty-handed. “Where did the other half of the potatoes go?”

I shrugged.

“So there's nothing left?”

“That's right! Nothing left! Did we ever have anything?”

Tina eye's narrowed into piercing slits. “You better not be lying. You know I'm supposed to get the leftover food. It's in my contract.”

I ignored her and instead examined my sweaty hands again. The white fluid was flowing down my fingers. With a frayed rag, I attempted to rub off the sticky liquid. There must be a way to get rid of this white gook. José put down his soup spoon and came over to study my hands.

“*Qué pasa*, boss?” José asked.

I showed him the palms of my hands. “I don't know what it is. Some type of virus.”

José looked closer. “*La mano blanca*. Me too once.”

“I guess it's spreading.”

José cocked his head. “*Sí*, spreading. But no bad.”

“How long ago?” I asked José.

“*Mucho* before.”

I could never get a straight answer from José. Still, my bones felt a change in the weather. My instincts told me that a storm was coming. If only I had some way to decipher its direction and intensity.

I stood up and glanced out the back door. My gaze rested on the several streetlights that stood unlit on our block. They had been broken for years. They seemed to represent all that was wrong with our town—the darkness, the dissolution. For me, I felt my problems were a direct result of that damn diary. I knew I should have burned it and let it die a lonely death.

What a perfect life.

The Apocalypse Syndrome: The Awakening

Copyright © L.K. Samuels 2011