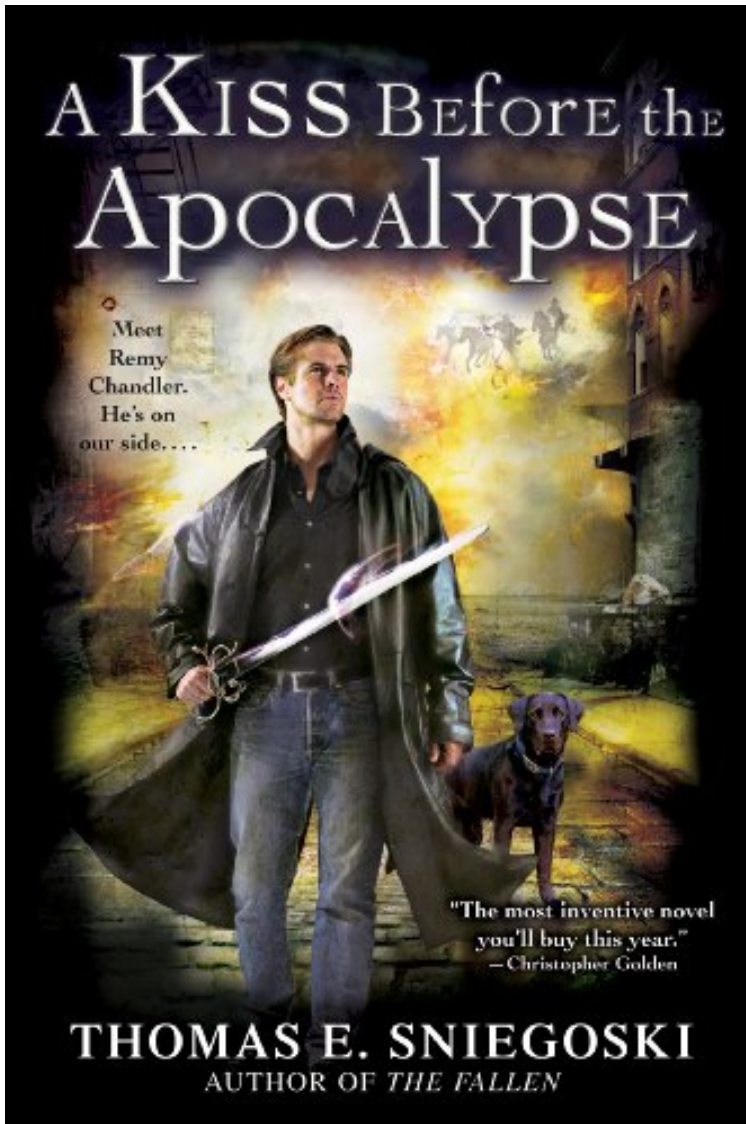


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A Kiss Before the Apocalypse



Par Thomas E. Sniegoski
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurGenerations ago, angel Remiel chose to renounce heaven and live on Earth. He found a place among ordinary humans by converting himself into Boston P.I. Remy Chandler, but he can never tell anyone who he was or that he still has angelic powers. Remy can will himself invisible, speak and understand any foreign language (including any animal language), and hear the thoughts of others. All these secret powers come in handy for a private investigator, especially when the Angel of Death goes missing and hes assigned to find him. As he gets deeper into the investigation, he realizes this is not a missing persons case but a conspiracy to destroy the human race and only Remy has the powers to stop the forces of evil.ExtraitCHAPTER ONE It was an unusually warm, mid-September day in Boston. The kind of day that made one forget the oft-harsh New England winter was on its way, just waiting around the corner, licking its

lips and ready to pounce. Remy Chandler sat in his car at the far end of the Sunbeam Motor Lodge parking lot, sipping his fourth cup of coffee and wishing he had a fifth. He could never have enough coffee. He loved the taste, the smell, the hot feeling as it slid down his throat first thing in the morning; coffee was way up there on his top ten list of favorite things. A beautiful September day made the list as well. Days like today more than proved he had made the right choice in becoming human. He reached down and turned up the volume on WBZ News Radio. Escalating violence in the Middle East was once again the headline, the latest attempts for peace shattered. Big surprise, Remy thought with a sigh, taking a sip from his coffee cup. When hasn't there been violence in that region of the world? he reflected. For as long as he could remember, the bloodthirsty specter of death and intolerance had hovered over those lands. He had tried to talk with them once, but they used his appearance as yet another excuse to pick up knives and swords, and hack each other to bits in the name of God. The private investigator shook his head. That was a long time ago, but it always made him sad to see how little things had changed. To escape the news, he hit one of the pre-set buttons on the car's radio. It was an oldies station, though he found it faintly amusing that an "oldie" was a song recorded in the 1950's. Fats Domino was singing about finding his thrills on Blueberry Hill as Remy took the last swig of coffee and gazed over at the motel. He'd been working this case for two months, a simple surveillance gig keep an eye on Peter Mountgomery, copy editor for the Bronson Liturgical Book Company, and husband suspected of infidelity. It wasn't the most stimulating job, but it did help to pay the bills. Remy spent much of his day drinking coffee, keeping up with Dilbert and maintaining a log of the man's daily activities and contacts. Ah, the thrilling life of the private gumshoe, he thought, eyeing the maroon car parked in a space across the lot. So far, Mountgomery was guilty of nothing more than having lunch with his secretary, but the detective had a sinking feeling that that was about to change. A little after one that afternoon, Remy had followed Peter along the Jamaica Way and into the lot of the Sunbeam Motel. The man had parked his Ford Taurus in front of one of the rooms, and simply sat with the motor running. Remy had pulled past him and idled on the other side of the lot, against a fence that separated the motor lodge from an overgrown, vacant lot, littered with the rusting remains of cars and household appliances. Someone had tossed a bag of garbage over the fence, where it had burst like an overripe piece of fruit, spilling its contents. The cries of birds pulled Remy's attention away from Mountgomery to the trash-strewn lot. He watched as the hungry scavengers swooped down onto the discarded refuse, picking through the rotting scraps, and then climbing back into the air, navigating the sky with graceful ease. For a sad instant, he remembered what it was like: the sound and the feel of mighty wings pounding the air. Flying was one of the only things he truly missed about his old life. He turned his attention back to Mountgomery, just in time to see another car pull up alongside the editor's. Time to earn my two-fifty plus expenses, he thought, watching as Peter's secretary emerged from the vehicle. Then he picked up his camera from the passenger seat and began snapping pictures. The woman stood stiffly beside the driver's side of her boss's car, looking nervously about the parking lot as she waited to be acknowledged, finally reaching out to rap upon the window with a knuckle. The man got out of the car, but the couple said nothing to one another. Mountgomery was dressed in his usual work attire dark suit, white shirt and striped tie. He was forty-six years of age, but looked older. In a light raincoat over a pretty floral print dress, the woman appeared to be at least ten years his junior. The editor carried a blue gym bag that he switched from right hand to left, as he locked his car. The two stared at each other briefly, something seeming to pass silently between them, then together walked to room number 35. The secretary searched through her purse as they stood before the door, eventually producing a key attached to a dark green plastic triangle. Remy guessed that she had rented the room earlier and took four more pictures, an odd feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. The strange sensation grew stronger as the couple entered the room and shut the door behind them. This was the part of the job Remy disliked most. He would have been perfectly satisfied, as would his client, he was sure, to learn that the husband was completely faithful. Everyone would have been happy; Remy could pay his rent, and Janice Mountgomery could sleep better knowing that her husband was still true to the sacred vows of marriage. Nine out of ten times, though, that wasn't the case. Suspecting he'd be awhile, the detective turned his car off and shifted in his seat. He reached for a copy of the Boston Globe on the passenger seat beside him, and had just plucked a pen from his inside coat pocket to begin the crossword puzzle, when he heard the first gunshot. Remy was out of the car and halfway across the lot before he even thought about what he was doing. His hearing was good unnaturally so, and he knew exactly where the sound had come from. He reached the door to room 35, pounding on it with his fist, shouting for Mountgomery to open up. Remy prayed that he was mistaken, that maybe the sound was a car backfire from the busy Jamaica Way, or that some kids in the neighborhood were

playing with fireworks left over from the Fourth of July. But deep down he knew otherwise. A second shot rang out as he brought his heel up and kicked open the door, splintering the frame with the force of the blow. The door swung wide and he entered, keeping his head low, and for the umpteenth time since choosing his profession, questioned his decision not to carry a weapon. The room was dark and cool, the shades drawn. An air conditioner rattled noisily in the far corner beneath the window; smoke and the smell of spent ammunition hung thick in the air. Mountgomery stood naked beside the double bed, illuminated by the daylight flooding in through the open door. Shielding his eyes from the sudden brightness, the man turned, shaken by the intrusion. The body of the woman, also nude, lay on the bed atop a dark, checkered bedspread, what appeared to be a Bible clutched in one of her hands. She had been shot once in the forehead and again in the chest. Mountgomery wavered on his bare feet, the gun shaking in his hand at his side. He stared at Remy in the doorway and slowly raised the weapon. "Don't do anything stupid," Remy cautioned, his hands held out in front of him. "I'm unarmed." He felt a surge of adrenaline flood through his body as he watched the man squint down the barrel of the pistol. This is what it's like to be truly alive, he thought. In the old days, before his renouncement, Remy had never known the thrill of fear; there was no reason to. But now, moments such as this made what he had given up seem almost insignificant. The man jabbed the gun at Remy and screamed. "Shut the door!" Slowly, Remy did as he was told, never taking his eyes from the gunman. "It's not what you think," Mountgomery began. "Not what you think at all." He brought the weapon up and scratched at his temple offhandedly with the muzzle. "Who . . . who are you?" the editor stammered, his features twisting in confusion as he thrust the gun toward Remy again. "What are you doing here?" His voice was frantic, teetering on the edge of hysteria. Hands still raised, Remy cautiously stepped further into the room. As a general rule, he didn't like to lie when he had a gun pointed at him. "I'm a private investigator, Mr. Mountgomery," he said in a soft, calm voice. "Your wife hired me. I'm not going to try anything, okay? Just put the gun down and we'll talk. Maybe we can figure a way out of this mess. What do you think?" Mountgomery blinked as if trying to focus. He stumbled slightly to the left, the gun still aimed at Remy. "A way out of this mess," he repeated, with a giggle. "Nobody's getting out of this one." He glanced at his companion on the bed and began to sob, his voice trembling with emotion. "Did you hear that, Carol? The bitch hired a detective to follow me." Mountgomery reached out to the dead woman. But when she didn't respond, he let his arm flop dejectedly to his side. He looked back at Remy. "Carol was the only one who understood. She listened. She believed me." Tears of genuine emotion ran down his face. "I wish we'd had more time together," he said wistfully. "The bitch at home thought I was crazy. Well, we'll see how crazy I am when it all turns to shit." The sadness was turning to anger again. "This is so much harder than I imagined," he said, his face twisted in pain. He lowered the gun slightly and Remy started to move. Instantly, Mountgomery reacted, the weapon suddenly inches from the detective's face. Obviously madness had done little to slow his reflexes. "It started when they opened up my head," Mountgomery began. "The dreams. At first I thought they were just that, bad dreams, but then I realized they were much more." The editor pressed the gun against Remy's cheek. "I was dreaming about the end of the world, you see. Every night it became clearer the dreams more horrible. I don't want to die like that," he said, shaking his head, eyes glassy. "And I don't want the people I love to die like that either." The man leaned closer to Remy. He smelled of after-shave and a sickly sour sweat. "Are you a religious man?" If he had not been so caught up in the seriousness of the situation, Remy Chandler would have laughed. "I have certain beliefs. Yes. What do you believe in, Peter?" Mountgomery swallowed hard. "I believe we're all going to die horribly. Carol, that was her name," he jerked his head toward the dead woman on the bed, "Carol Weir. She wanted to be brave, to face the end with me. But she was too good to die that way." He smiled forlornly, and tightened his grip on the gun. "I would have divorced my wife and married her, but it seemed kind of pointless when we looked at the big picture. This was the nicest thing I could do for her. She thanked me before I . . ." Mountgomery's face went wild with the realization of what he had done and he jammed the barrel of the gun into Remy's forehead. The muzzle felt strangely warm. "Would you prefer to die now, or wait until it all goes to Hell?" the editor asked him. "I'm not ready to make that decision." Remy suddenly jerked his head to one side, grabbing the man's wrist, pushing the gun away from his face. Mountgomery pulled the trigger. A bullet roared from the weapon to bury itself in the worn shag carpet under them. The two men struggled for the weapon, Mountgomery screaming like a wild animal. But he was stronger than Remy had imagined, and quickly regained control of the pistol, forcing the detective back. Again, the editor raised his arm and aimed the weapon. "Don't you point that thing at me," Remy snarled, glaring at the madman. "If you want to die then die. If you want to take the coward's way out, do it. But don't you dare try to take me with

you." Mountgomery seemed taken aback by the detective's fierce words. He squinted his eyes, tilting his head from left to right, as if seeing the man before him for the first time. "Look at you," he said suddenly, with an odd smile and a small chuckle. "I didn't even notice until now." He dropped the weapon to his side. It was Remy's turn to be confused. He glanced briefly behind him to be sure no one else had entered the room. "Are you here for her for Carol?" Mountgomery continued. "She deserves to be in Heaven. She is was a good persona very good person." "What are you talking about, Peter?" Remy asked. "Why would I be here for Carol? Your wife hired me to . . ." Mountgomery guffawed, the strange barking sound cutting Remy off mid-sentence. "There's no need to pretend with me," he said smiling. "I can see what you are." A finger of ice ran down Remy's spine. With a look of resigned calm, Mountgomery raised the gun and pressed the muzzle beneath the flesh of his chin. "I never imagined I'd be this close to one," he said, finger tensing on the trigger. "Angels are even more beautiful than they say." Remy lunged, but Mountgomery proved faster again. The editor pulled the trigger and the bullet punched through the flesh and bone of his chin, and up into his brain, exiting through the top of his head in a spray of crimson. He fell back stiffly onto the bed atop his true love, twitching wildly as the life drained out of him, and then rolling off the bed to land on the floor. His eyes, wide in death, gazed with frozen fascination at the wing-shaped pattern created by his blood and brains on the ceiling above. Remy studied the gruesome example of man's fragile mortality before him, Mountgomery's final words reverberating through his mind. I never imagined I'd be this close to one. He caught his reflection in a mirror over the room's single dresser and stared hard at himself, searching for cracks in the faade. Is it possible? he wondered. Had Peter Mountgomery somehow seen through Remy's mask of humanity? Angels are as beautiful as they say. Remy looked away from his own image and back to the victims of violence. How could a case so simple turn into something so ugly? he asked himself, moving toward the broken door, followed by the words of a man who could see angels, and had dreamt of the end of the world. He stepped quickly into the afternoon sun and almost collided with the Hispanic cleaning woman and her cart of linens. She looked at him, and then craned her neck to see around him and into the room. Remy caught the first signs of panic growing in her eyes and reached back for the knob, pulling the door closed. In flawless Spanish he told her not to go into the room, that death had visited those within, and it was not for her to see. The woman nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving his as she pushed her cart quickly away. Homicide Detective Steven Mulvehill stood beside Remy, as the team from the medical examiner's office prepared to remove the bodies from the motel room. Remy leaned against his car, arms crossed. The two friends were silent as they watched the activity across the lot. A small crowd had formed, kept at bay by a strip of yellow crime scene tape and four uniformed officers. The curious pack craned their necks, moving from one end of the tape to the other, eager to catch a glimpse of something to fill the misery quotient in their lives. It was something that Remy had never really understood, but had come to accept; the human species was enthralled with the pain of others. Whether a natural disaster or a drive-by shooting, the average Joe wanted to hear every detail. Maybe the fascination stemmed from the fact that somebody else had incurred the wrath of the fates, and they, for the moment, could breathe a sigh of relief. Mulvehill and his partner, Rich Healey, had already examined the scene in the motel room and released the bodies to the coroner. Healey was still inside, supervising the removal. The detective took a long drag of a cigarette, expelled the smoke from his nostrils like some great medieval beast, then broke the uncomfortable silence. "You all right?" he asked. "You're kind of quiet." He took another pull from his smoke. Remy stared straight ahead, his eyes focused on the entryway of the room across the lot. "He saw me, Steven. Right before that guy killed himself, he really saw me." Mulvehill was a stocky man, average height with a wild head of thick, black hair. He was forty-seven years old, divorced, and living the job. Remy had met him more than five years earlier, when a homicide investigation had intersected with a missing persons case he had been working on. The two had been friends ever since. "He saw me for what I really am," Remy said again, truly disturbed at what he was saying. Mulvehill looked at Remy, the last of the cigarette protruding from the corner of his mouth. "What, a shitty detective?" The cop smirked, taking the smoke from his mouth and flicking the remains to the ground. The case that had first brought them together had ended badly, the murder suspect dead and Mulvehill with a bullet in his gut. "You're a riot," Remy responded. "The stuff of Vegas floorshows. Really, if this cop thing doesn't work out . . ." Mulvehill laughed out loud, as he reached into his sports jacket for his pack of cigarettes. "And you're an asshole. Tell me again what you were doing here." He pulled one from the pack and placed it in his mouth. "Very smooth, detective," Remy grinned wryly. "It was simple surveillance," he explained. "Wife suspected he was having an affair. Nothing out of the ordinary." Mulvehill lit up with an old fashioned Zippo. He flicked the cover closed with metallic click, then

slipped it back inside his pocket next to the cigarette pack. He took a long, thoughtful drag. Smoking helped him think, he often said. Helped him focus. He'd tried to stop once, but it had made him stupid. "So he shows up here with his secretary, they go in, and after a while you hear the first shot?" Remy nodded. "That's about it. By the time I got in there, he'd already killed the woman. I think he was getting ready to shoot himself but I interrupted him." The homicide detective idly brushed some ash from the lapel of his navy blue sports coat. "So you think this guy could somehow see you the real you." Mulvehill had been near death when Remy found him lying in a pool of blood in an abandoned waterfront warehouse. To ease his suffering and calm the terrified detective, Remy had revealed his true countenance. Death is only a new beginning, he had reassured the man. Remy nodded, replaying the conversation with Mountgomery inside his head. "I didn't drop the faade at all, haven't done it in a long time. But the way he looked at me and that smile. He was definitely seeing something." The doctors said it was a miracle that Steven had survived the shooting. After his recovery, the homicide detective had come looking for Remy, who had denied nothing and offered nothing. But Mulvehill knew he had encountered something very much out of the ordinary, something that couldn't simply be attributed to loss of blood. Remy knew that Steven's mother and grandmother had been strict Catholics, and had tried to raise him in the faith as well. As a young man, he had gone to church to please them, but he had believed Christian doctrine to be nothing more than fairy tales, fantasies to relieve the fears of the devoted when faced with their own mortality. But since his own brush with death, and his encounter with a certain private investigator, the Boston detective wasn't quite sure what he believed anymore. In fact, he'd even started to attend Mass again. Just to be on the safe side, he'd told Remy. But Remy had shown Mulvehill his true face by design. He had revealed himself on purpose. This was something else altogether. This dead man had seen beneath his mask. "That ever happen before?" Mulvehill was asking, interrupting Remy's brooding. "Besides when you wanted it to, I mean?" Remy looked at his friend. "Not to me, but throughout the ages there have been holy men, visionaries, who could glimpse the unseen world and its inhabitants usually before some kind of change in the world something of great religious significance." Mulvehill sucked a final drag from his cigarette. "Anything coming down the pike that you know of? New Pope or something?" Remy shrugged. "Well, the guy did talk about having dreams about the end of the world, the Apocalypse. He thought he was doing the woman a favor by killing her, thought I was here to take them up to Heaven." Mulvehill looked at his friend with a serious expression, a new, unlit cigarette having appeared almost magically in his mouth. "When the time comes, will you carry me up to Heaven?" he asked, fishing for his lighter. Remy grinned. "Sorry, that's not my job, but I imagine you're gonna have to drop a few pounds if you want anybody carrying your sorry ass up to" Their playful banter was cut short by a sudden commotion. Healey ran from the motel room and beckoned to one of the uniforms. They exchanged some words and the cop spoke rapidly into his radio, then followed the detective back into the room. Mulvehill grumbled beneath his breath, threw his latest smoke to the ground and hurried toward the crime scene. Remy followed, that strange, uneasy feeling in his gut returning. "What's going on?" Mulvehill asked a second uniformed officer who stood just outside the motel room. An ambulance pulled into the parking lot, sirens wailing, and screeched to a halt in front of the open door. Two EMT's jumped into action, hauling open the doors at the back of the vehicle and removing their equipment. Another ambulance had been there a short while ago, but it was gone now. There had been no lives for its technicians to save. The uniform speaking to Mulvehill appeared shaken. He made brief eye contact with the detective and then looked back into the room, which buzzed with surprising activity. "I think the other detective said something about them being alive." A harried looking paramedic pulling a stretcher barked for them to get out of the way as he pushed through the door. Another followed with a second stretcher at his heels. There was a growing excitement amongst the gathered crowd, anticipation crackling in the air. They moved closer, an undulating organism hungry for anguish not their own. Mulvehill shoved the officer aside and stormed into room 35, with Remy close behind. The blanket-covered bodies of Peter Mountgomery and Carol Weir were atop the stretchers, oxygen masks on their faces. They were deathly pale, the damage done by gunfire blatantly evident. How could they possibly be alive? Remy stepped back against the wall as emergency workers pushed the stretchers past him, then approached Mulvehill and his partner, who stood beside the queen-size bed. "It's the damndest thing," Healey was saying, obviously flustered. "They were getting ready to bag em when they felt a pulse on the guy. They checked the woman just to be sure, and she was still alive too." Mulvehill looked at Remy, his expression that of someone who had just been slapped. "Steven?" Remy asked, concern growing in his voice. "Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air," Mulvehill told his partner, squeezing the man's shoulder in support. Healey excused himself and headed for the door, shaking

his head as he went. From outside they heard the mournful sound of sirens as the ambulance departed the lot. Mulvehill cleared his throat and fumbled for his cigarettes. "They're still alive, Remy," he said, the package crinkling from inside his coat pocket. "That's impossible. I saw the woman's body, Steven. Mountgomery shot her in the forehead." He pointed to the center of his furrowed brow. "And just to be sure, he put another one in her heart." Mulvehill was silent, glancing around at the several spots where blood had been spilled. It had already begun to dry, ugly dark stains that would never be completely washed away. "I saw him put that gun under his chin and blow his own brains out." Remy pointed to the wing-shaped stain on the ceiling. "That's brain matter up there. They can't possibly be alive." Mulvehill looked away from the ceiling and shrugged his broad shoulders. "Did you not see the ambulance take them out of here?" he asked. "They're alive. They both have pulses." The feeling in Remy's gut grew more pronounced. "Hey, it's not a bad thing, two people are still alive," Mulvehill reasoned. "Maybe it's a miracle or something." "Or something," Remy repeated as he turned and walked from the motel room, leaving his friend to make sense of it all. Though Remy looked and acted like a human being and chose to live like one, he was nothing of the kind. On occasion his body functioned on another level entirely. He could feel things, sense things that others couldn't. And right now there was something in the air that no one else could feel, something unnatural. As he walked across the parking lot, he glanced at his watch and swore beneath his breath. Late again. Remy got into his car, knowing that what had begun in Room 35 of The Sunbeam Motor Lodge was far from over, and that two hundred and fifty dollars a day plus expenses wasn't going to come close to compensating him for what he feared was waiting on the horizon. From Publishers Weekly Tightly focused and deftly handled, this adult debut from YA and comic book author Sniegowski (*The Fallen*) covers familiar ground in entertaining new ways. The angel Remiel wanders the Earth in human form as private investigator Remy Chandler, experiencing the mortal life while indulging his fondness for the trappings of noir. When the Angel of Death vanishes, Heaven hires Chandler to find him as well as a missing set of scrolls that could bring about the apocalypse. Sniegowski's choice to frame this high concept with a straight noir detective tale grounds the world for the reader and highlights the mystical elements. Chandler's dog, Marlowe, written with a humorous but heartfelt voice, shows off Chandler's ability to talk to animals and provides some charming comic relief. Fans of urban fantasy and classic detective stories will enjoy this smart and playful story. (May) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.