

CHANDELIER by Michael Leon

EXCERPT

Chapter 5

Benny lay down, resting his head on a pillow and relaxed. He hadn't started on the music for Diva, but he had some ideas after reviewing Diva's volatile life and the strong, sometimes strange men who'd influenced her career. Again, the peculiar sensation of sleep seeped over closed eyes, his last thought of Diva and her most eccentric relationship, the reported love for Erik Destler, the Phantom of the Opera.

"A good place to start."

Benny woke, startled by Flynn's voice, intending to reprimand him for invading his retreat, but he was no longer in his room. Benny was sitting beside Flynn in the Garnier opera house, the auditorium empty except for them. Benny reached out and touched an empty seat, then grasped Flynn's arm.

"Tell me again that it's only a dream."

Flynn shook his head before looking around the famous theatre. "It was too soon to tell you the truth. You were still shocked by the experience."

Benny collected his thoughts, still unsure if they were real or a dream. "The pills. You've given me a hallucinatory drug."

"These experiences are more real than anything you've experienced in your life."

Benny stood up and walked down to the front stage, hoping as he turned that Flynn was no longer there. "Make me understand, Flynn, or I walk out of here and won't come back."

Flynn walked to the front stall and joined Benny. "Diva gave you a job to do. I also have a role. To help you."

"What role? Are you going to fly around and have me follow you again?"

"No. I want you to look at the middle stall to your right. Do you know why?"

Benny followed Flynn's gaze to Box 5, supposedly the Opera Ghost's private stall. Someone walked from the shadows to the front of the booth—the ghostlike silhouette formed in the light, revealing a woman who gazed toward the stage.

"Bonjour!" Benny cried out, but she didn't respond. "Can she see us?"

"No, but she senses us," Flynn replied, before waving his hand toward the stage, seemingly making the curtain flutter as if by a breeze. "She can see that. Study her eyes, Benny."

Benny looked into the eyes of the old woman, feeling a sharp jolt from her gaze. She saw him for an instant before Benny was picked up by invisible forces, as if a ship in the open ocean, and blown by gale winds to another shore. He stood on the bank of Bellagio in Italy, gazing into the eyes of another, not the woman but a man he did not recognize.

"Let your research begin," came Flynn's voice.

Benny stood alone on the bank. "What am I doing here?"

"That's for you to work out. What's important is that you are where you should be, observing the man who can provide you with answers. May I introduce you to Erik Destler." Flynn said before his voice broke off, leaving Benny alone with the Phantom of the Opera.