***Chapter 4***

**The applicants had been lined up and were waiting for the signal to begin moving onto the rehearsal stage of the Academy. Susan Spiegel was already there, recognizable by her blackberry hair and sallow complexion, talking with the pianist. When she noticed Gilbert Fabre as he passed through the curtains, she briskly walked over to intercept him:**

**“Mr. Fabre: did I read this correctly? It says here that you’re a native speaker of Catalan. Is that what you meant to put down?”**

**“Yes. Why would you think otherwise?”**

**“It also says that you can make yourself understood in French and Spanish. You appear to be the only applicant who speaks Catalan. Most of the applicants don’t even realize it’s a language.”**

**“I was born in a small village on the French side of the Pyrenees, a medieval fortress town named Mont St Louis. It’s not far from Prades, the town where Pablo Casals lived in exile during the war. My childhood was spent in Perpignan and Barcelona. My family came to the United States when I was 10.”**

**“That’s very interesting, Mr. Fabre.” Susan Spiegel pushed her glasses up onto her brow, a way of showing that she was now paying attention to the person she was talking with rather than the document she was reading. “We certainly ought to be able to use you as a diction coach for the chorus.” Gilbert breathed a sigh of relief: his admission into the Chorus was guaranteed. He replied,**

**“It’s been many years, of course. But yes, I still remember my Catalan.”**

**“That’s wonderful! We will be getting back to you. Here’s the schedule for tonight. You’ll be working with Bill Thayer, he’s the assistant principal conductor of the Chorus. Around 8:45 you’ll be put in a group of half a dozen or so. Mr. Falcone himself will audition you at the piano. Here are your audition slips. I’ll put you in General Audition 2 and Private Audition Group 6. Just stay close to the stage and wait until you’re called.” Fabre nodded, finishing his cross-examination of this enthusiastic though not terribly clever girl. Then he continued on to the piano.**

**He found himself standing with about 20 others around a Baldwin piano. Seated at the keyboard was the elderly, silver-haired Bill Thayer, assistant to the Philadelphia Orchestra for several decades. Owing to reasons of disposition, talent or lack of opportunity, he’d never gone on to anything else. Philadelphia, Gilbert spitefully noted to himself, can have that effect on people.**

**The General Audition, one gathered, had been designed only to warm up the singers and familiarize them with the score. Even after a leave of absence of more than a decade, Gilbert slipped easily into blending with a chorus. The Vivaldi Gloria was beautiful, simple and relatively undemanding. Thayer instructed them to practice the passages they’d just run through and be ready for the Private Audition in about 20 minutes.**

**Aldo Falcone, Choral Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, was a man in his early 40’s. He was known as a dynamic musician able to get the best from the singers he worked with. His fiery temperament, which could manifest itself at any moment, was also well attested. Sharp-eyed and restless, of medium height with hardly a wisp of hair on his head, he inspired Gilbert’s respect, but not his trust. Naturally inclined to suspicion, Fabre came away with the feeling that Falcone had made up his mind even before the auditions began, indeed as if the replacements for the Orchestra Chorus had been decided on even before the announcement had been placed in the newspapers!**

**Falcone listened to them individually for periods of 2 to 5 minutes. Then everyone was informed that they would learn if they’d been accepted through a letter that would go out in the mail sometime the following week. Not by a single gesture had he indicated to any of them that they’d come up to his standard.**