



Gold medal Winter



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CHAPTER ONE

America's Hope for Gold!

Nothing compares to speeding across the ice. The wind rushing against your face and your hair flying up behind you, body angled forward, held up by sheer momentum. You forget about the cold because all you are is a bundle of energy, pushing yourself faster and higher in ways that are not only beautiful to watch but just beautiful to be. Sometimes I want to throw my hands and head back, chin to the sky, eyes closed, and let go, telling the world around me, the chilly air, the wintry trees burdened with snow, the little birds that sing my music, “I’m all yours.”

This is exactly what I’d do if I was at home, skating on the pond in our backyard.

But I’m definitely not at home.

“ESPI! ESPI! ESPI!”

That, believe it or not, is a sold-out crowd of almost twenty thousand people chanting my name while I stand at the center of the ice, still in my program’s final pose, trying to catch my breath at the US Ladies’ Figure Skating Championships.

“Thank you to Esperanza Flores, the last free skate of the evening.”

And *that*, believe it or not, is the announcer booming my name over the speakers.

I smile for all I'm worth, even though my lungs are heaving. The cheering from the audience gets even louder.

"Once the judges release Miss Flores's scores," the announcer goes on, "the medal ceremony will begin."

I straighten out of my pose, my hands in the air, waving. Stuffed animals dot the ice all around me. Brightly colored teddy bears. Penguins. Fat lions and fluffy puppies. Little girls of eight and nine are skating around, collecting them in their arms. They're called "sweepers." I remember dreaming of getting to be a sweeper when I was small, clearing away gifts from adoring fans for Olympic hopefuls at this very same championship.

Is this really happening?

"Congratulations, Esperanza," says one of the girls, a shy smile on her face as she hands me a big pink teddy bear. She's tiny, but her legs are cut with long, lean muscles, the legs of a skater. Her eyes shine bright against her dark skin, and she looks up at me like I'm some sort of magical creature come to life.

I bend down and give her a hug. "Thank you. You can call me Espi."

"Espi," she says. Her smile grows wider before she skates off.

Tears push at the back of my eyes. Then I hear a familiar voice shouting, "*iMija! iMija!*"

I turn to its source. My mother is down in the front of the stands, jumping up and down like a crazy lady, her chaperone credentials bouncing around her neck with all the movement. My best friends Libby and Joya are with her. All of them are

beaming. “Mamá!” I call back. She wipes her eyes. Tears shine on her cheeks in the bright lights. “Libby! Joya!” I shout, waving at them.

Then I see Lucy Chen, my coach, nodding her head at me with barely a trace of a smile showing, but from her, that’s all the approval I need.

She’s pleased.

No, the way she’s rising up and down on her toes means she’s *excited*.

My heart pounds. I never imagined I’d compete at Nationals, never mind have a shot at medaling.

Seriously. A shot at medaling!

With one final wave at the crowd, I skate off the ice, stepping through the door the official holds open at the edge of the rink. Someone takes the stuffed animals from my arms, though I can’t see who. It’s chaotic with so many people milling around and camera flashes from the audience going off like lightning. Sunbursts dot my eyes, but when they start to clear, Coach Chen is standing there.

“You nailed that triple axel,” she says, and I can see the pride shining in her eyes. She hands me my skate guards and I put them on. “You’ve come such a long way, Esperanza. You have a real shot at the Olympic team.” She leans in. “I knew you would. I knew it from the first moment I saw you on the ice so long ago.” She gives me a hug. “Your scores should be up any minute.” She grabs my hand and steers me toward the Kiss and Cry, where a skater and her coach wait for the judges’ verdict while the television cameras film the whole, angst-ridden experience. It’s called

the Kiss and Cry for just this reason — it's the place where you potentially experience the greatest moment of your figure skating career, or where tragedy can befall you and you react accordingly. The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, all caught on camera for the world to see.

We sit down on a low bench. Coach is tapping her nails against the top of the boards, her eyes trained on the monitor in front of us, where those all-important numbers will either make me or break me tonight. I glance back to where my mother, Libby, and Joya are waiting at the edge of the stands, all of them silent, facing the judges' panel.

"Espí, here they come," Coach says.

Suddenly, the numbers for my free skate start flashing above us on the giant scoreboard high above the center of the rink. I cover my eyes. Then I uncover them but turn away from the monitor. "I can't watch, I can't." My heart pounds so hard I might faint. My fists close so tight my knuckles turn white.

Coach Chen is murmuring, trying to do the math. Then she gasps. "120.67. Combined with your short program, that's" — she pauses, adding up the numbers again — "187.22! You're taking home silver, my darling Esperanza." She swivels me around to face her. "You knocked Meredith into third with your free skate."

"Ohmigosh, ohmigosh," I hear, then realize that it's me saying it.

Coach Chen wraps her arms around me in a big hug. "Go see your mother quickly before you have to go to the Mixed Zone. She looks like she can't wait until afterward."