PART ONE
Olympic Hopeful

“I didn’t lose the gold. I won the silver.”

— MICHELLE KWAN,

Olympic silver medalist 1998, bronze medalist 2002
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, “¡Mija! ¡Mija!”

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.

“Espi, 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.”
“Thanks, Coach,” I say. When she releases me, I step out of the Kiss and Cry and run to where my mother and my friends are standing with the rest of the crowd. I lean over the wall to better reach them. Soon the arms of everyone I love are around me. The tears that have been pushing at the back of my eyes ever since the end of my program start streaming down my face. The scoreboard flashes the new standings, and it’s true: I’ve moved up from fourth place to second.

“Mija, mi cielo, mi vida,” my mother is saying over and over. *My daughter, my sky, my life,* just three of her many terms of endearment for me. “Mi Esperanza,” she throws in — a double meaning, since my name means “hope” in Spanish.

“I love you, Mamá,” I whisper in her ear, inhaling the familiar scent of her lavender shampoo.

When she pulls away, Coach Chen’s husband, John Baxter, is standing there, smiling at me. “Congratulations, Espi. It was wonderful to watch you out there. It reminded me of watching my wife when she was the star.”

This is such a sweet thing to say. “Thanks, Mr. Chen.”

He laughs at my old nickname for him.

Libby and Joya have been hanging back, waiting as patiently as they are capable, but suddenly they are jumping up and down and squealing. “You’re going to the Olympics, Espi! The Oh-lym-pics!”

“Thanks for being here,” I say to them, grabbing their hands over the railing. “But nothing’s certain, so I can’t let myself celebrate yet.”

“Oh, come on,” Joya says, the dozens of twists in her hair
swinging and swaying as she bounces. “That chick supposedly holding spot number three isn’t going to make it with that injury she got today. What’s her name again?”

“Jennifer Madison,” I supply.

“Yeah, well. Her unfortunate exit means you’re up, *chica,*” Libby says, clapping her purple mittens together, her blue eyes as big and wide as ever.

I look around to make sure no one else has overheard these comments. “Shhhh,” I tell them. “It’s awful what happened to Jennifer. It’s probably going to cost her the Olympics. No one knows yet whether her injury is serious, so the committee is going to wait to make the final decision until after the doctors see her. We probably won’t know anything until tomorrow.”

The announcer’s voice booms over the speakers again. “The final standings are as follows: In first place, we have three-time US champion Stacie Grant, with 188.03,” and cheers go up across the stadium. “In second place, we have Esperanza Flores, with 187.22,” he goes on, my name naked of any titles, because I simply don’t have any. But the crowd is even louder now. “And coming in third, we have two-time US silver medalist and now two-time bronze medalist Meredith Park with 186.95.”

Coach Chen comes up behind me and greets everyone with a wave and a big smile.

My mother clasps her hands. “Do you really think this will be enough to qualify Espi for a spot on the Olympic team?”

“We’ll see,” Coach says. “It will be close, but I think she has a real shot. It was supposed to be Stacie, Jennifer, and Meredith,
but ever since Espi came in fourth at Worlds, US Figure Skating has had their eye on her. And with Jennifer likely out of the picture now, I think this silver might seal it for them. And for her,” she adds, glancing at me.

“I feel like my heart is going to fly out of my body,” I tell Joya and Libby. “I can’t believe this.”

“Silver,” Joya says. “Do you think it’s real or just silver-plated?”

This makes me laugh. I’m about to respond when my friends’ eyes shift from me to whatever is behind me.

I turn around. Correction: whoever is behind me.

Hunter Wills is standing there — the Young God of US men’s figure skating, according to the press, who also call him “the Quad King” and “the Ice Prince.” He’s tall even without his skates, and between his wavy hair and the way his white team jacket makes his eyes seem bluer than the ocean, I can understand why girls are fawning over him all the time.

For some reason, he seems to be waiting to talk to me.

“You were amazing tonight, Esperanza,” he says, flashing that winning smile, the one I see every time I open up the People magazines my mother leaves lying around the house. “You totally nailed that last jump combo. You got serious height. Height like a guy. Impressive.”

“Hi, Hunter,” I say, wishing I could erase the flush from my cheeks. “Thanks. I think,” I add, a little offended by his height like a guy comment. But still flattered.

“Sure thing. See you at the Olympics,” he adds, just before walking away.
Just hearing that steals my breath. The Olympics. And hearing it from someone like Hunter, who holds the number one spot on the men’s team, practically stops my lungs altogether.

“Did you hear what he said?” Joya gushes once he’s out of earshot.

“Yes. The Olympics,” I say, almost in a whisper, afraid to jinx myself.

Libby rolls her eyes. “Yeah, but he called you amazing. Maybe he likes you.”

I pull my jacket over my shoulders. I don’t know if it’s nerves or the chilly rink air that’s making me shiver. “What, are you dreaming?” I say to Libby. “That’s the first time Hunter Wills has ever said more than a polite hello to me in my entire skating career. And besides, there’s all sorts of rumors about him and Jennifer Madison. They’re a couple, I think.”

Joya taps her knuckles along the low wall that separates us. “Well, now that she’s probably out as far as the Games go, I bet they’re headed straight to Splitsville,” she sings, her voice full of the bravado that makes her our school’s standout singer in all the musicals.

Now both Libby and I shush her. Paranoid, I look all around, hoping no one overheard. As I turn I stumble right into none other than Stacie Grant, “America’s Darling,” who — I’ve learned recently — is less than darling in person.

I smile at her while inside I’m cringing. “Um, hi, Stacie. Congratulations on winning the gold.”

Stacie doesn’t smile back, but her blond curls are as pert as ever. “Yes, well, it’s not as though it was unexpected.” She tilts
her head, looking at me. Then she runs a finger just underneath the neckline of her Vera Wang skating costume, pulling the tiny rhinestones away from her skin. “I was always going to take first. But what a surprise to have to stand there next to you today.”

I swallow. “I’m happy about the silver.”

“Enjoy it, since I doubt it will ever happen again. Meredith just had an off day and Jen’s already doing physical therapy, so don’t count yourself part of the Olympic team yet,” she adds before moving on without saying good-bye.

“And don’t let Stacie psych you out, Espi,” Coach Chen says out of the side of her mouth, even as she smiles at Stacie’s coach, Angela East, who just gave her a wave.

I take a deep breath, in and out. Try not to care about Stacie’s mean remarks — but it’s difficult not to. “She’s right. The only reason I’m medaling is because of Jennifer’s injury.”

Coach Chen grabs my shoulders and turns me toward her. “You and I both know that isn’t true. You were born with a natural gift for this sport, plus you’ve got grace, speed, and height. On top of all this, you’re gorgeous. And you’re ten times nicer than all those other girls combined.”

My mother puts her arm around me from the other side. “That’s because I raised Esperanza to be a good girl and to never take anything for granted.”

“Yes, Mamá,” I say, and roll my eyes a little, but both of their comments help me feel a lot better.

“Hey, Espi,” Libby says behind me, her voice a warning. “Um, get ready and wipe those tears away.”
As I turn to her, I immediately see what she is talking about. A USFS official stands ready to take me to the Mixed Zone, where the press will be waiting.

That’s the thing about being a skater. Reporters and paparazzi pretty much tail you everywhere once you show you’re a real contender for a national title.

“You don’t have to answer anything you don’t want to,” Coach Chen says. “But make sure to smile.” We wave good-bye for now to my mother, Libby, Joya, and Mr. Chen, and follow the official backstage. On our way there I see Rachael Flatt and tug on the sleeve of Coach’s jacket.

“There’s Rachael Flatt,” I whisper excitedly. Rachael Flatt is one of my heroes. She was the national champion in 2010 and was part of the Olympic team that same year. “She’s so amazing.”

Coach Chen smiles at me. “Soon there will be young skaters saying that about you, Espi.”

Rachael looks up just as I pass. Her face lights up when she sees me. “Nice job today, Espi!”

My jaw drops. Then I remember to respond. “Thank you so much. It’s an honor to have your support.”

“Oh course,” she says with a laugh, as though I can always count on her.

Contemplating the magnitude of this encounter any further will have to wait, since the second we arrive in the Mixed Zone, the reporters and photographers swarm all around us. Cameras flash and flicker.

“Esperanza! Do you think you’ll make the Olympic team?”
“Espi, are the rumors true that you and Stacie Grant don’t get along?”

Microphones form a bouquet in front of me. I look at Coach Chen, who nods. I open my mouth to try and answer one or two of the reporters’ questions, but more keep on coming and I can’t get a word in.

“How does it feel to be the first Dominican to medal here?”

That’s one I’d like to take. Most people don’t think of Latinas as figure skaters. When they think of Dominicans, they think of famous baseball players like Manny Ramirez and Pedro Martinez, or they think of salsa dancing. I’m determined to prove the world wrong on this one. Dominican girls may be good dancers, sure, but we can skate too when we put our minds to it. I look around at all the faces waiting for me to speak.

“Fantástico,” I say, and smile wide, hoping my one word was the right one.

They burst out laughing, which makes me laugh with them. It calms my nerves a little too.

“I’m just lucky to be here, competing,” I go on. “It’s an honor to medal and stand up on the podium with such accomplished figure skaters. And if the Olympic committee wants me, of course I’m ready for the challenge.”

The announcer cuts through the next question by coming on over the loudspeaker, letting everyone know that the medal ceremony is about to start.

“Gotta go,” I say with another smile, and the press starts
moving away, heading toward the best place to film the podium, I suppose.

“Good luck, Esperanza,” a few of them say as they leave.

“Great job, you made them laugh,” Coach Chen says. “Now give me that jacket.”

I shrug it off into her hands. “I’m so nervous.”

“Just enjoy this,” she says. “It’s the best part!”

I nod. Then I run over to where my mom, my friends, and Mr. Chen are still waiting at the edge of the stands. “Thank you for being here. I love you guys.”

“You can pay us back later at the party,” Joya says with a smirk.

“Does payback include stuffing your stomachs with Luca’s cooking?”

“That’ll do,” she says.

I turn to my mother. “I love you, Mamá.” She doesn’t respond, because she can’t. She’s crying too hard. “Oh, Mamá,” I say, and lean over the rail to give her a kiss on the cheek.

Coach Chen crosses her arms. “Espi . . .” she warns me.

Stacie Grant and Meredith Park are already waiting by the gate to go out on the ice. I’m the only one missing, so I head off toward the door that the USFS handler is holding open for us, removing my skate guards one by one as I go. Just before I reach Stacie and Meredith at the edge of the rink, I stop, take a deep breath, and look all around the stadium, savoring this moment.

I am always aware that this may not happen again. This medal could be my last. Judges can love you one day and not the next. There are injuries, like with Jennifer Madison, and then there is the simple reality that bodies change and grow in unpre-
dictable ways, sometimes in ones that can end a career almost overnight. The Olympics may stay only a dream.

But nothing is standing in the way of me and that podium right now.

Nothing but a little ice.

The moment I join Stacie and Meredith, the lights in the arena dim. The medal ceremony is starting. The announcer calls out Stacie’s name as this year’s national champion, and when she steps through the gate, the audience is cheering wildly. I turn to Meredith. I almost want to grab her hand, give her a hug, do something to mark this momentous occasion we are sharing, but she won’t look back at me.

Oh well. If we end up going to the Olympics together, there will be time for us to become friends — I hope.

Then, suddenly, the announcer is talking about me and it’s my turn to get out there. As I’m skating toward the podium at the center of the ice, where I’m about to become the silver medalist at the US Championships, I hear someone in the crowd yell my name: “Esperanza Flores!” But it’s what they add afterward that makes me smile and wave.

“America’s hope for gold at the Olympics!”