

# HEARTS SET FREE by Jess Lederman

## EXCERPT

### Chapter One

*Luke and Yura: The Alaska Territory, 1925*

My father deserted my mother and me when I was thirteen years old. He had become famous that winter on the Great Race of Mercy, one of the Athabaskan mushers who brought diphtheria serum to Nome and saved ten thousand lives. He'd done the impossible, a blind run in the howling darkness, crossing the open ice of the Norton Sound, the temperature falling to sixty below, the sun a distant dream. He was our hero, our North Star.

And then he was gone.

He left us, of course, for a woman. A blizzard had hit him at Unalakleet, a storm so powerful that it travelled four thousand miles, till at last it reached New York and froze the Hudson River. The woman lived in just that far-away land, on the wild island of Manhattan, and her name was Kathleen Byrne. The Hearst papers had been giving the Great Race front-page headlines; Kathleen was a reporter, lean and hungry, she'd go to the ends of the earth for a good story, and one day she got her chance.

No one in my hometown of Nenana had seen anything like her, a slender redhead with emerald eyes, smoking Lucky Strikes and exhaling expertly through her nostrils, this coolly confident young woman with fiery hair.

She wanted details that would bring the story to life, so Father brought her to our home to show off his sled dogs. At least, the ones who'd survived, for three he had raised since they were pups had died on the trail. Somewhere in the madness of that journey he'd forgotten to cover their groins with rabbit skins, and they'd perished of frostbite in the unfathomable cold.

I gaped at her stupidly.

"Excuse my son," said my mother. "He has no manners."