MAMMOTH RIDER

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Prelude

The colossal creature towered above the girl, his warm breath heating her face. Huge – deadly – tusks rolled out either side, reminding the child that with a single shake of the brute's head she would be dead. Wise amber eyes studied the girl as explosions, screams and trumpeting sounded all around them. Smoke enveloped the pair, shrinking the world until it was just the two of them – child and beast.

The girl knew the animal was inviting her to ride him. It was a call to arms. No, a call to **trunk**. He was asking her to help in the battle to save the herd. As she gazed back into the beast's penetrating eyes, she knew he was looking to see if she was worthy, if she was strong enough, and she wondered the same thing.

It was all she'd ever wanted, to be a mammoth rider like her dad, but in that second, as the herd was under attack, doubt froze her. How could she, a twelve-year-old girl, help save a herd of mammoths?

'Do I have the strength to be a mammoth rider?' she whispered.

Chapter One

A few days before, Ash had woken up to the aroma of a freshly baked croissant in an otherwise lonely flat.

It had been the same every morning for months. Ash's dad would put the croissant in the oven on a timer so it would start cooking a few moments before her alarm went off and be ready when she roused. It filled the room with warm buttery goodness, even when the apartment was cold and empty. Ash had tried getting up early to see if she could spend time with Dad before he headed out to work, but no matter how early she dragged herself out of bed, she was always too late. It was Dad's busy season and, with the event just hours away, he was working all the time.

It didn't help that stuff kept going wrong.

Dad joked that gremlins must be bursting pipes, breaking things and mangling the electrics to cause outages. He said they must know the event was close, so they were creating as much chaos as possible. Ash didn't think it was funny at all, as Dad was working even longer hours to get everything fixed and, in his words, 'ship shape' in time.

She missed him, but it was almost over. Soon everything would be back to normal. Ash and Dad, the team. That was the trouble with having a small family. With just the two of them, if one was busy, the other was . . . Ash searched her brain for the right word, but none seemed quite right, so she settled with: **lonely**. Only a few years ago her mum would have been here. Her parents would have taken shifts working and taking care of her, and Ash wouldn't be alone, staring at a pastry.

Ash sat in her pyjamas at the breakfast bar and devoured her croissant, which she knew was Dad's way of saying he loved her. It warmed her insides a bit. But not as much as the note Dad had left her. He wasn't big on words, so it was a doodle, which suited Ash – no reading necessary. On the back of an old, ripped, tea-stained envelope he had drawn two stick figures (her dad wasn't big on drawing

either, but at least he tried). There was a little one – Ash – and a tall one with a beard – Dad. Next to them was what looked like a hairy mountain with fallen trees, which Ash guessed was his attempt at a mammoth.

Holding the doodle to her chest, Ash got up and walked across the minuscule living room, passing its one sofa, dust-covered coffee table and ridiculously small TV, to her room. She pulled on her clothes with a smile. One of the perks of Dad not being about was that no one nagged her to have a shower.

As she went to open the curtains, her eyes got caught on her bookshelves. They were covered in half-built Lego and books about animals, all with big glossy images and very little writing, just the way she liked them. None of those tricky dancing words.

Her eye went straight to the birthday card with a huge pink 'eight' nestled between a photo of a young Ash and her mother and a toy elephant. The last card signed by her mum, and strangely the last one where she could read Dad's signature – it seemed remarkably similar to her mum's handwriting.

Since Mum died, Dad refused to have his photo taken, and, before she died, he was always the

one taking the photographs, so the doodle was the closest thing Ash had to a picture of him. Carefully she propped it up between her photo of her and her mum, and the multiple photographs of her only other honorary family member, Ransom. It was a gallery of dozens of images of Ransom and Ash at different ages: baby, gappy-toothed on her first day of school, right up to his most recent visit six months ago.

Ransom was busy too now, studying for his degree at university and off saving the world and the animals in it. Staring at the photos of them together, Ash recalled his last visit, which seemed like forever ago. He stopped by for a fleeting visit in October, so Ruby had the idea to have an early Halloween party and for the three of them to trick-or-treat around the complex. She remembered the laughter as she wrapped Ransom up in toilet paper as they improvised a mummy outfit. The giggles when Dad had yelled from the bathroom as they used ALL the toilet roll. Even the chuckles as they tried to wind the paper back on to the cardboard tube. It was the most fun time Ash could remember, but it was so short, as Ransom had left the next day.

Ransom was her big brother – not technically, as they weren't related, but he was only seven years older than her and had always lived with them during school holidays when they were younger. It seemed like ages since she'd seen him, but one of the best things about the event was that Ransom was coming, her whole family back together.

Feeling lighter, Ash readied herself for the day. She tried to stop the thought of hours of torturous online school from dampening her good mood as she drew the curtains. Outside, beyond the intricate frost patterns on the glass, the world was white.

It was finally here.

Winter.

Ash loved the winter. She loved the snow. So white and crisp, like a blank page. The best type of page, ready to be drawn or painted on or folded into an origami animal. Blank and friendly, **not** full of letters or numbers that tried to trick her, moving and morphing, giving her a throbbing headache and making her cranky.

Ash thought that the snow was beautiful. It transformed the tundra from an expanse of gorse and grass, all hard and spiky, into a soft landscape of marshmallow. The months of no sun it brought

weren't so great, but along with it came the mammoths. Ash really loved the mammoths.

That's why she and everyone else was here, up in Greenland living in the isolated inhospitable tundra at the western headquarters of the Mammoth Arctic Conservation Trust (MAC). Where the adults here were trying to save the world from warming up to devastatingly high temperatures causing mass extinctions – by cloning, breeding and caring for mammoths.

MAC had cloned modern mammoths by editing the genes in Asian elephant DNA to make them winterproof.

The huge beasts roamed the tundra looking for food, their sheer size breaking up the blankets of fresh snow, preventing it from warming up and melting the permafrost beneath. The mammoths had been de-extinct since before Ash was born; the oldest, Goliath, was about to turn twenty years old. She'd never known life without them, but she was still awe-struck and yearned to look after the mammoths just like Dad. Maybe this winter he'd finally let her start learning mammoth husbandry skills. Maybe she'd finally get to see a mammoth up close.

Ash felt every muscle in her body itch to get out into the snow. It was calling to her, telling her to walk, run and jump. Her body shivered as it anticipated the cold, and she could almost hear the crunch underfoot. It was the sound that only snow makes, a slow satisfied sigh of welcome.

'Maybe I have time to go out before school?' Ash whispered to herself as she looked to the clock that hung on the wall of the hall outside her room.

She knew the theory, that the little hand pointed to the hour and that the big hand pointed to the minutes. Ash always found reading analogue clocks hard, as the numbers moved and switched places. Today was no different, and the harder she concentrated the more the numbers played tricks on her. It made her head thump, and she was still no wiser as to what the time was.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

KNOCK.

Hammering sounded from the apartment's front door and stopped abruptly. Ash rushed to answer it,

but before she'd made it to the middle of the living room the feverish pounding began again.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

'ASH!'

KNOCK.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

Ash knew the foghorn voice well. It belonged to her best friend, Ruby. With Ransom away at boarding school for most of Ash's life, Ruby had been the only other kid living full-time at MAC Headquarters. But Ash liked to think that even if there'd been a hundred kids, or a thousand, or even a million, that they'd still be best friends.

'Coming!' Ash yelled back.

'ASH!' Ruby was mid-holler as Ash swung the door open. Unfortunately, she was also mid-knock. Although Ash dodged, she still got clobbered around the ear.

'OUCH! RUBY!'

'Soz,' Ruby said with a grin that told Ash she wasn't sorry at all. Ruby slouched against the wall. She was wearing too-short jeans, her favourite holey jumper, and her curly hair was scraped back into two pigtails.

Behind her and in complete contrast, Jack was in his crisp white shirt, tie, black trousers, and shoes so shiny Ash could almost use them as mirrors. He looked more nervous than usual and was almost shaking.

'Hi, Jack,' Ash greeted him.

'Good morning, Ash. Have you seen? It's SNOWING! There is actual SNOW OUTSIDE!' The words burst out of him like an avalanche. Sometimes Ash forgot that Jack had only been living at the complex for two months as he'd gelled with her and Ruby so quickly.

'It's like he's never seen it before!' Ruby scoffed and rolled her eyes.

'I haven't! I lived all my life in California – it never snows there. Well, it does, but only in the mountains. Not where I lived!'

Ash knew there were some people that had never seen snow before, but having grown up in the tundra, it was difficult to believe. Here, snow was

a permanent fixture for six months of the year and made appearances during the springtime and autumn too. Which was part of the problem: the hotter the world got, the more it snowed, and the more the snow insulated and melted the permafrost. If Jack was this excited about snow, she couldn't wait to see how he would react to the mammoths.

'I always wanted a white Christmas like in the movies.' Jack was bouncing on his heels, his shoes squeaking on the polished stone floor.

'Like the really ooollllld movie? You dreaming of a "White Easter" and "White Halloween" too, Jack?' Ruby smirked.

Jack rolled his eyes and shook his head, rather like a disappointed adult.

Excitement fizzed in Ash like electric eels were swimming through her veins. 'Jack, come on, let's go out in the snow.'

Jack beamed, before his face crumpled like an over-ripe peach. 'But it could be cold. I could get pneumonia. Or frostbite. Or I could fall and break a bone. Is it slippery? It looks slippery.'

'Jack, it'll be fine. We do it all the time; you'll love it.' Ash tried to persuade him, but Jack wasn't listening. He was muttering to himself.

'It's almost time for school. If we went outside now, we'd be late. I can't miss lessons.' Jack was back to obsessing about school, which was, as Ash had learned in the last few weeks since he'd arrived, **all** Jack thought about.

Ruby kicked at the air. 'It's only a half-day – we won't miss much.'

Jack glared at her in response.

'Okay –' Ruby held her hand up – 'if you won't skip lessons, then we make a pact that we go after school. And no backing out.' She thrust her hand out to him.

Jack's eyes widened and his mouth opened to protest, but when he looked at Ruby's face, he gulped, nodded and shook her hand.

Ash felt the calling of the snow pull at her, but she knew she'd have to wait; she'd have to endure a painful half-day of online school first. Then she'd be free. Free to embrace the snow, to feel the chilly air fill her lungs and to put her mark on the pristine canvas of the blank landscape.