

ANTA CLAUS OF ANTARCTICA Serialized



14. Christmas Meeting of Bears

“Next stop Barrow, Alaska,” Anta shouted. “Oh! Oh! Barrow!”

Hoping for a glimpse of something familiar on the ground, Carol leaned far over the side of the sleigh. Yes, there were things down there, jagged, white shapes. Like so many pieces of a mammoth jigsaw puzzle, they covered the entire area.

Carol shivered. She pulled down her stocking cap. “What are they, Anta?” she asked. “What’s down there?”

“Icebergs,” Anta said. “We’re flying over the Arctic Ocean.”

Carol’s gaze remained fixed on the endless chunks of ice. Often, she spotted a figure, as white as the ice itself, moving across them. When the sleigh dipped lower, she saw more of these solitary shapes.

“Each iceberg has a passenger, Anta,” she said. “What could they be?”

“Very curious, that,” Anta said. “Let’s fly down and find out.”

Soon the sleigh was gliding a few yards above sea level. The icebergs floated a short hop below.

With a gulp, Carol saw what the travelers were.

“Polar bears!” she said. “Hundreds of vicious, child-eating polar bears! Where are they all going?”

“I don’t know much about white bears,” said Anta. “They don’t live in Antarctica.”

The sleigh soared over a large sheet of ice. Anta pulled on the reins and steered the yaks around the jagged white island.

“Look, Anta,” said Carol. “The polar bears are floating toward this big ice floe.”

Anta and Carol watched as several bear-bearing icebergs bumped into the white sheet. The bears bounded off their ice boats and joined other bears already

there. By now, hundreds of polar bears dotted the ice. They stood in clusters and milled about in twos and threes. Other bears sat on the edge of the floe dangling their feet in the water. Some dove into the ocean with a splashy belly flop.

Carol leaned farther out of the sleigh. "Every polar bear in Alaska must be down there tonight," she said. "Something important is going on. Look, one of the bears is waving to us."

Anta's sleigh circled the island again.

"I'll land and see what's going on," said Anta.

Carol looked alarmed. "Oh, I wouldn't do that," she said. "Polar bears are dangerous predators. They eat children for snacks. You can't trust them."

"This meeting looks peaceful," said Anta, "I'm curious what it's all about."

Anta's sleigh landed near the center of the ice sheet. Nearby stood a group of polar bears. They looked toward the sleigh and ambled toward the new arrivals.

Carol scooted closer to Anta. "The polar bears are coming for me."

"Oh! Oh! I think they just want to talk."

"Talk? What do you mean talk? Bears growl. They don't talk."

Soon eight burly polar bears surrounded the sleigh. Their brawny heads swayed side to side. Their black beady eyes glared at Carol and Anta Claus.

"Greetings," Anta said. "I'm Anta Claus and beside me is my helper Carol Snow."

"Hi," Carol said, weakly. "Please don't eat me."

Anta Claus reached into his black sack, "Tis and Twas usually pack treats for occasions such as this," he said. "Let's see what we have."

He pulled out an armful of giant candy canes the size elderly people might use to walk. Black stripes instead of red ones swirled around the sticks.

"Care for an Antarctica candy cane?" he said to the bears.

Smiles spread across the bears' thin black lips. Anta passed a cane to each one. They took them in their giant paws and licked them with thick dark tongues.

"*Phew!*" said Carol. "So far so good."

As Carol spoke, a bear on her side of the sleigh clapped his paws together. He held them out toward Carol.

"Oh! Oh!" said Anta. "The white bear wants to play patty-cake with you."

"Patty-cake?" Carol said. "A polar bear wants to play patty-cake?"

The bear nodded. His black smile spread wider.

Carol shrugged. "OK, let's play," she said. "But I haven't played patty-cake

since first grade. I hope I remember the words.”

Carol clapped her hands and sang the paddy-cake rhyme. She tapped her right hand to the polar bear’s right paw. She clapped again and tapped her left hand to the bear’s left paw. Clap right, clap left. They continued until the song was over. Afterward, the polar bear rolled on his back and roared with laughter.

Carol laughed, too.

Meanwhile, Anta studied the circle of bears. “You white bears appear to be having an important meeting,” he said. “Carol and I dropped down to see what you are discussing.”

A fat bear who stood closest to Anta lowered his candy cane, “Welcome to the annual Christmas Meeting of Bears, Anta,” he said in a deep rough voice.

“Each year we select a different topic to discuss,” said a second bear.

“Last year we talked about where to find the best seal blubber to eat and town dumps to raid,” said a third bear.

“This year’s topic is much more critical,” said a skinny bear at the rear of the sleigh, “Global warming.”

“Global warming?” said Carol. “I learned about climate change in school. People have put too much greenhouse gas like carbon dioxide in the air. That’s caused the climate to get warmer.”

The eight bears nodded.

“As a result, more and more of the ice where we live has melted,” said the first bear.

“We have fewer places to hunt,” said another.

“Each year fewer and fewer polar bears attend the Christmas Meeting of Bears,” a third bear said.

Carol noticed one bear wore a red Santa Claus hat. She pointed and asked, “Where’d you get that?”

With a big clawed paw, the bear batted the cotton ball at the tip of the cap off his snout. “Earlier this evening we had another visitor,” he said. “Santa Claus and his reindeer stopped by. He gave me his spare sleigh-riding hat. What a swell person.”

Carol’s eyes widened. “Santa Claus landed here?” she said. She caught herself and glanced at Anta.

“Santa mentioned having problems with global warming on the North Pole,” said the bear in the hat.

“He does?” said Carol. “What problems could Santa have?”

“Santa told us the ice on the North Pole turns slushy at times,” said the bear who played patty-cake. “That makes it difficult for his sleigh to take off and land.”

“Santa said the roof of his workshop leaks, and the reindeer’s barn floods,” said another bear.

“Santa said because of global warming he might need to move away from the North Pole,” said the first bear.

“Move away?” said Carol. “It’s hard to imagine Santa living anywhere other than the North Pole.”

Anta scratched his black whiskers. “I’m fortunate not to have such problems on the South Pole,” he said. “The North Pole is warmer since nothing is under it but ocean. Under my pole is land.”

The eight polar bears lowered their candy canes.

“There’s another pole?” two bears asked together.

“Oh! Oh!” said Anta. “The South Pole is at the opposite end of the earth. No white bears live there, though. Only penguins, seals, and nosy scientists.”

Carol looked around at the eight bears. “Do you know Anta Claus delivers gifts like Santa Claus?” she said. “But he delivers gifts to naughty children.”

Again, the polar bears nodded.

“But we’ve never heard of you before Anta,” the fat bear said.

Anta grumbled. “Yes, I know Santa is a lot more popular than I am,” he said. “And I know his workshop is bigger than mine and his sleigh is fancier. But no one can say Santa’s reindeer are faster than my yaks.”

The yak team grunted.

Carol gave Anta a look. “They are? How do you know?”

“Because Santa Claus and I had a race,” Anta said.

“You did?” said Carol.

“They called it the Great Santa-Anta Race,” said Anta.

“Tell us about the race, Anta,” said one of the bears.

“We love stories,” said another.

“Oh! Oh! Okay,” said Anta. “It’s a splendid time to tell the tale. It deals with global warming.”

The eight bears sat on the ice. They continued licking their Antarctica candy canes. Anta’s eight yaks turned their heads to hear the story better.

“Once *under* a time...,” said Carol.

Anta grumbled. He began, “The Great Santa-Anta Race took place many years before climate change was a problem.”