

NICHOLAS CLAUS - The Story of Young Santa

❄ Chapter One ❄

A steam train pulled into the station. Brakes squealed, and sparks flew off rusty wheels like fireworks.

“Forest Boreall!” shouted the conductor.

A passenger stepped off the train. A young woman set her bags down on the sagging wood platform and looked around. The small station was in a dark, vast forest. The “ticket office” was just an empty, old hut. Its door was covered by spider webs.

She breathed deeply. *Abbb, fresh air*, she thought. *Finally, I'm free from the smell of cigars, sardine sandwiches, run-over skunks, and stinky passengers.*

She had traveled for many weeks, starting with a fishing boat from her home in England, then by train across Europe.

The train's whistle blew, and the locomotive lurched as it slowly started chugging away from the station. The woman watched it disappear from view.

Alone in a new place, she started to worry that no one showed up to welcome her.

She came to the Forest Boreal to live with her aunt, Mrs. Sophie Fairfield. She knew that Mrs. Fairfield received her letter about when she would arrive, but she also knew her aunt was supposed to be a little crazy.

Suddenly, from behind the cobweb-covered hut, appeared a man in a grey, wrinkled coat and dirty, grey hat. Middle-aged, pale, with greasy, grey sideburns and dark grey eyes, he marched up to her and asked, “Are you Anna of Derbyshire?”

She nodded yes.

The man bared his teeth in a fake smile. His dark green teeth reminded her of pond scum. He pointed at a speckled horse and a dark carriage, and said, “I'm Mrs. Fairfield's driver. I will take you to her house.”

The carriage driver took Anna's bags and strode ahead, leading her down a ramp off the platform and across a muddy wooden sidewalk. Tossing her bags into the carriage, he waited for her to get in, and then climbed onto his seat. He grabbed a whip and lashed the horse with a loud *crack*. The carriage rolled out of the mud, away from the station.

A young man watched from afar. He was hidden from view, high in a fir tree. He saw Anna arrive and was impressed by her pretty face and the confident way she walked.

Nick knew it was not polite to stare, even to admire someone, so he stayed on the limb and just observed. He often came to the railroad station out of curiosity. Trains roared by, but never stopped, since no one wanted to visit the Forest Boreal. Yet Nick enjoyed catching a glimpse of people in the train windows. Some passengers waved at him, but usually they were too bored or sleepy. Nick was just part of the scenery to them.

But, finally, someone got off the train.

Who was that woman, Nick wondered, *and why was she here?* He overheard her name and it sounded important. "Anna of Derbyshire."

Nick dropped ten feet from the branch, and landed easily in powdery snow.

"She must be visiting someone around here, so I'll probably see her again," Nick told a friend at the base of the tree.

Nick's friend snorted and kicked the dirt.

"Didn't you notice how beautiful she was?" Nick asked.

His friend looked at Nick's black boots. So Nick looked at them too and noticed how scuffed and dull they were. He never polished them. Then he noticed his pants were torn and saw stains on the shabby red coat he wore in the woods to make sure hunters didn't mistake him for an animal and accidentally shoot him. Judging his appearance, he realized that a well-dressed person like Anna of Derbyshire might think he was a loser.

"You think she's too good for me?" Nick asked, annoyed. "I know what you're thinking, and it hurts my feelings. It really

does. But what if you're right? What if she won't even talk with me?"

Nick walked over to his sled and pulled out a large axe, almost as tall as he was, and started chopping a pine. His swings were fast and powerful. The evergreen toppled with a loud crash.

"Please toss the hatchet," Nick said to his friend.

A hatchet in a leather harness flew through the air. Nick caught it without looking and started to hack the fallen tree.

"Well, maybe she is too good for me," Nick said. "Toss the ulu."

A small knife in a leather harness was thrown to Nick. He caught it, again without looking. His friend remained silent, but Nick continued. "Perhaps if I had a lot of money she'd like me."

Nick walked over to his friend and patted him on the head. His friend was a seven foot tall reindeer.

Blitzen wasn't interested in the human girl. He spied berries on a distant tree and wanted Nick to return home in that direction. He pressed his nose against Nick's back.

Nick frowned. "What is it?" He realized that Blitzen was pushing him toward the berry tree. "That's your idea? Give her fruit from a tree? That doesn't make sense..."

Suddenly Nick's face lit up. "Tree! That's it! The tree-chopping contest is in a few days. The winner gets a big cash prize. If I have money, she'll think I'm a successful man with a great future. Then she'll be happy to talk with me!"

Blitzen burped.

Nick laughed at him. "You're not very romantic."

Blitzen snorted, and then prodded Nick to move along. Romance could wait. There were berries to be eaten before darkness, then a long walk home.

* * * * *

“Welcome to the Fairfield house,” said a butler, greeting Anna at the door of her aunt’s three-story mansion.

“Thank you. I am Anna.”

“Of course you are, dear. We have been expecting you,” he said. “Please come in and make yourself comfortable.”

The butler wore thick glasses and stood stiffly like a soldier. A round bald spot on his head looked like a pink helmet. He signaled the carriage driver to take Anna’s bags upstairs. The driver grunted, and tipped his grey hat. He did not like taking orders from a butler, but grabbed the bags and dragged them up the staircase.

Anna followed the butler inside and looked around at her new home. When the carriage had first entered the driveway she was amazed by the size of the house, with its six pillars and the statues of saints on the porch. But inside it was even more majestic.

Sunshine streamed through tall windows and reflected off crystal chandeliers and mirrors. Persian rugs decorated the marble floors. Old shields and spears hung on walls behind throne-like chairs. Gargoyles and angels peered from corners of a huge fireplace.

A voice rang out from another room: “Do we have a visitor?”

An older lady rushed into the parlor and stopped a few feet from Anna, looking intently at her. “You must be Anna! You look exactly like your mother – my sister – when she was your age. She was such a treasure!”

Anna smiled. “Thank you, Aunt Sophie. Yes, I miss her terribly.”

The thought of Anna’s mother made them sad. Anna’s parents had died in an awful train accident. The train hit an ice patch, careening out of control into a mountain.

Anna and her aunt stood in silence for a moment. They had never met before, and if the tragic accident had not happened, neither would have probably traveled such a long distance to meet.

Mrs. Fairfield had a long, thin face, curly silver hair, big earrings, and stood straight as a board. But she seemed normal

enough, thought Anna – not “nutty as a shaved duck,” as her father once described her. The only thing that seemed strange was that she had necklaces wrapped around her arms and a big ostrich feather in her hair.

Clearing his throat for attention, the butler broke the silence. “Perhaps I should show Anna her room?”

“Good idea,” said Mrs. Fairfield. “Anna, would you like to take a nice, hot bath?”

“Oh yes, thank you,” said Anna, thrilled at the thought of washing away the dirt and smell of her journey.

“I’ll explain a few things on our way to your room,” said Mrs. Fairfield. She pulled a piece of paper from a puffy sleeve. “I wrote some notes so I wouldn’t forget anything.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” said Anna.

Mrs. Fairfield cleared her throat and said, “Point number one: Ever since my husband died, I have run this house in a strict, sensible way. Oh, watch out for that sword, dear.”

Anna didn’t understand until they passed a suit of armor. It raised its arm in a robot-like salute. Anna jumped back to avoid the sword it held.

Mrs. Fairfield continued speaking as if nothing happened. “Point two: Until now, I have only had servants to worry about. Now I have you. Uh, ignore this mirror, dear.”

As they passed a large, rose-colored mirror in the hall, it made Mrs. Fairfield look young and beautiful, but made Anna appear old, ugly and filthy.

Anna pretended not to notice, and said, “Aunt Sophie, I don’t wish to be a worry to anyone. I’m just happy to...”

Mrs. Fairfield pulled a pencil from her sleeve and made a quick note on the paper. “Point number two and a half: Do not interrupt while others speak.”

Anna nodded. “Sorry.”

Mrs. Fairfield led Anna up the staircase. “Number three: I remember from your mother’s letters that you are an artist. We

have plenty of art supplies here. Don't touch this banister. The electric eel does not like to be disturbed.”

Anna noticed that the banister was a tube of glass filled with green liquid. An electric eel slithered inside the tube, lighting it up.

Near the top of the staircase, Mrs. Fairfield said, “Mind the last step, dear,” careful not to step on the top stair as she stretched to reach the landing. Anna tried not to touch the step but tripped... The moment her foot touched the stair, Anna heard a clicking noise. A battering ram swooped from the landing and crashed into the opposite wall. The log narrowly missed Anna, but Mrs. Fairfield and the butler continued walking, as if this was perfectly normal.

They went down a hall with pictures of dragons, castles and medieval weapons. Mrs. Fairfield said, “Point four: I know you play the piano, so you will be happy to see the grand piano in the living room. Feel free to play whenever you wish, but never an F chord.”

“Why?” said Anna.

“Point number five,” Mrs. Fairfield continued. “I recall in your mother’s last letter that you hope to become a teacher.”

“I do, indeed,” said Anna.

“Well, you are lucky,” said Mrs. Fairfield, “because I can teach you everything a young lady should know.”

“I am very lucky then,” said Anna.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Fairfield. “Point six: Being a teacher is nice, but I assume you wish to get married some day. Don’t worry, when the time is right, I will find a husband for you. Handsome, but not so handsome that he will love a mirror more than you. Smart, but not too smart for his own good. And after I die, you both will inherit my property.”

“But --” Anna began.

“There is no need to thank me. I’m not dead yet,” said Mrs. Fairfield. “You and I are the last two in our family, and I just want what’s best for you. And believe me, I know what’s best for you.”

“But I’m not trying to find a man and get married. I just want -- ”

“Don’t worry about men. I will protect you from them.”

“But, but -- ” said Anna.

“Here is your room, dear,” said Mrs. Fairfield.

The oak door looked normal, but the doorknob looked like a crystal ball that a fortune-teller might use to see the future.

Mrs. Fairfield and the butler waited for her to open the door. Anna looked at them for a moment, in case they wanted to warn her about the doorknob or room... They looked at her blankly.

Anna placed her hand on the doorknob. The crystal ball seemed to fill with smoke but turned clear again. As she opened the door, Mrs. Fairfield said, “When you hear the grandfather clock chime two and a half times, that is our dinner hour.”

Mrs. Fairfield started to leave but Anna piped up with a question she had to ask: “Aunt Sophie, why there are so many, um, odd things in this house?

Her aunt replied, “My late husband designed it. He was... unique.”

* * * * *

In a distant part of the Forest Boreal, Nick was swinging his axe at an evergreen. After a series of mighty blows the tree fell.

Nick wiped his sweaty brow and turned to Blitzen. “Was that any faster?”

Blitzen responded with an unimpressed snort.

Nick nodded. “You're right. That's not even fast enough to win a tree chopping contest against a beaver! Let's try again.”

Nick started chopping the tree into firewood. He was determined to improve his speed and strength. Blitzen began to fall asleep while standing up.

Hours later, Nick looked at his dozing friend and knew it was time to quit. He unrolled his sleeping bag. Tonight he would sleep outdoors by the campfire he'd built.

Nick had trained himself to sleep when it was dark so he could rest through the cold nights and stay awake when it was light.

But his mind was restless -- he kept thinking of the young woman he saw at the train station.

Behind Nick was the cabin he called home. It was small, but creatively built. Four trees were the corners. The walls were a patchwork of timber, hay and boulders. He had a bed made of straw inside the cabin but, unless the weather was arctic, he preferred to sleep outside, under the stars.

Nick looked at the sky. The moon was hidden behind a cloud and only the brightest stars were visible. He found the evening star and realized it was still early.

He comforted himself with one of his favorite fantasies -- flying in the night sky, seeing the world from above, traveling around the world, and returning safely home.

* * * * *

After soaking in the tub, Anna felt refreshed. And hungry. When the grandfather clock chimed two and a half times, she hurried downstairs.

The dining room was crimson, with paintings of smiling knights and ancient castles. Above the table, a chandelier with dozens of flickering candles cast a comforting glow.

Anna was so tired of stale bread and smelly cheese from her train trip that when she thought about the feast she was going to enjoy, she almost cried with happiness. She ate the first course of fruit salad quickly, but slowed down. She did not want to seem like a starving pig diving head-first into a trough.

Mrs. Fairfield didn't mind that Anna was quiet. She enjoyed talking and hated to have people ruin a nice conversation by expressing their opinions. "Anna, I'm sure we should talk about your parents. But let's not speak of sad things tonight. Let me tell you about our villagers instead. Some are quite unusual."

The butler took their salad bowls and replaced them with plates of clams whose opening and shutting shells indicated that

they were not quite dead. Every time Anna brought her fork toward a clam it snapped shut, causing Anna to jerk back in surprise.

Mrs. Fairfield continued without noticing Anna's reactions. "Most villagers are fine. Personally, I only like two of them. And one of those two I'll never speak to again, until she apologizes for calling me a snob. Can you imagine? I look down on all snobs!" She stirred her tea. "Anyway, most people around here are nice. Some merchants are greedy, and some farmers are idiots. And the young men, well, stay away from them. They can't be trusted. They want only one thing from a lady."

"One thing?"

"Well, two things. Money – they want to marry a rich lady so they won't have to work any more. Isn't that lazy and awful?"

Anna nodded. "I understand. And what is the other thing?"

Mrs. Fairfield whispered, "The other thing is -- " She glanced around to make sure the butler wasn't nearby. "Love."

"Love?" said Anna, not sure she heard correctly.

"Let's not talk about such things. I don't want to ruin your appetite," said Mrs. Fairfield.

Anna looked down at the snapping clams. One clamped shut on her fork.

* * * * *

Anna had trouble falling asleep that night in the mansion, even though she was weary from her journey, full after her meal, and tired from playing the piano for her aunt.

She threw off the covers, got out of bed, and went to her bedroom window. She opened the drapes and looked out. A radiant moon lit up the backyard of the Fairfield estate and, in the distance, a range of mountains. The view took her breath away.

Anna spotted the evening star. It reminded Anna of her parents. When she was a child, they often pointed at the star

through her bedroom window after tucking her in. Her eyes started to tear up at the memory but she was distracted by noise outside.

Wiping her eyes to get a clearer look out the window, she saw a man walking past the garden. He looked extremely tall, with white hair. Anna heard him humming a tune, and noticed that he carried a large stick which he pointed in the direction of the North Star as he walked. She watched him amble on and then disappear into the woods.

Anna forgot her troubles. She went back to bed wondering about this strange place she would now call home. Fluffing up a pillow and pulling a quilt over her shoulders, she hummed the tune she heard outside, and quickly fell asleep.

* * * * *

Days later, Mrs. Fairfield agreed to take Anna to the village square. It was just a dozen small shops in the center of the village. The rest of the Forest Boreal was spread out – houses, farms, lumber mill, blacksmith, wheelwright, graveyard...

Anna was eager to visit the square, even though Mrs. Fairfield warned her that “most of our merchants only care about money, and most of their customers are so dumb they would buy a bottle of water if they heard it was on sale.”

Riding on a bumpy dirt road, the carriage driver did not seem to care when they hit large holes and ruts. But when they struck a hole so deep that Anna almost flew out of the carriage, Mrs. Fairfield shrieked, “Drive around those blasted things!” The driver tipped his grey hat, and then lashed his horse as if it were the animal’s fault.

“Look,” said Anna, pointing to a hand-made sign. “*Tree Chopping Contest Today at Noon -- Town Square.*” That sounds like fun!”

“Tree chopping? That kind of entertainment is for common people,” said Mrs. Fairfield. “You are a proper lady. We don’t want anyone to think you are interested in a tree chopping contest! It is such a crude, stupid thing -- sweaty men, just showing off. And why? To win money. That is so, so -- ”

“I am in that contest, madam,” said the carriage driver.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Fairfield. “Well, it sounds like, uh -- ” She didn’t know what to say.

“Fun?” suggested Anna.

Mrs. Fairfield just frowned.

Anna was amused by her aunt’s embarrassment, but decided to help by changing the subject. “I heard some people put trees in their homes and decorate them for Christmas. Wouldn’t that be -- ”

“Silly!” said Mrs. Fairfield, adjusting her beehive-shaped hat that was made of squirrel tails. “Trees don’t belong in houses! They belong outside, with other trees. Unless -- ” She patted the driver in a friendly way. “Unless they are chopped into logs for firewood.”

The driver did not respond. The hatred in his grey eyes showed that he was not the kind who could forgive an insult. He lashed the horse viciously. A minute later, the carriage rolled with a painful jolt into another hole.

When they arrived at the village square, Anna was surprised to see Christmas decorations everywhere. Merchants had pine garlands and holly swags on their store fronts. To raise money for charity, women stood on sidewalks selling wreaths ornamented with pinecones and ribbons. Children sitting nearby were busy sticking cloves into fresh oranges, and stringing berries into chains.

“It looks so festive!” said Anna. “I’ve never seen so much Christmas spirit.”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Fairfield. “They are just trying to get money from people. Anna, if they say ‘merry Christmas’ or try to sell you something, just look right past them as if they don’t exist. Do not encourage them.”

* * * * *

Nick and Blitzen were already at the town square.

“Look, Blitzen. Who’s that handsome mammal?” Nick held the blade of his axe by Blitzen’s face so the reindeer could see his own reflection in the polished metal.

As Nick put away his axe, he stopped to admire Blitzen.

The reindeer’s eyes were bright, with a personality that seemed human to Nick. Blitzen was often moody, always hungry, but never boring. His coat changed colors with the season – light in the winter, dark in the summer. His broad hooves allowed him to dig and walk on deep snow to look for food. But one hoof was scarred from a time when he was caught in a hunter’s trap. That was how Nick found him. He had pried the metal claw off the reindeer and took him home to clean his wound.

Now fully grown, Blitzen’s back was a little higher than Nick’s height of six feet. Blitzen could use his strong, furry antlers to fend off predators, and several times saved Nick from bears and wolves. Blitzen looked kind; his soft, white beard made Nick think that he himself might like to grow a white beard when he was older.

Nick decided to do stretching exercises before the contest, using his sleigh as support. Just as he was feeling limber, a man yelled from the other side of the road, “Hey, Nick, why don’t you get a horse like a normal person?”

This wasn’t the first time Nick heard this kind of ridicule. He was the only person he knew that used reindeer for transportation. Nick replied, “In this climate a reindeer is much better than a horse!”

The man dismissed Nick with a wave of his hand and shouted, “Bah!”

Nick shrugged and continued stretching.

* * * * *

The Forest Boreal’s elected leader, Mayor Anders, climbed to the top of a wooden platform set up in the middle of the town square. He wore a sash that said “His Honor,” and loved to make public speeches whenever the public would let him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have been enjoying our famous tree chopping contest!” The crowd cheered.

“So far, we have seven losers,” announced Mayor Anders. “They all win a prize, a sour pickle. The losers are: Harry Lumpkin, Gene Poole, Stanley Steven Stutterheim, Virgil Pignappel, Nibs Argyle, Wacco Smucker and Wiley Warren Winkenwerder. So, we are down to our final two in this contest. They are the fastest axemen in Forest Boreal. But only one will win 100 gold coins!”

He pointed to gold coins stacked high on top of a barrel. The crowd applauded.

“Whoever cuts through his log first will become Boreal’s Blaster of the Blade! Are you men ready?”

Nick stepped forward with his axe. He wore a red plaid lumberjack shirt, faded red trousers, a wide black belt, and his old, but newly-shined, black boots.

Out of the shadows of a crooked tree came the carriage driver. He stared at Nick, and then spit out of the side of his mouth – accidentally on a lady’s shoe. He strode through the crowd, waving his grey-handled axe.

Two logs had been placed on saw-horses. Each man stood by his log and took practice swings to warm up.

The seven men who had lost in the early rounds teased the two now competing. Nick laughed, knowing it was all in fun. But the carriage driver looked deadly serious, and occasionally shot a threatening look at someone who called him a weakling or sissy.

Mayor Anders held a pistol above his head. “Ready, get set...” *Kerblam!*

Both men swung their axes with great ferocity. *Whack! Whack!*

The gun blast and roar of the crowd was heard by those in the stores, including Anna, who was admiring a heart-shaped pendant. She put it back in its case and looked out a window. She couldn’t see the contestants but saw wood chips flying in the air.

Mrs. Fairfield was in a back room with the shop-owner who was making chalk marks on a dress so it could be tailored to fit.

Anna was fascinated by the scene outside. Finally, her curiosity was too great. Afraid that her aunt would refuse to let her view the contest if she asked permission, Anna quietly slipped out of the shop to see what was happening. She wove through the crowd, and spotted the carriage driver. Anna noticed that he made a hissing sound every time he lunged at the log with his axe and that he tried to pull and twist his axe out of the wood so as to fling woodchips into his opponent's face.

She then saw the young man competing with the carriage driver. She was struck by his good looks and his determination.

Anna was even more surprised when the young man noticed her and suddenly stopped in mid-swing. It was as if he had *felt* her watching him. Their eyes locked.

Emboldened by the sight of Anna, Nick raised his axe for a final, mighty blow. But, in swinging the axe backward with such great force, the axe flew out of his hands – over the heads of the spectators behind him. They jumped out of the way just in time.

Embarrassed, Nick dove off the platform and into the crowd. In his mad rush to get his axe back he accidentally knocked over a child licking a candy cane.

“Sorry!” Nick called out, as he ran past, looking for his axe.

Nick ran through the crowd, leaping over a wheelbarrow and ducking under Christmas decorations. Finally, he spied his axe stuck in a nearby tree. Nick looked over to the stage. The carriage driver was still chopping. Nick jumped up and tried to yank his axe out of the tree. But he just ended up hanging onto the axe handle, his legs dangling above the ground. The axe wouldn't budge!

He tried to jiggle the axe up and down but couldn't. Just when he was ready to give up, the axe came loose and they fell to the ground.

Nick raced back through the crowd towards the platform, but then he saw the carriage driver preparing for his final, winning blow. Nick took aim with his axe and threw it at his log. The axe turned end over end as it hurtled through the air.

But the carriage driver's axe was coming down, too. Both axes seemed to move in slow motion.

Nick's axe sliced through his log a second before the carriage driver's did!

The crowd was stunned. They looked at the Mayor who ran to Nick and held his arm up. "The winner!" the Mayor shouted.

The crowd burst into thunderous applause.

Anna was confused. It seemed this young man had almost lost the contest because of her, but then won in a way she could hardly believe with her own eyes. She quickly returned to the shop, and stood at the store's window to watch the scene from a distance.

While the crowd was still cheering, Nick looked around for Anna but couldn't find her.

At the same time, the carriage driver was whispering into the mayor's ear. The Mayor nodded and raised his arm for quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen! I'm sorry but the rules of our contest state that the hands of the contestants must be on their axe handles throughout the competition. And so this year's winner is, um, this man."

The carriage driver raised his arms in triumph. The crowd applauded politely.

One man went up to the loser and said, "Maybe you'll win next year, Nick."

Anna could tell from the grey-handled axe raised triumphantly in the air that her driver must have won. She was surprised by how badly she felt. *It's just a silly contest*, she thought, *and I don't even know the fellow who lost.*

The carriage driver was strutting around and bragging. Then he went over to Nick and poked him in the chest. "You ain't never going to be nothin' in this forest! You'll just be another useless old man selling dead trees to a bunch of nobodies!"

"Hit him, Nick!" said one man.

"Don't let him push you around!" shouted another.

Nick had never started a fight in his life, and would not dream of hitting someone just because of an insult. Still, his pride told him he should at least say something mean to this man. He

tried to reply but, surprised to see so much hate in the driver's face, couldn't think of anything to say.

"What's the matter, boy? Are you afraid?" shouted the driver.

But the driver jumped when he felt hot air on his neck. "Hey, who -- ?"

He spun around and found Blitzen in his face. Shocked to see a big hairy animal, the driver fell backwards onto an elderly woman. She caught him by his armpits before he fell, but then dropped him on his bottom.

Everyone in the crowd laughed.

The driver got up, wiped off his pants and stormed off.

Several men complimented the woman for dropping the driver. "I didn't do it on purpose," she said. But they just laughed.

Nick, feeling miserable, left the crowd and walked toward an alley between stores where he sold his Christmas trees. He looked down the road.

He saw Anna with one of his customers, Mrs. Sophie Fairfield. Nick noticed that they carried packages, which reminded him that they were wealthy. Perhaps the carriage driver was right, he thought – maybe he would never be successful in life.

Nick felt something cold and wet against his cheek. Blitzen's nose.

"Yes, I know it's time to eat," he said.

Nick watched the driver help Anna and Mrs. Fairfield get into their carriage, and continued to watch as they drove down the road, leaving town. Nick felt as if the driver had defeated him in every possible way – taking the prize money, taking his pride, and taking Anna away.

But then...was it his imagination or did Anna turn around to look back at him?

Nick couldn't be sure. Still, it gave him hope.

"Let's go, Blitzen. We have to get home before dark."