

*Rosette*

*Sweetheart Rose*



# REINDEER GAMES

BY  
STACY DAWN



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Reindeer Games

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this story to my family where Christmas has always been a fun time of year.



“Can they really fly?”

I hunched closer to the little girl's, winter bright, Rudolph-red nose and nodded permission toward the hesitant hand reaching out to pet Blitzen's snout. “Well, I'll tell you a secret. Though I've never actually seen them fly, when I come out Christmas Eve to feed them, there's not a reindeer to be found and no hoof prints anywhere outside the pen. Then, by the next morning, they're all back and frightfully hungry like they've had a hard night's work.”

Her eyes saucered on a puff of awed breath.

I straightened. “Now, you best get back to your family before the games begin.”

The ringing of childish giggles followed her out of the barn towards the bleachers where most of my hometown of Noelle, Alberta waited for the annual Reindeer Games to begin.

“Are you gonna tell our children the same story?”

I didn't bother to turn. I knew the voice and knew its owner, Brent Nickles, would be lounged against the barn door at the opposite end. “Don't you think you're getting ahead of yourself, considering we haven't even been on a date?”

“Not for my lack of trying.”

I laughed off his teasing and released the latch on Blitzen's stall. I couldn't take Brent seriously. We'd known each other our whole lives and were, in fact, from enemy houses—the Holloran Family Tree Farm and the Nickles' Nurseries and Reindeer Ranch. On opposite ends of town, the good-natured feud between our family businesses was as legendary as the yearly Loser Deed between Brent and myself.

I finally turned to address my adversary. "So, have you come to find out what I have in store for you this year when you lose?"

"Now look who's getting ahead of themselves." Sea-green eyes sparkled in amusement as he shouldered off the graying wood to come inside. "Same rules?"

"Loser has to do it, no question, no argument." Not that we really needed the clarification, the confirmations were more a part of the ritual. I tapped a gloved finger on my chin. "Hmmm. I haven't put you in a dress yet."

After the 'treetop' incident where Brent fell and broke his arm when we were nine, the Loser Deed no longer included daring feats. Fun humiliation, however, was completely within the rules. After what he put me through last year, I was aiming high on the humiliation meter.

In mock seriousness, I studied him from the top of his black Stetson to the snow-covered tip of his boots. "I kinda liked that little number your sister wore the other night at the high school's Christmas Dance. You know, I think pink could really be your color."

I laughed at the growl from low in his throat.

"Then again, I heard they still needed a Mrs. Claus for the children's party tomorrow. Maybe I'll call up Mrs. Willobee and tell her I have a volunteer who has no choice but to do it."

I squealed as two thick arms shot out and grabbed me around the waist.

"Maybe this year *I'll* ask you for a kiss. That's something *you* haven't done yet."

A quickening overtook my heartbeat as I found myself cocooned within Brent's arms. The winter wind clinging to his shadowed jaw, the worn lambskin coat pressed against my face and the warmth of his touch all tickled my senses in the most intoxicating way. This sensation happened only once before, the other night when we shared a chaperone dance at the high school. Again, for half a minute, I'd actually forgotten the



handsome man before me was the same boy who used to put frogs in my rubber boots and dare me to eat live crickets.

“Jessica! Jessica!”

With a gasp, I jumped back.

My father barreled through the barn, his eyes thankfully focused on the two thick, red elastic straps his hands attempted to yank around his belly. “I can’t get these blasted suspenders to stay put.” When he looked up, bushy white eyebrows lowered over pale blue eyes. “Oh, hello Brent. Infiltrating the enemy camp I see.”

Brent tipped the front of his weathered Stetson. “No, sir. Just wishing my competition good luck.”

“Well, you better get back to your own stables, son. The games are about to begin. That’s if I can get these danged suspenders to work right.”

“Yes, sir.” Brent ambled out of the barn, sending me a wink over his shoulder before he disappeared from sight.

“Cocky lad, isn’t he?” my father harrumphed. “Well, his family’s not getting the trophy this year. You make sure of that, Jess.”

I pulled my gaze from the entrance with a slight headshake and willed my heartbeat back to a regular rhythm. “Don’t worry, Dad. I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve.”

His jovial laughter made my attempt to fasten the suspender clips over his round belly even harder. Add in the ever-present, fluffy white beard and twinkle in his eye and there he stood, Santa Claus Holloran, celebrity throughout three counties. Dad played the role to the hilt, too—especially today dressed in his favorite, red velvet outfit with gold trim. For all the little girls who ever wanted the jolly old elf as their father, I was pretty lucky to have him all to myself.

“There you go.”

He pulled the waistband of the pants forward until they snapped back, ruffling the rich material in waves all

the way down to his shiny black boots. "Perfect. Thanks, sweetheart."

Blitzen, fed up with being ignored, thumped me on the rump with her snout. "Okay, okay. I know you want to get started."

With a chuckle, my father buried a hand deep in the reindeer's thick neck coat. The youngest in our stable of twelve, she was also the most expressive and my secret weapon for this year's games. I'd been working with her for the past six months and this little darling could jump higher than any reindeer we'd ever raised.

Old leather and soft whiskers preceded my father's kiss on my cheek. "I'm off. See you soon." A few minutes later, a boisterous round of applause and the merry chimes of jingle bells rode the cool breeze into the barn.

"Time to go," I called to the other reindeer patiently waiting within their stalls. Decked out in their finest fragrant green garland laced with bells, I herded our eight elected champions into a line in preparation for the opening parade.

"This is it, ladies. The Nickles have won the last two years in a row so now's the time we win back the coveted Bronze Horns. Dulcey, how's your pitch today? Good. Dancer and Prancer? You two ready to pull for all you're worth? Excellent." I walked down the line, rubbing the occasional rack of horns or coarse hair.

"Thelma and Louise, no looking at the handsome bucks this year—you need to focus. Henrietta, get your head out of the oat pail, please. This is no time for a snack." I gave her a pat on the rump and she fell back in line. "You've all worked hard and, win or lose, there's extra grain tonight. Yes, even you Henrietta. But, please, help me out here, girls. I don't want to wash out the football teams gym clothes and equipment after the big New Year's game or worse yet, wear that skimpy cheerleader outfit and do a one-woman rally during half-time like last year."

*Maybe this year I'll ask for a kiss.* Was Brent serious?

## Reindeer Games

Nah, couldn't be. He was just trying to rile me but I wouldn't take the bait. This year, he'd be doing the Loser Deed and a pink dress sounded perfect.

I flew back to the front of the line more eager than ever to let the games begin.

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With an icy shiver, I viciously yanked my shirt back and forth in an attempt to shake out the remainder of snow. Still on my knees beside the pile of fluffy flakes used as the middle for the Tug-of-War, I replayed the event behind closed eyes. Along with Thelma and Louise, we pulled our hearts out against Brent and his two reindeer team. I even saw his foot slip and then...there...in my peripheral vision. His sister casually walking by the outer fence with a big, broad buck in tow.

"Need a hand there, Frosty?"

Brent's large glove came into focus when I opened my eyes and I batted it away. "Let me guess. You had no idea Hailey was behind you with Melvin on the harness."

"Really? I had no clue," he mused with widened eyes.

I didn't buy the innocent act as he took a quick glance over his shoulder. The right side of his smile always tilted higher when he was pulling something over on me.

"Ri-i-ight." I brushed the snow from my pants, ignoring the odd spark of warmth Brent's laughter ignited as I went to collect Thelma and Louise from their perch near the fence. "Thanks a lot, girls," I muttered. "Some team mates you are, leaving me to eat snow while you run off after the cute guy."

The brush off hurt even more because we'd just lost our advantage and the games standings were now tied. We'd won the Sleigh Harness, a timed event determining the fastest team to be hooked up to Santa's sleigh. This was an enormous victory because the winning team then pulled Santa Holloran and a few children around the field in a victory lap officially opening the games.

Next, Comet shot off like a rocket, leaving Brent's

poor Donner kissing his snowflakes during the Reindeer Races. Henrietta *should* have won the Obstacle Course, too. For four years in a row, she's been the best at the present push, maneuvering over the faux rooftops and weaving around the line of brick chimneys. Though I couldn't prove it, I knew exactly who tucked those carrots in Henrietta's last chimneystack—a big, hunky Albertan cowboy.

*Hunky?* Since when did I think of Brent as hunky? Granted he was big in a broad-shouldered, athletic kind of way, which I'm sure helped with teaching Physical Education and coaching. Throughout high school, all my friends thought him handsome. Since returning from college a few years ago, I admit I've pleasantly watched the maturity fill out his boyish features. And he does have nice legs...

*Whoa. What am I doing?*

These stray thoughts had to be all part of that kissing thing. He was playing with my head again. Paranoid—who me? No, just on to his scheme.

I quickly revamped my thinking—he had nice legs all right and they'd look great in the dress I planned for him to wear down Main Street. I wasn't lying when I told my father I had a few tricks up my sleeve. Looked like the time had arrived to let them loose.

I jogged back to the stable with Thelma and Louise, adding the promised extra grain portion to their pails before retrieving Dulcey and returning to center field.

Over the years, our families and some generous townsfolk built bleachers around the open field, as well as a hot chocolate shack and a seasonal ice rink on the far side. From the outside, all the extras may have seemed a lot for a one-day-a-year event but this was Noelle after all. Christmas was more than just a seasonal holiday here.

I glanced over to where Brent's mother and two younger sisters operated the beverage booth. Initially, my mom served up the hot chocolate for the crowds but she died when I was twelve. Brent's strong hand refusing to

release mine had been the only thing keeping me from running away that awful day. He never said a word but I never forgot. He'd always been that way, there when you needed him, no fuss, no muss.

I didn't even realize my gaze had wandered until the flicker of his brow dipping in question caught my attention.

I shook off his look and the strange path of my thoughts to focus on the event at hand and positioned Dulce beside a well-stocked pile of snowballs. Before the games began, we never ran out of little hands eager to help us load up for the Snowball Toss event.

"Okay, Dulce. Time for the wham-bamalam."

My laughter caught Brent's attention and his gaze narrowed even further. He knew I was up to something—he always knew. But I knew things, too. Like how he naturally stood to the left of people, which I planned to use to my advantage.

"You know, Brent, I take it back. I'm not going to make you play Mrs. Claus. It just wouldn't be right."

"Why so generous all of a sudden?"

I smiled wickedly at his back while he positioned his reindeer Georgette next to their own pile. "Because I think hiding your legs beneath a long gown would be such a waste. Hailey's pink dress would show off that cute bod of yours much better."

"Keep dreamin', Jess," he snorted. "But if you want to see my 'cute bod' up close and personal, all you have to do is say the word."

The look he gave me over his shoulder could only be called steaming hot. I was surprised the snowball in my hand didn't melt on the spot because my knees were sure having a problem staying solid.

The jingle bells rang out, thankfully breaking into the moment.

*Focus, Jess!* I never used to be this susceptible to his tactics. Why was my mind wandering today?

My answer currently placed a snowball on his

reindeer's snout, readying Georgette to launch the white globe into a bucket five feet away. I heard his encouraging timbre and a cheer go out when it hit its mark.

"Lucky shot," I heckled.

He sent me a satisfied smirk over his shoulder then turned back to reload.

"Alright, Dulcey. You know what to do. Let's give this crowd a little show and Brent a little snow." I set a snowball on her thick snout. "Go," I commanded curtly just like during practice.

"Hey!"

Bullseye—right smack between Brent's shoulder blades.

I smiled sweetly. "Oops, sorry. Her aim must be off today."

The crowd burst into laughter as he shook the snow off and sent me a warning glare. We both set up our reindeer with another snowball. Georgette's went right into the bucket and Dulcey's right into the back of Brent's head.

The crowd loved it. Brent, well, he's always been a good sport. Another thing I loved about him.

*Liked* about him. Liked, not *loved*. I don't know where that word came from. Leaving my errant thoughts to freeze in the snow, I concentrated on the task at hand.

When all was said and done, Georgette scored eleven. Unfortunately, Dulcey's aim was better at Brent's back than at the bucket. The Holloran team was now down by one.

"Nice trick," Brent muttered as we led the girls back to the stables to exchange them for the Sled Pulling teams. "Been practicing I see."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," I boasted.

"I just might have a few tricks left up my sleeve, too. Keep your eyes open, Holloran."

Relieved to be back in control with our usual banter, I hid a sigh of relief from Brent. "You don't have anything I can't handle, tough guy."

We reached the fork in the path where we broke off to go to our respective stables or more apt, respective corners. Dark sea-green eyes smiled down as he leaned in closer. "Can you handle a kiss, Jess? Guaranteed if I win, that will be your deed."

*Gulp.* He almost sounded serious. "Why would you want to kiss me?"

"What if I said I've wanted to kiss you since those doe-brown eyes of yours laughed at me after the 'treetop' incident?"

"I'd say you were pulling a fast one." Except there was no hint of movement on the right side of his confident smile.

"Oh, I'm not joking." His gaze dropped to my lips. "And believe me, I will be asking for one...simple...kiss." His face moved closer still.

So much for being in control. My heartbeat thundered in my ears. His unique winter cologne surrounded me and my own gaze fell to his lips. Odd, I never noticed their perfection before. The chiseled top lip and full bottom one looked so supple, delectable, and the rosy winter hue of cranberry jelly that I found myself wondering if they tasted as good.

"Hmm. Guess we'll just have to wait to find out."

My gaze jumped to his eyes twinkling in amusement, unsure if he referred to the games or had actually read my mind.

I cleared my throat and took a step back, looking him up and down though I didn't know what for. He was just the same Brent, taunting me as usual.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

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"Really, his teasing doesn't mean anything. He's just trying to rile me, I know it." Dancer and Prancer tilted their heads in unison at my sputtered ramblings. The twins had no idea what I was talking about. In truth, neither did I.

"I mean, I've known this man for as long as I can

remember and...no, that's not true." My fingers paused over the clasp on Prancer's bridle. I knew the boy—the man was turning out to be a whole other story.

More confused than ever, I trudged back over the padded down trail with the sisters in tow. The sleds were ready so I began to harness up the girls for the Sleigh Races.

A flash of red caught in my eye. I glanced over my shoulder to my father heading towards the stage with a few children tagging along like a crew of elves. Helping him with the business was all I've ever wanted to do since he took me on my first snowy tree-cutting and brought home our very first reindeer. I'd even enrolled in business courses in college to lessen the load from his shoulders. Dating had never been high on my list, especially when the few guys I went out with didn't take my family business seriously.

My gaze drifted of its own accord over to Brent. With such a large family, he pursued his dreams of teaching, yet never failed to lend a hand around the Nursery yard or stables. The corner of his lips curled up and my heart skipped a beat.

Obviously, my attention span hadn't come with me to the games this year, and I yanked my scarf tighter around my neck in an effort to get it back.

With our reindeer hooked up to the sleds, we split off to opposite ends of the crowd for volunteers. The objective was more audience participation but also to pick five lighter children than my opponent.

Multi-colored mittens shot up along with resounding mantras of "Pick me, pick me, pick me," shouted out in white puffs on the air.

With my riders selected, we returned to the sled and I got everyone settled. I rounded to the outside of the twins, giving their snouts a rub in readiness then turned to see if my adversary was ready.

Brent squatted with a knee bent in the snow, fixing a little girl's scarf and hat. He laughed at something she



said and tapped her button nose before helping her up into the sleigh.

Someday he'd make a great dad.

The thought seized the breath in my chest as his words came back to haunt me. *Are you gonna tell our children the same story?* Not your children, *our* children.

A loud throat clearing next to me stopped my thoughts before they could get any further out of line.

"You okay, Jess," my father asked.

"O-of course." I only hoped the smile I pasted on was reliable.

He winked. "Ready then?"

"Yep."

My father returned to the stage and called Brent over, distracting him long enough for me to hook the pre-arranged rope to the back of the Nickles' sleigh. In order to avoid the other images my mind were conjuring since watching him with the little girl, I focused on an image of Brent walking down the middle of town in his sister's dress as I secured the line to one of the brick chimneystacks. I thought it only fitting considering his abuse of poor Henrietta's food addiction.

Giggles from the children sprouted up like tinkling bells. With a silent finger pressed against my grinning lips, I resumed my place next to Dancer and Prancer.

On his return, Brent's narrowed gaze whisked over the tittering children. Fortunately, he didn't have time to question them before the jingle bells rang out to begin the Sled Pull Race.

Dancer and Prancer dashed off with the children in our sleigh laughing all the way while Brent's poor reindeer inched forward then came to a complete stop. I couldn't help chuckling at his perplexed look. The children laughed incessantly and one or two even pointed down behind the sleigh while covering their mouths over more insuppressible giggles.

By the time Brent realized what happened, Dancer and Prancer rounded the far corner and hauled us back

towards the finish line. When he finally unhooked his sled and finished his turn around the track, he found me leaning against the side of my sleigh with five other smiling faces shining like happy little ornaments around me.

“So, kids, do you think Brent would make a great Mrs. Claus or what?” Their chorus of agreement caused Brent’s brows to lower even further and the laughter grow louder.

I met him halfway between the sleds. He tipped both the Stetson and his voice lower. “I thought you gave up on that idea, something about seeing more of my ‘cute bod’. Of course, you’d have to win first. We’re all tied up, Jess, and it’s still anyone’s game.”

His brow rose in a sexy arch along with the right curve of his lips. His eyes danced with a heated spark of anticipation, which shot straight through multiple layers of my winter clothing to rev my heartbeat into overdrive. Then those startling-colored eyes rose and held my gaze with unadulterated—or was that adulterated—confidence.

“I’m looking forward to our last match.”

He was talking about the games, right? The way his lips tipped up as he nodded and walked away told me an entirely different story.

One that I was starting to believe in.

The cold air stung my teeth as I willed the smile to remain on my face and my knees to hold me up.

For the first time in my Reindeer Game history, I seriously considered if I wanted to win...or lose.

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My steps felt lighter than the snowflakes drifting around us as I set up Blitzen for the final hurdles, better known to the children as the Flying event. She pawed a hoof at the snow and twisted her horns playfully.

“Atta girl,” I praised her eagerness. “Won’t be long now.” My own words filled me with a breathless anticipation.

When the jingle bells rang, I let my littlest reindeer fly. I ran alongside as she effortlessly cleared the first level of hurdles then guided her back to the front.

I snuck a peek at Brent who rubbed the back of his reindeer, Margie, in encouragement. She pranced over the hurdles with no problem. Brent winked as he returned to their position.

My father raised the heights and two more times, Blitzen and Margie flew over them with ease.

I fidgeted with my scarf—this was taking too long. I glanced over to Brent, finding I'd stolen the bad habit of staring at his lips just sitting there ready, willing, and I bet very able.

*If Blitzen loses, you can have them all to yourself, no question, no argument,* a little elf-like voice whispered in my head.

"You know, Brent," I called over. "At an inch at a time, this could take all afternoon. Let's say we up the stakes a little, so to speak."

His eyes smiled in challenge. "What'd you have in mind?"

"One hurdle, three inches higher and raised two inches consecutively if the girls clear it."

"Sounds good."

We both turned to my father whose jolly Santa Claus belly shook with laughter as he nodded his approval. To the roar of the crowd, he moved a single hurdle out into the middle of the field then returned to flip a coin. Brent and Margie went first.

After a brief set-up and vote of confidence from him, Margie jumped the hurdle. Her hoof nicked it on her way over but it didn't fall.

"Come on, Blitz, your turn."

At the sound of the jingle bells, she ran up and over the obstacle with an easy two inches to spare. I nuzzled her nose then walked her back around, kicking myself for the tiny bit of disappointment, which dropped my shoulders when she cleared it.

My father raised the height another two inches and this time Margie knocked down the rail.

*Damn.*

*No, wait! What are you thinking?*

I berated myself for my traitorous thoughts. The chance for a win was wide open. A win not only for Blitzen who had been practicing so hard, but for my family name which meant much more than a single kiss from Brent Nickles.

Blitzen snorted a puff of frozen air and flared her horns around. At the sound of the jingle bells, I shouted, "Fly, girl. Fly!"

Her front hooves left the ground, clearing the bar, and I held my breath as the back hooves nicked it. For a long moment, the railing rattled as if ready to fall. Even after scolding myself only a moment ago, part of me prayed for it to hold and part prayed for it to fall.

The railing held firm and Blitzen landed with a sweep of snow and prancing all the way.

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"The winner of this year's Reindeer Games is the Holloran Family Tree Farm!" My father's boisterous voice rang out with pride from the small stage tucked into the side of the competition field.

My winning team stood in a prominent spot in front of the stage below us while Brent and his group of eight competitors collected on the snowy turf to the left.

I accepted the coveted Bronze Horns Award and held it aloft to the cheers of the crowd. When I brought it back down, I turned my gaze to Brent. A hint of disappointment marred his eyes but his smile never faltered.

"You're going to make me wear the dress, aren't you?"

He would do it, too. He never backed down from a challenge, he stood behind his family and friends one hundred percent, and he always kept his word. He was a good man; a perfect man actually. Why had I taken so

long to see that?

“I want you to kiss me.” They weren’t the words I planned to say, but in my heart, I knew they were the right ones.

Brent was up on stage faster than Comet during the Reindeer Race. His arms tightened around me, raising me until I stood on the tips of my boots.

Vaguely, I heard a roar from the crowd and a surprised laugh from my father but all my focus was on the soft lips covering mine. They were warm, confident, and full of tantalizing possibilities.

Funny, the kiss didn’t feel like a first kiss, more like an always-has-been one.

I don’t know how much time passed before he reluctantly pulled away, but I definitely knew I wanted more. “You better be careful kissing me like that,” I said breathlessly. “Next year, I just might ask you to marry me.”

His sea-green eyes sparkled down in mischief and promise. “You know the rules. I’d have to do it, no question, no argument.”

At that moment, I had no doubt who would win next year’s Reindeer Games.