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Published by Scrivenings Press LLC  
15 Lucky Lane  
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110  
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-238-9

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-239-6

Editors: Shannon Taylor Vannatter, Susan Page Davis, and Linda Fulkerson

Cover design by Linda Fulkerson - [www.bookmarketinggraphics.com](http://www.bookmarketinggraphics.com)

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Spring  HAS SPRUNG

REGINA RUDD MERRICK



*To my little sister, Andrea Rudd Peak, born seven years and ten days after my spring birthday. For this child I prayed with all the fervor of a first grader!*





# Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Linda at Scrivenings Press for the opportunity to collaborate on this novella collection, and to Amy, Heather, and Sarah for the wonderful time I've had running things by you, comparing notes, and just having fun together.

Thanks be to God for giving me a wonderful family and friends, and for their prayers as I go through what has been the craziest year of my life!



*Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and  
looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

*—Luke 9:62 CSB*



*“Spring has sprung, the grass is riz,  
Wonder where the flowers is?  
They are nowhere to be found,  
'Cause they're underground.”*  
—Unknown



# Chapter One



*“Spring is the time of plans and projects”*  
—Leo Tolstoy

*Late January*

The meeting room door stood in front of her—large, in charge, and ominous.

Dread, not in the form of butterflies, but large, wild moths in the pit of Maia’s stomach elevated into downright cold sweats and shallow breathing.

From experience, she knew the enthusiasm of the Chamber of Commerce’s Daffodil Festival committee would be enough to make her sick.

*Maia Pascal, focus ...*

She stretched her spine and cracked her neck, preparing for the fight of her life. Most people saw the season as a time to celebrate new beginnings, new life, but Maia had the misfortune to live in Spring, Kentucky. Yes, her town celebrated all things spring. The Daffodil Festival gave

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everyone *carte blanche* to go over the top, and it drove her crazy. Pushing the door open, enthusiastic spring-lovers bombarded her before she could greet them.

“Mia ...”

“It’s Maia—like the Mayan temples in Mexico, but without the *n*.” Why couldn’t this woman, who was particular about everything else, pronounce Maia’s name correctly? She’d literally known her all her life.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I have a problem with that.” Mrs. Cotton, the county homemakers’ president, exuded excitement as she handed everyone a sheet of paper with a long and varied list of entertainment, games, food vendors, ideas for décor, and much, much more. “Anyway, after we spoke the other day, I made a list of activities we’ve done in the past.”

As the county’s most-organized person, why wasn’t Mrs. Cotton in charge?

*Because Mrs. Cotton isn’t a city employee. That’s why.* Unfortunately, Maia’s position as Assistant City Manager was to make this the biggest, best Daffodil Festival in the books. She’d have to suck it up and put on a happy face, even though, for her, all she could think about on the first pleasant day of the season were headaches, runny noses, bad hair days, and never knowing what to wear.

Why? Because springtime in Kentucky means thirty degrees in the morning and seventy by lunchtime.

She raised an eyebrow. “Good morning, everyone. It looks like the Daffodil Festival is well on its way.” Glancing toward Mrs. Cotton, she voiced her query. “One of these days, I suggest you be in charge of the festival.”

The older lady turned red, and waved her hands, flustered. “Oh, no. I work much better in an advisory capacity.” She laughed nervously. “I’m just here to make sure every festival is



better than the last, and that our love for all things spring is upheld.”

*Is something wrong with me, inherently, that I dislike this season so much?*

Her naturally curly hair staged a rebellion when the weather warmed up and rained.

It happened. Every year of her life that she remembered.

People in Arizona or California didn't know how good they had it. Kentucky, on the other hand? Louisville ranked in the top five worst cities for seasonal allergies in the United States.

She'd looked it up. It was Internet-official.

The room had gone silent after Mrs. Cotton's comment, waiting for Maia.

“Thank you.” Maia came to herself. She schooled her expression, but she worried it didn't quite reach her eyes. Glancing across the table at her best friend, Jasmine Carter, who she may or may not have placed on the committee to keep herself on an even keel, Maia inwardly cringed at the smirk on her friend's face. Having Jasmine on the committee meant nothing to anyone else at the table, but for Maia, Jasmine represented sanity in a crazy world.

Claudia Clay, on the other hand, looked utterly bored. At least that would be the first impression of her. Always.

Why was Maia here again? Oh yeah. She worked here. The co-op program had provided their office with a mixed bag of enthusiasm each year. Was it just last year that high school senior Brenden Behr volunteered to man the dunking booth, even in forty-degree weather? *I wonder if he still has that cough?*

“Could I just say, as a newcomer in town, how happy I am to be able to help with the festival?” Doctor Owen Roswell, hired at Spring Community Hospital late last summer, broke the silence.

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With that last name, she so wanted to ask him if he'd seen any aliens lately, but she held back.

Cute in an eager-beaver sort of way, the well-cultivated ginger five-o'clock shadow gave Owen Roswell a slight *bad boy* vibe that was totally trashed as soon as he smiled or opened his mouth. She'd noticed him on the platform at church, playing drums or guitar with the praise band. He was a versatile musician. One of those *hand-lifters*. As a non-hand-raiser, it always made her feel not quite holy enough. But that was her problem, not his.

Yeah, that was Dr. Owen Roswell.

*Insecure much, Maia?*

Who was she to question the validity of his outward expression of worship? Who knew? Perhaps working on this project together would allow her to get to know him better. He wasn't too obnoxious. His eyes were nice. Kind of a draw-you-in color of blue, which made no sense. But it did. And he was cute if a little over-enthusiastic.

"Good to have you, Dr. Roswell."

"Please. Call me Owen."

"And you may call me Maia."

"Ah, the Roman goddess of spring." The brilliant smile he turned her way threatened to blind her this early in the morning.

She bit her lip, trying to hold back the sarcastic laugh that wanted to burst forth. "Unfortunately, yes." Maia glanced at him with a slight grin, then surveyed the committee. "I think we've got a good start on the festival. Mrs. Cotton, as usual, you're in charge of the food vendors. Mr. Simmons, traffic. Jasmine and Claudia, games." Maybe hanging around with Jasmine would improve Claudia's outlook.

She looked around. One person left, two positions to fill. "I

need someone to be my assistant and someone to contact and hire an amusement ride company. Bounce-n-More?”

Curt Simmons, a local insurance agent wearing a polo sporting the company logo embroidered on the front, crossed his arms across his chest, nodding. “I’ll be glad to manage that one in addition to parking. I’ve been contacted by a new carnival company up in Indiana, as well as Bounce-n-More, so I’ll check out both places. I’d need to see if the equipment is up to liability standards, anyway.”

Exactly who she wanted for that job. She nodded as she printed his name on her list. “Great. And that leaves ...” Maia looked up to see Owen Roswell beaming. “Dr. Roswell for my assistant.” Her voice, and her smile, faltered in the face of his exuberance.

He tilted his head and quirked up one side of his mouth. “Ah. Call me Owen.”

For some weird reason, his expression reached in and tugged at something inside her, but she slapped it away like an early mosquito, figuratively speaking. No matter what Jasmine said, the Daffodil Festival would not turn into a city-government version of speed-dating.



NOT ONLY HAD Owen secured a position on the Daffodil Festival planning committee, but he’d also agreed to be assistant to the chair. What a fantastic way to get to know people in the small town he’d adopted six months ago.

The January day promised to be brisk, but sunny. He walked out into the sunshine, glad he had his jacket with him today.

Perfect. Born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona, Owen understood summer well, but he hadn’t experienced a true

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four-season climate until he attended medical school at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. He was hooked.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Even in January, there were warm days sprinkled in that made the grass a little greener and fooled the trees and flowers into budding before the next cold snap. Those were the days that brought out that slightly damp, winter-turning-to-spring aroma present this time of year in Kentucky. It was what brought him back after he finished med school.

When the board of the Spring Community Hospital approached him at a job fair as he finished up his residency, it was just too good to be true. A chance to live in a town that lived and breathed all things spring. The small flags hanging from the decorative streetlights and fluttering in the breeze had the town logo on them—a bouquet of Daffodils. It didn't matter what time of year. Here, it was always *spring*.

On the way to his car, he smiled and greeted people on the sidewalk. In this first meeting, he'd watched as Maia Pascal organized the committee, and he wondered at a note of irritation. A difficult day in city government? No, it seemed like more. He also noticed she always kept a tissue handy. Allergies? Probably. Western Kentucky was known for being the allergy capital of the U.S.

"Dr. Roswell?"

Owen turned to see Maia walking briskly toward him, holding out a folder. "You forgot this."

"Thanks. Sorry about that." He smiled as he took it. "I don't know where my head was."

She scoffed. "Mine is one big ache this time of year in anticipation of allergy season, so I don't even pretend to know what I'm doing half the time."

"I wouldn't say that. I thought you ran the meeting well." He grinned. "I take it this isn't your favorite season?"

“Uh, no. Maybe because this town is spring on steroids?” She snorted quietly.

Owen laughed out loud. “I know what you mean, but I suppose it would be wrong to have a fall festival in Spring, Kentucky.”

“Possibly.”

He shrugged. “Fortunately for me, I love this time of year. Especially now. Never had it growing up, so it’s all new to me. In the southwest, we have fall and summer. Mostly summer.” He smiled gently. “And please, call me Owen. Who knows? Maybe we’ll become friends?”

Her face held a skeptical, but open, expression. “Maybe we will.” Maia glanced at her phone. “Gotta go. See you soon.” She fluttered her fingers in a wave and was gone.

She was tall and reasonably attractive. No. Scratch that, calling Maia *reasonably attractive* was ridiculous. Her dark hair and eyes were as beautiful as was the rest of her. But that frown line between her eyebrows? That needed to go.

By the time the festival was over, he predicted that not only would he and Maia be friends, but she would love spring as much as he did.

Owen had been looking for a hobby. This could be it.