

A person wearing a dark suit jacket and a white shirt is shown from the chest down, holding a large, glossy red heart with both hands. The heart is the central focus of the image. The background is a solid black color.

*The Important Things*

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*A Samhain Publishing Freebie*

The Important Things  
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The last person Tara Scott expected to see when she answered her door on Valentine's Day was Max Balfour. For one shocked moment she stared, nonplused by his appearance before reaction kicked in. *The day designated for lovers*. Tara grasped the door for support, her heart racing like a wild, unbroken horse while she considered the irony. She had thought about him constantly since Christmas. The flutters in her stomach intensified, but she fought back, firing a scorching glare in his direction in an effort to try to hide her rising panic.

"What do you want?" she snapped, trying to counteract her anxiety with anger.

Max raked one hand through his dark, shaggy hair acknowledging her greeting with a wry twist of lips. "Look," he said, "I know I'm not welcome in your house, but I'm looking for Katie. Is she here?"

Tara drew a sharp breath. He wasn't here to wish her a Happy Valentine's day. "Katie? No, why would she be here?"

One arrogant brow rose at her reply. "We were close once," he said softly. "Our marriage plans were no secret. Katie likes you."

Heat flooded her cheeks, and Tara felt a tinge of shame. She stared down at her wrinkled cotton shirt, unable to meet his accusing eyes. He was right. It was a logical place to look for Katie. In the past, Max's daughter had spent a lot of time at her apartment. "I'm sorry, Max. She's not here."

"Damn," he muttered, his frustration clear. "I'm sorry I bothered you. I should have driven over instead of running here." He turned to leave, but Tara placed one hesitant hand on his arm to halt his departure.

"Tell me what's happened. I might be able to help."

"Katie's run away." His face darkened in pain. "It hasn't been easy for either of us during the last month."

*Not since we broke up*, Tara filled the gaps silently. It hadn't been easy for her either. She smoothed her short, curly hair and nervously swallowed her unease and guilt.

Max's sigh was impatient as he swung back toward the road. "I have to find Katie. She's only four. Hell, anything could have happened to her. I have to find her."

Tara ducked back inside and grabbed her jacket from the hall cupboard. When she hurried outside, her car keys in hand, Max was outside her neighbor's house.

"Max, wait! I'll help you look for Katie."

He spun about, a look of icy rage on his tanned face. "Katie is my responsibility. You don't like children. That was your excuse for canceling our wedding. You don't want children, remember?"

Tara skidded to a halt, wincing at his fury. She huddled into her leather jacket in a valiant effort to fight the shivers that racked her body without warning. Her heart twisted in pain. His words hurt. Dammit, the man could wound from six paces without even trying.

"Please, Max," she whispered, feeling tears sting at the back of her eyes. "Can't we just look for Katie and forget the rest for the moment?"

His mouth firmed, and for a time it looked as if he would argue. Tara waited silently for his verdict. She wouldn't blame him if he said no. She'd walk away without looking back. But she desperately wanted to help, to make everything right again. This man was her life, and so was Katie, although it had taken her a long time to see this truth.

He strode back to her and held out his hand. "I'll drive."

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Where shall we start?"

"I didn't see her on the way here." Max slammed the driver's door and waited for Tara to settle herself in the passenger seat. "Katie asked me to take her to the library and to the bookstore. She wanted a book of fairy tales. She's been asking me to take her to the library all week. I was too busy. I have a deadline..." he trailed off, anguish clouding his eyes. He smashed his hands against the steering wheel. "I should have made the time."

Tara swallowed, trying to dislodge the tight ache deep in her throat. "We'll find her," she said, forcing confidence into her voice. Fear, pure and deep-seated, rushed through her. She was a lawyer for God's sake. She worked late, writing and

dissecting legal briefs, fighting battles in court. Tara was good at her job—a career woman. *What did she know about kids?*

“I’ll try the bookstore first. It’s closer. I mean how far could she have walked?”

Tara glanced over at Max. His desperation was clear. He loved his daughter and felt he’d failed her. Yet Max was a great father. The best. He’d managed to raise his daughter by himself even though his wife had died soon after Katie’s birth. That took a lot. Tara knew it had been tough, but he’d managed and very successfully.

“I think we should ring the police,” she said. “Um, just in case...” She tensed as she watched his capable hands clench around the steering wheel. Tara looked away. She couldn’t bear the sharp pain that ripped through her chest. The thought of Katie lying hurt somewhere.

“The store is at the end of this road. I’ll ring from there.”

Tara reached into the right pocket of her leather jacket and pulled out her cell phone. “I’ll ring now,” she said.

Max parked her Toyota and pulled on the handbrake. In the sudden silence of the confined car, he took a deep shuddering breath before he turned to her. His eyes were full of uncertainty. “She’ll be all right, won’t she?”

The unaccustomed lack of confidence tugged at her heartstrings. She had missed Max so much during the last few weeks. His teasing laughter. Their conversations.

His soul wrenching kisses.

The gentleness when he held her, and the fierceness with which they had made love. Then there was Katie. Somehow, both father and daughter had wormed their way into her affections leaving a gaping hole when they were no longer there. Tara hadn’t realized until she’d lost them.

The crisp voice at the police station jerked her back to the present. “I’d like to report a missing child,” she said. “Description? Ah, she’s four, has dark curly hair. What is she wearing? Just a moment.”

“A yellow Mickey Mouse T-shirt and blue jean dungarees with bright orange shoes. Today she has her hair in pigtails.”

Tara flinched as she repeated the information back to the calm voice at the other end of the phone. She had taken Katie shopping for the orange shoes and yellow T-shirt.

The shopping trip had taken place the week before she had succumbed to her agonizing fear. A week before she'd panicked, lashed out at Max then run away to hide in cowardice.

Max climbed from the car and hurtled inside the bookstore. Tara followed a little more slowly as she tried to make sense of her jumbled emotions. Valentine's Day displays filled the store windows. She noted the florist doing a roaring trade with several customers studying the buckets of bright flowers while others waited in line for the staff to arrange their purchases. *Love*. It filled the air and made Tara realize what she'd lost when she'd walked away from Max. She stepped inside the bookstore in time to hear Max question the staff.

"Have you seen my daughter? She's dark haired with pigtails. She's wearing..."

"You're Katie's father, aren't you?"

"Have you seen her?" Max fired back the question at the elderly shop assistant so quickly she started to look nervous. She edged behind her counter and glanced at Tara for reassurance.

"She's missing," Tara explained when she halted beside Max's larger, menacing frame.

"I'm sorry. I haven't seen her since Christmas. She was with her mother looking at the books of fairy tales."

Max glared at Tara. "She was with you? This obsession with fairy tales is your fault! What is wrong with stories about that dog, Hairy McCleary?"

The saleswoman stared over the top of her glasses at Max, her eyes growing frosty. "There is nothing wrong with fairy tales. They have nice happy endings."

"Not in real life, they don't." Max spat the words over his shoulder as he stalked from the shop.

"Well, really!" the woman said.

Tara offered a conciliatory smile and hurried after Max, feeling sick. The sandwich she'd eaten before Max's arrival lay in a heavy lump at the bottom of her

stomach. Tara gulped the fresh, clean air in an effort to quash the sudden nausea. *Please let Katie be unharmed,* she prayed.

Max was already in the car waiting for her. As she fastened her seat belt, she bit back the words of apology trembling at her lips. Now was not the time. When Katie was safe, they could talk.

"Ring the police again," Max demanded. "Then ring home in case she's there."

Tara forgave him his harsh voice and terse manner. If she felt sick, she imagined Max felt even worse. With shaky fingers, she dialed Max's number.

After at least a dozen ring tones, she hung up. "No reply at your house."

Max grunted and pulled up at a red light with a screech of brakes.

Tara caught a flash of yellow from the corner of her eye. "Is that..." she began only to stop when the little girl turned around.

"It's not Katie." Max clamped his eyes shut and only opened them again when the driver in the car behind gave an impatient toot. His dark eyes glistened with unshed tears.

Tara gulped, feeling his pain as if it were her own. She felt connected to Katie in a way she couldn't explain.

The truth hit her with a bang. Katie was her daughter in every way that mattered.

She'd taken Katie shopping, cared for her when work and deadlines claimed all of Max's attention, loved her, spoken to her sternly when the occasion warranted. That was all parenting, but she hadn't realized because being with Katie had been fun. Her parents had always complained of the hard work required to raise a child. Her mother had made raising children sound like the worst job imaginable.

Max slowed the car and gestured in front of them. "The library is down there on the right."

Tara frowned. "I can't believe a four-year-old would walk this far."

"Believe it." Max turned to her with a forced grin that didn't reach his eyes. "She gets her stubbornness from me."

There was nothing Tara could say to that. She racked her brain for an encouraging comment and came up blank.

The minute he'd parked the car, Max was out and striding up the front steps to the library entrance. Tara hurried after him, the wind sending a chill through her body. Inside, bright red paper flowers and pink hearts showcased a selection of romances for Valentine's Day. The sight made Tara's heart ache.

"Max, wait!"

"What?" he snarled.

Tara bit her bottom lip then pushed on doggedly. "Does Katie have her own library card?"

He muttered a succinct curse. "Why?"

"Because," she said in a patient tone, "if she does we can find out if she has checked out books today."

Max sent her a look of chagrin. "Sorry," he apologized in a terse voice. He strode to the enquiries desk and spoke to the man behind the desk. A few moments later, he hurried back to her side. "She was here! And she checked out two books of fairy tales."

"How long ago?" Tara demanded. "Did he know?"

"I have to go to the children's section. She may still be here!"

Max sprinted away, taking the escalator two steps at a time. When Tara arrived at his side, out of breath and still squeamish with nerves, he was grilling the two on-duty librarians. This time he kept his temper in check, charming the two young women with his charismatic manner.

"Oh, are you Katie's father? She was here about half an hour ago. She's an adorable little moppet," the young blonde gushed.

Tara watched him at work and remembered when he'd directed that charm at her—how special she'd felt and how loved. Her eyes narrowed to slits when the blonde sidled nearer to Max. Close enough for her breast to rub against Max's arm. It took Tara a while to identify the foreign sensation racing through her.

*Green-eyed jealousy.* She squashed the emotion and took pleasure in interrupting. Satisfaction coursed through her when the distance between Max and the blonde increased.

"Is Katie here?" she asked.

"No," Max replied, his face cold as he turned to face her.

Her heart sank as she recognized she no longer had any rights in regard to Max. It was a galling thought.

Max took her by the arm, his fingers biting into her soft flesh. "We must have missed her somehow. We'll drive home down George Street. Thank you for your help, Karen." He smiled a farewell to the blonde before saying to Tara, "Let's go." His terse voice didn't bode well for her.

The car door clunked loudly in the blooming silence. Tara glanced at Max, wondering why he was taking so long to start the car. What she saw made her breath catch.

His face twisted in agony. "Oh God, Tara." He lifted his hands to cover his face but a muffled sob escaped. "What if we don't find her?"

"Max, we'll find her. Safe. We know she made it this far. Come here." Big fat tears began to fall unchecked down her face, and suddenly they were in each other's arms, comforting and receiving reassurance.

The hug finished far too quickly for Tara's liking, but she knew at this moment Katie was more important.

"I'll let the police station know we think she's okay," she said without meeting his gaze.

Max muttered a reply as he did a U turn and drove down George Street, constantly searching for a glimpse of his daughter. The trip home was short and without success.

"Do you think she is inside?" she asked.

He didn't wait for her, but Tara was becoming used to the feeling. She tagged behind, bursting through the open door after him.

"Katie!" Max hollered.

Tara noticed the edge of desperation in his tone. He was terrified for his daughter.

Max ran up the stairs to Katie's bedroom. Minutes later, it was her name he was shouting. "Tara, is she down there?"

"No." The word was a sob of despair.

Without warning, Max was beside her. Tara forgot all their bitter words, their stormy arguments and threw herself into his arms. Max clutched at her shoulders, enfolding her in his arms and resting his chin on the top of her silky head.

"I don't know what to do," he admitted in a broken voice. "Where is she?"

The phone rang, strident and demanding, ratcheting up the tension.

Tara looked up at his still face. "Max?"

He snatched up the phone, pulling Tara close so she could hear the conversation. "Hello?"

"Max, it's Eloise Jones at number eighteen. I thought I'd better ring to let you know your daughter is here visiting. I didn't want you to worry."

"Katie's with you? Thank you, Eloise! I'll come and collect her straight away."

Tara could hear the smile in the elderly woman's voice, and she let out a sigh of relief. Katie was safe.

"Take your time, dear. She's no trouble at all." The call disconnected.

"She's all right!" His lips curled into a relieved grin. "I don't know whether I should shout at her and paddle her little backside or hug her to death." He drew Tara closer and squeezed gently in demonstration. She pulled away a fraction, to give him a beaming smile. Valentine's Day was looking up. Without warning, Max froze and the smile faded from her face. His large hands moved upward to cup her face, and his blunt fingers traced gently over the purple shadows under her eyes.

"Not been sleeping well, sweetheart?"

Her eyes closed as she tried to hide the truth from him—that without him, she was barely functioning let alone living.

He read her with ease. "Me neither," he admitted in a whisper.

Tara started when his lips closed over hers, and her eyes flickered open. She could scarcely believe that Max held her, kissed her. And she was afraid to hope.

"Sweetheart, I love you. Please, whatever it is bothering you—we can work it out."

"Oh, Max," she half sobbed, half laughed. "I'm sorry. I love you so much."

Soft, gentle lips became ravenous and greedy as they held each other tight. It had been so long.

"Max," she protested finally, feeling ruffled and out of breath.

He let out a sigh but loosened his hold on her after stealing one more kiss. "You're right. We need to pick up my daughter."

"Our daughter," Tara said.

"Our wedding is on again?" he asked, his dark eyes serious and intent. "You won't change your mind?" A note of caution crept into his voice.

"You still have the license don't you?" He nodded, and she said, "Max, I'm sure. I won't change my mind again. We can talk later tonight after Katie is in bed." Tonight, she'd be honest instead of hiding her head in the sand.

"That sounds great." He reached out and captured her hand in his larger, callused one. "Let's go and collect our daughter."

Tara followed without hesitation, this time sure of herself. She knew another panic attack was unlikely now that she had thought things through. Her career didn't matter. She didn't need to use it as a crutch. A modern woman, she was adaptable and staying at the top didn't matter when compared to the alternative.

Today had shown her that. She knew she'd never forget this day. Valentine's Day would always remind her that the important things in life were Max and Katie and...

A few minutes later, they knocked on his neighbor's door.

"Hello! That didn't take you long," Eloise said, ushering them inside.

A small dark-haired missile flung herself at Max. "Daddy!"

He swung her up into the air, hugging her tiny body to his chest.

"Daddy, you're squeezing me too tight!"

"Sorry, Katie. I'm pleased to see you."

It was then the little girl noticed Tara standing behind her father. "Tara, you came! My wish came true just like you said it would."

Max gave his daughter a blank look but Tara understood. She remembered their discussion about fairy tales, happy endings and the morals each tale carried.

"Katie, why don't you thank Mrs. Jones, and we can go home," Max said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Jones."

The elderly woman beamed. "Come again but next time, check with your father first."

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The three of them sat huddled on Katie's bed while Max read the fairy tale out aloud.

"The end," he said.

"One more?" Katie wheedled.

"Tomorrow," Max said. "Besides, this bed is a little cramped now. I think Tara must have spent the whole of the last month eating."

Tara aimed for indignant but ended up blushing and ducking her head instead. "I was hungry," she defended herself and her weight gain.

"Well, that's all right. Katie and I don't mind if you grow a little chubby. We'll love you just the same, won't we, Katie?"

Katie bolted upright in her bed, a beam spreading across her face. "Are we getting married again?" she demanded, looking from one adult to the other seeking confirmation.

"Yes, we are." Max grinned at his daughter.

"When?" Katie asked. "Soon?"

Max looked over at Tara, a hot look in his dark eyes. "Very soon," he said. "Maybe even at the weekend."

"Oh wow!" The little girl's eyes shone with happiness. "It's ending like a fairy tale."

Max kissed Tara on the cheek and ruffled her dark curls. "Sure is, Katie."

"Tara, can I call you Mummy when we're all married?"

Tara swallowed at the wave of tenderness that engulfed her. This time she knew she was doing the right thing. "If you want to," she said to Katie. "I'd like that."

Katie snuggled back down in her blankets. "I am going to like having a Mummy," she said through a big yawn.

As they crept from the room, Tara wondered if Katie would like the idea of a new baby brother or sister.

They walked downstairs and turned into the den, intending to sit out on the deck and watch the sun set.

"Happy Valentine's Day, sweetheart," Max said.

“You remembered?”

“Hard to forget with all the red roses and chocolates everywhere. I didn’t get you anything.”

“It’s not important. I have you.” It was nothing less than the truth.

Tara cuddled up to Max on the padded swing, breathing in his seductive scent and feeling content for the first time in over a month. Then, taking a deep breath, she pulled away so she could see his face.

“Ah, Max, about that weight-gain...”

## **Biography**

Shelley lives in New Zealand, with her husband and a small, bossy dog named Scotty.

Typical New Zealanders, Shelley and her husband left home for their big OE soon after they married (translation of New Zealand-speak: big overseas experience). A year long adventure lengthened to six years of roaming the world. Enduring memories include being almost sat on by a mountain gorilla in Rwanda, lazing on white sandy beaches in India, whale watching in Alaska, searching for leprechauns in Ireland, and dealing with ghosts in an English pub.

While travel is still a big attraction, these days Shelley is most likely found in front of her computer following another love—that of writing stories of romance and adventure. Other interests include watching rugby and rugby league (strictly for research purposes \*grin\*), being walked by the dog, and curling up with a good book.

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