

~ Red Tide ~

by A. K. Naten

Disclaimers - Mine. Warnings - No beta, no time. Advance apologies for errors. I don't really write that much anymore, so I'm out of shape.

Summary - You may recognize these characters from my (one and only) published novel, *Turning Tides* (available from Regal Crest publishing:

http://www.regalcrest.biz/author_page.php?author=Naten). Continuing-saga ideas and blurbs about these two have been sitting on my hard drive for years, so I thought I'd take this one out, shake the dust off, and re-work it a little for V-Day at the Academy of Bards.

I welcome comments that won't hurt my feelings: a_k_naten@yahoo.com . Thanks for reading.

Seven months.

Depending on how you looked at that time frame, it could either feel like an eternity, or the mere blink of an eye.

For M. J. Whitton, it felt just about right.

Two and a half years ago, her tumultuous, scandalous office affair with Allison Riley ended when Allison left the company where they both worked. M.J. had screwed things up badly, and Allison shocked them both by abruptly cutting the strings and departing. Then, a little over a year ago, the tides turned and fate intervened when the two ran into each other at a holiday business gathering. Dormant desires and still-simmering feelings made themselves known, and the flames of a romance that had never fully died were rekindled. This time, though, the current would flow in their favor.

Both acknowledged they'd made tragic mistakes in the past, mistakes that could not be repeated if they were to have a chance. So they vowed to try harder, to be honest and open and talk things out rather than make assumptions and walk away in anger or confusion. Each had come to realize how deeply they loved one another, and each agreed that it was their destiny to be together. Vowing to do things differently this time, Allison and M.J. began their relationship anew.

They spent the next six months learning each other all over again, steadily growing closer as they strengthened the bond between them. When Allison's apartment lease expired in July, M.J. surprised herself by immediately asking the blonde to move in with her. Allison was surprised as well, but happily accepted the invitation. That had been seven months ago.

It had been an adjustment for both. Being lovers and spending occasional nights at each other's houses is quite different to moving in and sharing space and lives, 24/7. Allison had very little personal space requirement, and M.J. had too much. Through compromise and accommodation, they worked out the kinks. Both agreed that they would take things slowly and not push too much too soon. It was all working out. Things were progressing wonderfully.

M.J.'s lips twitched in a smile as she sped along the highway that led her home, a light February rain just beginning to fall.

Home. It had come to mean something completely different now that Allison lived with her. It meant warmth and security. Happiness and joy. It meant love and contentment. M.J. was very content, and very happy.

She gave a sideways glance to the bag that sat on the passenger seat and smiled again. Valentine's Day was tomorrow, and she could hardly wait to give Allison her gift. The blonde would probably scold her for buying the gorgeous diamond necklace that lay in a long velvet-lined box inside the bag, but that was nothing new.

M.J. frequently bought things for Allison - big things and little things - and Alli usually fussed at her for it, saying she should stop spoiling her. M.J. wasn't intentionally trying to spoil her, or impress her, or anything silly like that. She did it just because she wanted to. Just because she loved her.

The executive had spotted the pretty 5-carat tennis necklace after Christmas was well over, so she hesitated buying it, knowing Alli would scold her. However, once she remembered Valentine's Day, she was provided with the perfect excuse. The lovely piece of bling had been impatiently hiding at her office for more than a month.

The brunette grinned wider and pressed the accelerator a little harder, eager to get home.

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Finally arriving at the house, M.J. pulled her car up to the garage and hit the door opener. She smiled as Allison's car came into view. Anymore, she disliked arriving home first and finding the house empty. Entering a house that was warm, alive and filled with Alli's presence was so much nicer.

Exiting her car, M.J. stealthily took her gift bag and hid it in one of the cabinets in the garage. Inordinately pleased with herself, M.J. was nearly gliding on air as she entered the house and walked into the kitchen.

"Hellooooo, I'm home." She didn't listen for an answer, her attention instead going to the wonderful smell emanating from the stovetop. She plopped her briefcase on the counter and walked over to investigate the large pot sitting atop the stove.

Opening the lid, M.J. sniffed the steam as it wafted from the kettle. "Mmm," she hummed aloud. Picking up the wooden spoon that lay nearby, the tall brunette dipped it into the pot and took a sip of the savory concoction.

"Hey! Get outta there!" Allison scolded in her soft southern lilt as she entered the room and delivered a swat to her lover's bottom.

M.J. smiled and turned around to face her attacker. "Mmm, tastes yummy." She grinned and

smacked her lips before leaning in for a welcome home kiss. "Almost as yummy as you," she added, quickly stealing another kiss.

"Sweet talker," Alli grinned. "Gimme my spoon." She snatched the implement out of M.J.'s hand and turned her attention to the pot, stirring it carefully.

"Whatcha cookin' up here, chef?" M.J. asked as she pressed lightly against Alli's back, her hands resting on slender hips as she peered over her shoulder.

"Homemade clam chowder."

"Ooo, homemade? Aren't you quite the little Susy Homemaker?" M.J. kissed Alli's neck as the blonde chuckled softly. Walking over to the refrigerator, M.J. grabbed herself a bottle of water. "Y'know, you've always said that your mother wasn't a very good cook, so how is it that you know how to make all this kind of stuff?"

"It's called following a recipe, honey. Anybody can do that. Even you," Alli teased playfully over her shoulder.

M.J. took a slug of her water and frowned. "Hey, I know how to cook some things."

Allison grinned. "You know how to cook scrambled eggs, baby. That's it."

"You don't like my eggs?" The brunette pretended to be hurt.

Allison flashed a sweetly placating look. "I love your eggs, honey."

M.J. smirked and walked up behind Alli, pressing against her again as she snaked both hands under her arms and gently grasped handfuls of soft breasts. "*Mmm*, I love *your* eggs too," she growled, noisily kissing Alli's neck.

"*Ooo!*" Allison giggled, wiggling against her lover and making her laugh. "Are we feeling frisky this evening, Ms. Whitton?"

"Mm-hmm, I think we may be." M.J. kissed Alli's neck again and dropped her hands, giving her lover's bottom a gentle squeeze and then a pat before turning away and walking to the counter where she began sifting through the day's mail.

"So, how was your day today?" Allison asked as she continued to stir the chowder.

"Mm, the usual," M.J. shrugged as she methodically opened one envelope after another. "How was yours?"

"Okay. Didn't have to fire anyone or anything."

"Well that's good." M.J.'s customary response brought a knowing smile to Alli's lips.

Allison was getting to know all of M.J.'s tendencies and quirks quite well, and she knew the dark-haired woman didn't like to discuss work very much, preferring to leave office business at the office. Alli didn't know why she still asked the question. Probably because it was the customary thing one asked after a long day of work. It was silly, but it was just one of the many automatic routines they'd both gotten into since living together. Alli thought it made them seem like a typical domestic couple. That notion made her warm inside.

Allison turned around and gazed at her lover, admiring her tall, striking form. She was filled with satisfaction and smiled happily, knowing that the form belonged entirely to her. "Has anyone told you how incredibly good you look today?"

"Why no, as a matter of fact, no one said a thing." M.J. turned and arched a mischievous eyebrow at Alli. "Can you imagine that?"

Allison grinned wide. "Well, I'll say it then; you look amazingly *hot* today, dear. I think it's that beautiful navy blue suit that does it for you."

"Mm, yes. This is a lovely suit, isn't it?" M.J. bantered as she turned around and struck a model-like pose before approaching Alli.

"Mm-hmm, it's gorgeous. I heard your *girlfriend* bought it for you. She has fabulous taste, I must say." Alli batted her eyes playfully.

M.J. flashed a devilish grin. "Oh, indeed she does. She is *my* girlfriend, after all."

"Oh!" Allison said, feigning indignance.

M.J. started laughing and quickly wrapped her arms around Alli's waist, placing her lips on the tender skin at the back of Alli's neck, growling and suckling noisily.

"Hey!" Allison swatted playfully at M.J.'s head. "Stop, you beast!"

M.J. chuckled and pressed her face into soft blonde hair, kissing Allison's head and hugging her firmly. "It still sounds funny to me, you know."

"What does?" Alli asked, not turning around.

"To hear 'my girlfriend'. It sounds so...I dunno. High schoolie or something."

"Well, what would you rather hear?" Alli asked, slowly stirring the contents of the pot again. "Lover? Significant other?"

M.J. shrugged and stood against Alli's back, lightly resting her chin on a narrow shoulder. "I dunno." She closed her eyes, feeling peaceful.

Alli halted her stirring, staring for a moment into the pot as she contemplated her next statement. "Well...you could say...fiancee." Her voice was quietly tentative, but carried a hopeful edge.

M.J.'s eyes flew open wide as Alli's words dashed away her peace.

She and Allison had discussed 'it' - marriage - only once, and it scared M.J. half to death. It wasn't that she felt uncertain about her love for Alli, because she didn't. It was just the idea of marriage itself that made the brunette nervous as hell. Allison, on the other hand, was a romantic at heart, as well as a bit old-fashioned. M.J. knew that her lover would eventually want to make things permanent, so she would have to overcome her fear sooner or later. And she would overcome it. She'd do it for Allison, because of Allison.

Even though M.J. knew in her heart that Alli was the one for her, they had made a deal to take things slowly. M.J. had therefore assumed it to be understood that long-term issues, like 'it', wouldn't be brought up...at least not now. The subject's sudden appearance took her by surprise, and surprise made her edgy.

Keenly aware of the dangerous and sensitive territory they were treading in, M.J. tried to keep her voice even. "Uh, yeah, I suppose you could say that, if we were engaged." She turned her face so that she could bury her nose in Alli's hair again, subconsciously trying to hide.

"Mm-hmm." Alli merely hummed her response while M.J. held her breath and waited for the other shoe to drop. Alli silently stirred the pot for a few moments before adding, "It would be nice, don't you think?"

M.J. closed her eyes as the shoe noisily clattered against the floor inside her head. "What would be nice?" She played dumb and held her breath again.

"Being a fiancee."

The soft-spoken hopefulness in Alli's voice constricted M.J.'s heart. She quickly tried to formulate a response that wouldn't get her into trouble, nor promise anything she wasn't ready for. "Uhm, maybe, I guess...I dunno." She immediately rolled her eyes at her ridiculous response.

Alli gave a soft snort and finally turned around to face her lover. "You 'guess'?" She was smiling and her voice held an edge of humor rather than anger.

M.J. dropped her arms and shrugged, nervously forcing a half-grin on her lips. "I don't know. What do you expect me to say to that? I mean, what are *you* trying to say, exactly?" Her words were rapid and she felt a little like she was being backed into a corner.

"Don't freak out, babe." Alli placed a hand on M.J.'s arm and squeezed gently.

"I'm not freaking out," M.J. retorted quickly.

Allison grinned. "Yes you are. You have that look of sheer panic in your eyes." She walked over

to the refrigerator and pulled out a pitcher of iced tea, pouring herself a glass. "I'm not saying I want to go pack our bags and elope tonight or anything drastic like that, I'm just saying..." she shrugged as she turned back. "It's something I think about once in awhile." Deep jade eyes looked up at panicked blue. "Don't you ever think about it?"

M.J. leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms firmly. "I dunno. Maybe, I guess. I don't *know*."

"Don't get so defensive, hon," Alli's soothed as she came to stand in front of M.J., reaching out to unclasp her tightly-wound arms.

"I'm not defensive," M.J. snapped unconvincingly. "And don't start the head-shrinker routine, please. I don't like it when you do that."

"I'm not head-shrinking you, baby, I'm just talking to you. It's okay to just *talk* about this, you know." Alli gently stroked M.J.'s arms, not wanting things to turn unpleasant.

Allison had become very adept at diffusing M.J.'s notorious temper, and the brunette was well aware of her skills. Alli wasn't trying to agitate her lover, she just wanted to see if she could broach the subject of something they'd discussed only one time before - a time which ended abruptly when the commitment-phobic M.J. got too wigged out. Alli knew that M.J.'s defenses went up when she was nervous, so she wanted to keep the subject light and casual, showing M.J. that they could talk about 'it' without etching anything in stone.

"All I'm saying is that sometimes, once in awhile, I think about some day getting engaged and married." Alli's voice was calm and soft. "And I mean 'some day', as in 'down the road sometime'. Okay?" She quirked a sweet grin as she peered into M.J.'s eyes, trying to make her see that she was being completely light-hearted about it.

M.J. sighed and dropped her eyes, her hands coming to rest on the counter edge on either side of her body. "Okay, okay. I get it."

"Okay." Allison smiled wide and reached up on her tiptoes to deliver a tender kiss before turning away to fetch something out of a kitchen cupboard.

Running a hand through her hair, M.J. was just breathing a deep sigh of relief when Allison stepped back in front of her.

"So...you promise not to freak out if I give you your Valentine's Day gift?"

"What?" Alarms again sounded inside M.J.'s head. "It's not Valentine's Day yet."

"I know," Allison said as she held her hand out, revealing a square, red ring box, "but I can't wait." The color drained from M.J.'s face as she stared wide-eyed at the object. "Open it," Alli whispered.

"Allison-"

"Just open it. Please."

M.J.'s heart was pounding and she gave her lover a long look, not understanding what would possess Alli to take such a bold step. Seeing only love in the green-blue eyes, the executive took a deep breath and reached for the box. As she pried the lid open, a half-chewed/half-sucked candy ring pop appeared before her eyes. M.J. could only frown, utterly baffled.

Alli started to giggle, unable to help herself. "Happy early Valentine's Day."

M.J. looked at her, still frowning with confusion. Allison was just jerking her chain? About getting married? She didn't get it. "I don't understand."

"It's just a little joke, honey." Alli giggled again and reached out to touch M.J.'s arm.

"I don't see the humor." And M.J. really didn't.

"Oh M.J., come on, geez!" Alli rubbed her lover's arm, wanting to calm her before she freaked. "I was *kidding*, okay? I'm just *teasing* you...just having fun with the big, bad 'M' word, that's all." She smiled and reassuringly squeezed her arm.

M.J. gave an exasperated sigh and flicked the box onto the counter. "That's not a very nice thing to tease about," she said, her voice mildly scolding.

Alli looked at her contritely. "I'm sorry," she giggled softly, "I just want you to lighten up about it, that's all."

Still feeling some annoyance, M.J. pursed her lips and glanced away.

Allison quickly maneuvered in-between M.J.'s legs and laid her body against the taller frame, wrapping her arms around her lover's back and hugging her gently. "Don't be mad at me, baby."

"I'm not mad," M.J. said, her irritation easing as soon as Allison's body touched hers.

"Then talk to me and tell me what you really think about *'it'*."

Bright, smiling eyes looked up at her and M.J. knew she couldn't be upset with Allison for trying to make her talk about things. They had promised to try to be more open, and she owed her lover that. She drew a deep breath, thinking carefully before she answered. "I think...we've only been living together a few months. And I think that getting engaged would be...too much too soon."

Alli nodded. "I know, and I agree. That's why I'm saying, not right now, but maybe down the road."

A dark eyebrow arched sharply. "How far away is your idea of 'down the road'?"

"I dunno." Allison laughed lightly and shrugged. "I don't want to put a timeframe on it, hon. I'm just saying, it's something I'd really like to be some day."

"Be'?"

"Yeah," Alli smiled softly, "I'd like to be your wife."

M.J. paused and let those words wash over her. To her surprise, it did not send her into a state of panic. Instead, it suffused her with warmth and peace. Maybe she could let go of her fear sooner than she thought?

A small smile finally tugged at the corner of M.J.'s mouth. "Well, when you put it that way," she looked down at Allison, "it doesn't sound *so* bad."

Allison's eyes shone bright with adoration. "I love you," she whispered as she reached up to press a kiss on her lover's lips.

"I love you too." M.J. took the blonde into her arms, fitting their bodies together as they kissed long and deep.

Finally breaking apart, M.J. delivered one more kiss before whispering, "So, is that chowder ready yet? I'm starved."

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