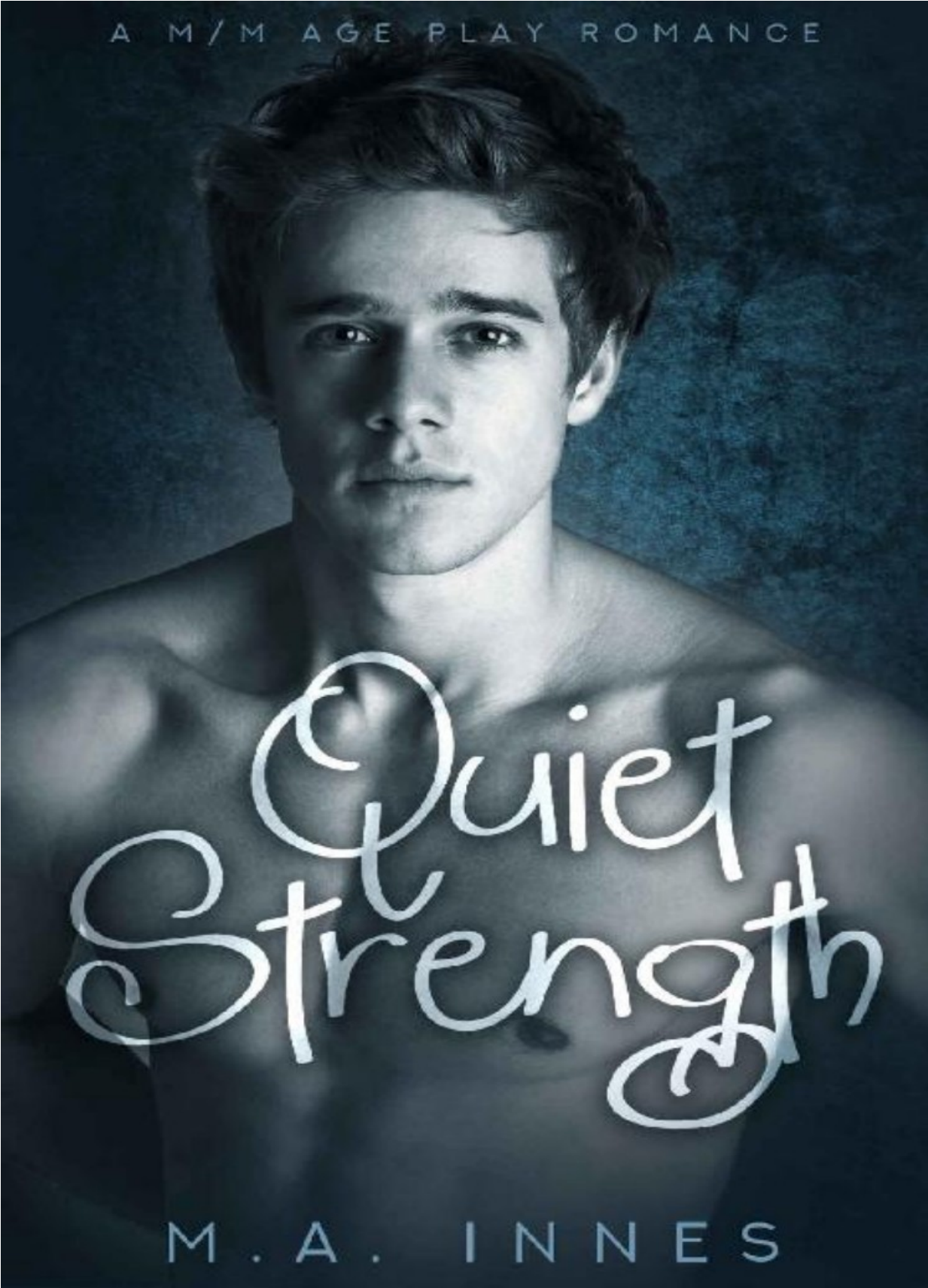


A M/M AGE PLAY ROMANCE

Quiet
Strength

M . A . I N N E S

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Quiet Strength

M.A. Innes

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QUIET STRENGTH

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Chapter 1

Eric

Nathan was trying to kill me.

“Was I not supposed to ask?” He blinked at me, curious and almost innocent, like he had no idea why I was choking to death on the fry I’d just eaten. “I’m good with whatever it is. I’ve been researching different preferences and fetishes. People are weird.”

I finally managed to take a breath without coughing and reached out to take a sip of my water. Of course, I wasn’t stalling, I was just *very* thirsty. When I couldn’t put it off anymore, I had a hard time figuring out what to say. “You’re *people* too, don’t forget that part.”

So maybe I hadn’t actually answered his question. I was hoping that with his habit of conversation-hopping, he wouldn’t realize it until later. It didn’t seem to be working, though. He smiled and nodded, clearly not fazed by the idea of being *weird*. “Very true. But Gabriel likes it too, so I’m okay with that.” Then his voice lost some of his usual excitement and he started mumbling. “At least, I thought I was...I probably am.” I didn’t like the sound of that. I jumped back into the conversation before I could talk myself out of it. “Are you having second thoughts about what he wants?”

Gabriel hadn’t seemed like the kind of guy...master...who would push Nathan into something he didn’t want, and Marcus had nothing but great things to say about the guy. However, I didn’t want Nathan dragged into something he wasn’t ready for.

Nathan looked slightly frustrated and shook his head. “No, not really. It’s a lot to take in, I think.”

That had to be an understatement.

I could understand why he liked being taken care of, but the whole puppy aspect of it was hard to wrap my mind around. I was doing my best

to keep the image of Nathan dressed up out of my head, but it was hard. My imagination kept trying to run wild, and I didn't appreciate it. Damn thing had a mind of its own.

Was he having the same trouble?

The idea that he was trying to picture me in my little boy persona made my stomach swirl. Suddenly, I wasn't sure the fried food had been a good idea. Nathan perked up in his seat again, leaning forward with more excitement. "Being his pup the other night was hot. Hands down, it beat every regular date I've ever gone on. Like, no contest."

As odd as the conversation was, I was glad he'd found something that made him happy. He'd been...*lost* for so long that finally figuring out what felt right must have been a huge relief. "You hadn't really seemed to click with anything or anyone before. I'm glad you're finally figuring it out."

He'd dated around, but it had always seemed haphazard and random. A guy here...a girl there...no one that really seemed to matter to him. It probably should have occurred to me that he might be into something different, but even if I'd made the connection, I'm not sure I could have said anything back then.

I didn't always see what made Daddy so proud of me, but even I had to admit I was more confident now than I'd ever been. A few years ago, or even a few months, I wouldn't have been able to work up the nerve to sit with Nathan if he'd known what I was into.

It would have been impossible.

Nathan lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. "I couldn't figure out what everyone was talking about when they'd go on and on about how hot something was. Looking back, I guess it was because that take-charge thing that Gabriel has going was missing. I like going out to dinner and stuff, but the domination thing adds something special to it."

I'd always known how hot the "take-charge thing" was, so I could understand what Nathan meant. He was usually so lost in his own mind that it would have taken a two-by-four to the head to have made him realize what he was missing. "I can understand that. No matter what alternative lifestyle you're into, it's hard to think through it all, to begin with."

I couldn't help remembering high school and how hard it'd been. Not wanting to go down that path, I tried to shove the memories away. They didn't matter anymore. I had Daddy, and I knew how much he loved me.

"He was so sexy. All dommy and take-charge." Nathan's dramatic sigh pulled me back. His eyes had a faraway look, like he was remembering something naughty.

I tried not to laugh. It was impossible not to relax around Nathan. "Take-charge is hot."

"So am I not supposed to ask about what you guys are into? What are the rules about that?" He leaned forward and blinked, curious and innocent again like he had no idea he'd made my heart stop completely.

I was fighting the blush I knew was heating up my face. Hoping that it would fade faster if I wasn't looking at Nathan, I reached for a fry. There was a big part of me that wanted to run, but I could hear Daddy's voice in the back of my head, soothing and low, telling me how proud of me he was. I knew what he'd want me to say—but I wasn't sure how much I'd actually manage to get out.

I started with something simple. "Well, I wouldn't ask just anyone, and most of the time if you're at a club or someone's house it's usually kind of obvious. It's not *wrong* to ask, though."

Nathan didn't seem to believe me. He gave me a cautious look and started fiddling with his food. "You don't have to tell me. Gabriel would probably say it's none of my business. He's right, but we're not going to tell him that."

His almost whispered confession made me laugh. Tossing my squishy fry back on my plate, I relaxed back in my seat. I could do this. "D—Marcus said I should tell you. He said that it would help you to have someone to talk to who understood what you were going through. When I was first starting to explore my sexuality, I didn't have anyone who would get it, so he's probably right."

I was fighting to push the ghosts back where they belonged, and it took me a second before I could keep going. Nathan must have thought he'd done something wrong, because he frowned and his eyebrows pulled together. "Listen, it's—"