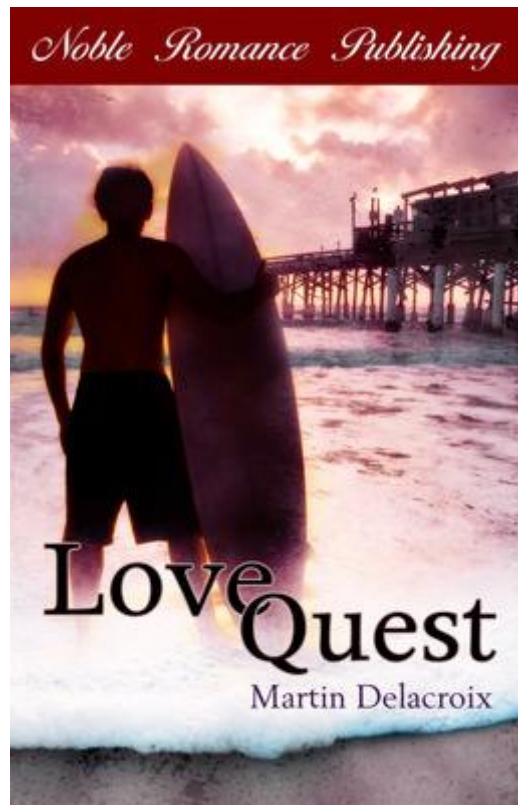


Love Quest - Martin Delacroix



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Eighteen year old Jamie Bliss ages out of the foster care system, a victim of repeated sexual abuses. After hustling tricks and living on the street for a time, Jamie enters into a couple of abusive relationships before meeting Evan and Frederick, a gay couple who become Jamie's mentors. Can they help Jamie overcome his destructive past? His low self esteem? And when Evan introduces Jamie to Evan's colleague, Jack, a young school teacher who pursues Jamie's affection, can Jamie open his heart to Jack? Despite the bad cards life has dealt Jamie, is he still capable of love? Excerpt: Jack exchanges glances with Evan, then he asks me, "Are your nerves rattled easily?" I shake my head. "Why?" "Spending the day with a roomful of eight-year-olds can test your patience. Do you like children?" "I don't know," I say. "I haven't been around them much." Evan says, "We can change that. One day, when you don't have classes, you can shadow me or Jack at school. You'll get a feel for what we do and what the kids are like. Sound good?" I say, "That would be great." It's still drizzling when the evening ends. I'm dressed now and my hair is dry, and while I thank Frederick and Evan for the nice time, Jack offers me a ride home. "There's no reason you should get wet again," he says. We place my bike in the bed of his

dented pickup truck. The cab smells like stale beer and old shoes and the dashboard has a crack in it. A paper bag from a fast food place rests upon the floorboard, along with several soda cans, all crushed. There's a gun rack behind my head and a "Dale Earnhardt: R.I.P. #8" sticker on the rear window. Jack twists the key two or three times before the truck's engine turns over. He switches on the defroster, and while we wait for the windshield to clear, I study his profile. He has a fine-cut nose and full lips. I look at the backs of his hands, at the blue veins snaking across them. His fingers are long and large-knuckled, and once we're on the road he chews a hangnail. "Don't bite yourself," I tell him. "It's not healthy." He looks at me and rolls his eyes. "You ever smoke cigarettes?" I shake my head. "I quit a couple of months ago and it hasn't been easy." He slaps his belly. "All I want to do is eat." "Grits and cornbread?" He laughs. "You think I'm a redneck, don't you?" "Well, your truck" He looks at me and his eyebrows gather. "What?" "It's a mess." He giggles. "Where I come from, everybody's truck is like this." I jerk a thumb. "What's with the gun rack?" "If you hunt deer you need one." We come to a stoplight and I try to imagine Jack in camouflage clothes, toting a rifle with a scope on it. "I don't like guns," I say. I talk about Nate and his weapons collection. "That's entirely different," Jack says. "An Uzi is used to kill people." "You don't feel guilty when you shoot a deer?" He shakes his head. "I've got three brothers and two sisters. My family would go hungry if they didn't hunt." We come to my place and I lift my bike from the bed of Jack's truck. I thank him for the ride and he says good night and backs into the street. Moments later, when Jack is gone, I stand like a statue in the driveway, blinking, while rain tickles my cheeks and drips off the end of my nose. Hollowness fills my chest and sadness creeps over me and (damn it) I almost feel like crying. I know it's crazy, 'cause I only just met him, but I miss Jack.

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