

What Could Have Been

By: Austin Huibers



Chapter 1 - First Glance

Gregory first noticed Asil over a coffee mug. She had her hoodie pulled up, the strings dangling like tiny barriers, and a faint smirk tugging at her lips. He had always been awkward with people, carrying old wounds that made him unsure if he deserved connection. But something about her quiet strength-her calm in a world that screamed-pulled him in.

“Hey,” he said, voice cracking a little.

She glanced up, eyebrow raised. “Hey,” she replied, not unkind, just cautious.

It wasn’t much-a shared smile, a mutual reach for the same mug-but when she laughed, a small, almost hidden sound, Gregory felt his chest expand in a way it hadn’t in years.

For months after, he replayed that laugh in his head. He didn’t know it yet, but the smallest ordinary moments with her would become the anchor he would cling to.

Chapter 2 - Gaming and Coffee

Evenings became theirs. Gregory brought his laptop; she brought her console. They shared headphones, controllers, snacks, and the quiet understanding of two people who didn't need to fill the air with chatter to feel together.

She hated certain fabrics-scratchy blankets, stiff jeans-but would wear what he bought if it was soft enough. She gamed with laser focus, sometimes ignoring him, sometimes glancing at him mid-match with a smirk that made his heart skip.

Mornings were coffee on the deck. Red sunlight spilled across the boards. Plants thrived under his care, and she watched in the most supportive manner. He didn't have to speak to feel close to her; he just needed to be near. Although he often spoke a lot

Chapter 3 - The House in the Woods

Three months in, they moved into the white house tucked into the corner of the woods. The red deck, crowded with potted plants, became their sanctuary. Gregory unpacked carefully, imagining a life where love wasn't fleeting. Asil preferred the simplicity of it all-less decoration, fewer reminders of permanence-but let him have his touches.

For Gregory, every night meant sleeping beside her. Every morning, waking beside her. It felt like a miracle, even though he carried the weight of past anxieties, old scars that whispered he wasn't enough. Here, in the quiet woods, with the soft hum of life outside, he almost believed he could be.

Chapter 4 - The Lake

They went to the lake most evenings in summer. She hated swimming-the cold, the floatiness, the way the water made her feel untethered-but she let him hold her hand and sit on the PVC swim boundary while the sun disappeared behind the trees.

The water lapped softly against their toes. Gregory didn't speak much; he didn't need to. He held her hand, feeling the pulse of life in her fingers, knowing this small gesture meant she trusted him, that for a fleeting moment, she was willing to let herself be seen.

"The water is freezing," she whispered.

"I know," he said softly. He knew she didn't want to be there, but the fact she did meant the world to him.

She laughed quietly, shaking her head, her eyes glinting with something he could never name. And for a few hours, everything felt infinite.

Chapter 5 - Roots and Routines

Gregory's favorite part of each day was coming home. He loved the smell of the forest brushing against the house, the sight of her on the red deck watering plants, the small comfort of knowing he'd fall asleep beside her, wake beside her.

Even at 2 a.m., he could wake her to show her a photo of deer grazing on the lawn. "Look! Deer!" he whispered, shaking the phone.

She blinked, groggy and unimpressed, but didn't push him away. She let him share the world with her in those moments-the way she let him share his life, even with all its cracks and anxieties.

Chapter 6 - Fabric and Fire

One night, a blanket irritated her. The fabric scratched her skin. Gregory reached out instinctively, to comfort her. She flinched.

“I love you,” he said, voice tight. “No matter what.”

Her eyes softened, but she looked scared. “That’s what scares me,” she whispered.

Even in his deep love, he began to realize that love could hurt just as much as it could heal. And she, for all her warmth and quiet strength, had walls he couldn’t climb-not yet.

Chapter 7 - Future Talks

Gregory began to imagine forever. Marriage. Kids. A home full of laughter.

“You’d be an incredible mom,” he said one evening, running a hand through his hair. “You’d make a an amazing wife, too.”

She stiffened. “Don’t,” she said quietly. “Don’t make me someone I’m not ready to be.”

He didn’t understand why his words, meant as love, felt like pressure. Every vision of the future he painted was a wall to her, even though she loved him too, in her own quiet way. But in time he’d come to find out that’s just how she was.

Chapter 8 - Silence in the Woods

The house grew quiet. They ate dinner in separate rooms, lingered on the deck with coffee in silence, swam in the lake without speaking and eventually slept separate. Their love remained, but it was fragile, tense, like a thread stretched thin.

Gregory worried. Asil pulled back. He tried to understand, tried to be patient, tried to hold the fleeting moments tight enough to keep them alive. She tried too, but sometimes love wasn't enough to bridge the gap between them.

Chapter 9 - The Goodbye

One morning, Gregory woke to an empty apartment. The red deck glowed in the morning sun, the plants thriving, untouched. On the counter was a note in her neat handwriting:

“You loved me like I was safe. I wish I’d been brave enough to stay.”

He sat on the deck for hours, the forest around him breathing, grieving quietly. He realized love isn’t always enough, even when it’s real.

Chapter 10 - What We Were

Months later, he returned to the lake, to the house, to the red deck. The PVC boundary floated empty in the water, reflecting sunlight like a memory. He read her note one last time, folded it neatly, slipped it into his wallet, and smiled softly.

“You were right,” he whispered. “I didn’t need to fix you. I just needed to love myself the way I loved you.”

He drove away, leaving the white house behind, carrying the warmth of a love that had been fleeting but true. Some loves aren’t meant to last. Some loves are meant to change you forever. They would see each other in passing at work, but it would never be the same and he always thought to himself “What could have been?”.

Authors Thoughts

Some love stories aren't meant to last but that doesn't make them any less real.

Gregory and Asil were flawed, broken, and human, yet for a short time, they truly saw each other. Love isn't always grand gestures or forever. Sometimes it's waking someone at 2 a.m. to show a deer on the lawn, holding hands on a lake, or quiet mornings on a red deck surrounded by plants.

This story is for anyone who's loved so deeply it hurts for years after and for the fleeting moments that change us forever.