

Never Give Up On Love
by Quensetta Williams

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1. Chapter

The dog walker had just called to say she would be arriving a little late to pick up Goldie, her tawny colored Pomeranian, for her morning trot through Central Park. Normally Grace would be upset, but today she seemed too caught up in her own world to really be as concerned about it as she would usually be. Lately she had been moping about her condo overlooking the park. Finally she settled into one of the burgundy overstuffed Louis XIV chairs that she fell for and was dying to have no matter the cost.

Although Grace had been famous as a theater actress for the past 10 years, she still clearly remembers her not so affluent upbringing in Hoboken, New Jersey and sometimes still needed to give herself permission to spend money. Tall and thin with a graceful walk from years of training at academies in New York and abroad, she glanced at the envelope she received earlier that week that had been the cause for her moodiness; the wedding invitation. One of her close friends, Amanda, was preparing to walk down the aisle soon, and although Grace was genuinely happy for her, she was also reminded of how lonely she really was. She wanted the same love, one that was promised forever.

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She decided to brush off her melancholy and focus on her schedule for that evening. Her personal assistant made the arrangements to have her custom designed mink shawl delivered as well as the silver studded Versace gown with the plunging neckline. That should show everyone that she's still got it, she thought to herself. Those award shows can be a bore sometimes but she had to admit she still enjoyed the glamorous lifestyle. Who could refuse a night when the spotlight is on you, the champagne never stops flowing and the best actors in the industry are there and can't wait to meet you, hanging on your every word.

But despite all this she was desperately hoping to see Alexander at the event. She knew deep down inside that she needed to get over him, but the memory of the beautiful love they shared together in Venice never left her. Especially when he whispered in her ear during the moonlit gondola ride that he couldn't live without her. She kept replaying that romantic encounter in her head repeatedly. Even though it was over a year ago, it always felt like last night to Grace.

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Unfortunately things didn't turn out to be that simple. When Alexander announced his cast was going on a European tour, she pretended to be happy for him, but she knew that would likely be the end of their relationship. Her intuition couldn't be further from the truth, particularly when she found out about the actress that was accompanying him in more ways than one.

She and Alex had been rivals for years, in addition they were the best of friends as well as lovers. Thinking that he wasn't the type of man that would be intimidated by a strong, talented woman that took her career seriously may have been her downfall she started to think. She may have been more obsessed with herself than she was willing to admit. After all, Grace Madison was a beauty that took most men's breath away, with emerald green eyes that sparkled like jewels. She had many bachelors, as well as some men that were not, on the set as well as in the theatrical community bidding for love. The problem was she was bored with most of them.

Alexander was different. He played a little hard to get, but that's what intrigued her. Also he was intelligent and had a real raw acting talent that sometimes left her speechless.

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Grace was making her rounds through the crowded ballroom shaking hands and showcasing her signature smile. It was professional but still had the appearance of being warm and genuine. Those acting lessons really paid off, she was thinking to herself. At the moment she started sipping her champagne she could have sworn she overheard the voice of Jillian, the bit part actress that stole her beloved Alexander's attention. That can't be right, she thought, why would she be here if they ran off together? Also if she is here, did she come with Alex?

Suddenly Grace's heart started thumping so hard in her chest, she thought she could actually hear it in her head. She slowly turned, not wanting to seem alarmed or create a scene. That's exactly what the paparazzi and critics would love to see. She could see the front page of the New Yorker displaying a less than flattering photo of her or worse being the new feature on those horrid tabloid magazines she despised.

That annoying, shrill voice was definitely undeniable. But Alex was nowhere to be found. Once she continued to listen she understood why. She decided to intentionally eavesdrop on Jillian's conversation she was having with a colleague.

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Grace tried to keep her eyes from welling up with tears as she listened to Jillian's account of their tour and adventures. Apparently everything started out fine on the tour and she described how they traveled through London and enjoyed the typical sites like Buckingham Palace and viewing Big Ben, which it seemed that Alex enjoyed. Grace knew that Alex liked exploring different cultures and was also a history and architecture buff, so she believed Jillian's story so far.

After England they went off to Paris. They did several shows there and received rave reviews from the audience and local critics. Jillian even bragged, to Grace's dismay, about the starlit nights they enjoyed while strolling through the City of Light as well as excursions to the Louvre and the Palace of Versailles. When Jillian's friend exclaimed how romantic the French extension of their tour must have been, Grace started to become slightly ill since she started to feel the bile come up into her throat. All of a sudden the crisp, bubbly taste of the champagne started to turn sour in her mouth.

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According to Jillian's account, the next stop was Germany, which was unexpected as the touring company wasn't initially certain they would have all the arrangements ready. She was exclaiming how excited she was since that was a destination she always wanted to travel to since she had some family there.

There was much more to the story of course, but Grace was now starting to feel light headed. She quickly excused herself from the small group of actors that were making their way towards her in search of the nearest rest room.

It seemed like an endless walk down the ornately decorated hall and marble staircase to the facilities. Once she finally was able to locate the ladies' room she practically collapsed in one of the purple velvet settees in the foyer area. It wasn't just because she could barely stand hearing Jillian's account of her exploits with her former love, but also the memories started flooding back about the time she and Alexander spent together in Paris.

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The rendezvous was his idea, and they actually just ran away to Paris at the last minute. It surprised her since he could sometimes be aloof, but also unpredictable. He had a tendency to be spontaneous which was a quality that Grace could sometimes find annoying but at other times intoxicating. The memory made her realize it was one of the aspects of his personality that made her fall in love with him in the first place.

They started out with a moonlight stroll over a bridge crossing the Seine. The stars twinkled in the deep blue sky, almost as if they were winking at them in approval of their passionate getaway. They would talk about everything and anything it seemed, except the one topic Grace always seemed to want to avoid, which was marriage.

She would abruptly change the subject to keep from discussing tying the knot or making a long term commitment. It's not that she didn't care deeply for Alex or was against the idea of spending her life with him, she was just afraid. Grace had a deep rooted fear of depending on anyone else for her happiness since she had been disappointed so many times before. Many indiscretions dashed her hopes of true romance whenever she thought the relationship she was in held any promise. Many men used the excuse that's how it was in show business, that people are expected to have additional boyfriends and girlfriends. She was looked at as unrealistic regarding relationships when she first got into the acting game years ago by many of her peers.

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Even though Grace wouldn't give him a straight answer about marriage, she noticed that during their entire trip to Paris, Alex never seemed to be bothered by it. They took long walks and enjoyed people watching while sipping coffee at local bistros and wine in the intimate cafes. The more time Grace spent with him the more she enjoyed his company. The special chocolate massage treatment was also an usual and unexpected delight followed by an intimate encounter they enjoyed all their own until the sun rose the next morning.

Grace often second guessed her hesitation toward even having a discussion regarding the potential of wedded bliss. Part of it was the fact that she worked hard to build her career and didn't want to either share the spotlight or be dismissed from it and be relegated to becoming the "little woman". Also she was used to living on her own and enjoying her lifestyle on her own terms. She went where she wanted, lived in a space designed just for her and had her name name in lights, online and in print. The reality of it was as far as her professional life was concerned she could honestly say she felt fulfilled. Well if her life was so wonderful what was that void she seemed to have inside that made her feel empty? She also realized that that void seemed to be filled whenever Alex was near and they were together.

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Even though Grace had only been in the restroom about 15 minutes, it felt to her like she was away from the crowd for hours. She splashed some cold water on her face, dabbed it with a towel and applied her makeup again, especially her eyeliner and lipstick. In the theater business you never know who's watching. Keeping up her appearance was a huge part of her job and maintaining her career. Plus she knew the competition was always ready to spread gossip about her if she didn't look her best.

Men didn't seem to have that problem as much as women, Grace realized long ago. Alex definitely never did, having just enough character in his face to easily allow him to slip into practically any role. He also had the most intense piercing hazel eyes that seemed to be able to see right through her and know all her most intimate secrets without her ever uttering a single word. He was also tall with large hands and long slender fingers that seemed to almost have a mind of their own when caressing her face or massaging her shoulders after a long, tiring day. She definitely missed his arms around her now and that slight musky smell of the one cologne he always wore.

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Her memory went back to her romantic encounter in France. Not only because she wanted to linger over it a little longer, but she also wasn't ready to go back and face the crowd yet.

One particular day during a scenic walk through the city Alex took her to a restaurant as they were both starting to get hungry. Instead of dining indoors he announced he wanted to have a picnic in the park. He picked out a large wicker basket lined with red and white gingham fabric and had it filled with cheeses, baguettes, meats, grapes, apples and of course red wine. Alex also had arranged for a driver to take them to the outskirts of the city to a area filled with trees and flowers blooming that was to be the location for their romantic meal. After enjoying their lunch, Grace topped off the meal by feeding Alex grapes as they also finished their wine.

It seemed like they couldn't have asked for a better afternoon until they noticed the dark storm clouds that started looming in the sky. Before they could manage to pack up their food and plates and put them into the basket, they were quickly drenched in a downpour. Their driver, even with running over carrying an over sized umbrella, was unable to keep them from getting soaked.

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He opened the rear car door for them to enter and they quickly got into the back seat. Grace and Alex were covering themselves with the wet blanket and giggling like school children who were caught doing something they shouldn't have.

The driver offered to take the sopping wet blanket and told them he had another in the trunk. Once he took it he went around to open the trunk, he noticed the couple curling up closer together even through the ripples from the water pounding the car's rear window. He pulled out the dry blanket and replaced it with the wet one. When he opened the car door he saw Grace And Alex wrapped in each other arms and entwined in a passionate kiss. The driver, an older gentleman, smiled to himself, remembering intimate drives through the countryside he had taken along with his wife. He gently draped the fresh blanket around the couple and closed the door. He decided to take a little walk, after all they obviously needed some privacy.

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Their kissing came to be the start of much more and the foggy windows became a way to shield them from prying eyes. They ended up cuddled in each other's arms, exchanging light gentle kisses. Although this was not their first intimate encounter, Alex had never felt as close to Grace as he did right then. He had thought about proposing to her prior to taking this trip, but at this moment he felt as if he was at one with her, in a different way than he ever had before.

Alex decided not over analyze the situation, he went with his emotions and put his heart out for Grace to see. He told her he loved her more than life itself, that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her at his side and asked her to marry him. He was hoping for a much different response than what he received.

Grace loved Alex, that wasn't really the issue, but she was too insecure then to make a decision. At that point in time she loved her alleged independence more than being married to him. She looked at him first in disbelief, then confusion, and finally she blurted out, "You're asking me to marry you in the back seat of a car? That's not the proposal I was expecting!" Alex had the look of a wounded puppy after her exclamation of disapproval. Although he knew she deserved the best that life has to offer, he would have given her all that and more if she agreed to marry him. Also he wanted to make sure she didn't get blinded and agree to matrimony because of a huge diamond, a home in the Hamptons and all the other trimmings. Despite Alex's fame and wealth he wanted to be sure the woman he would make a commitment to really wanted him first before any material assets. Even though Grace had money of her own, he knew women that expected the man to start being the sole breadwinner and were looking to marry only for money.

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The driver came back soon after from his walk, to a less talkative, more somber couple. As he settled in to the car he asks, "Everything alright?" in English with a heavy French accent. No one in the back seat speaks a word then, or throughout the entire ride back to the restaurant drop off point. That evening was a long one and fortunately for both of them the last night of their trip. But the next morning Alex acted as if nothing ever happened and was helpful in packing both of their suitcases for their return to New York. Grace was wondering if she had made a mistake in her reaction, but decided to just play along and hope that things would just go back to normal between them. Then she was interrupted from her memories of Paris.

An elderly lady entered the rest room that worked with the concierge service at the ballroom. She saw Grace looking as if she were literally in another world and asked if she needed anything. Grace said no, that she'll be out in a minute. The woman mentioned that people were looking for her and had wondered if she had left. "There's a lot of talk out there about your friend Alex, I just thought you may want to know", the woman said to her, with a sense of concern.

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Grace's eyes grew wide and forgetting to keep her secure, detached demeanor hurriedly rushed past the woman in the rest room and quickly walked back to the ballroom. Some of her colleagues' eyes met hers, and they appeared to be uncomfortable, as if they were looking at someone who they didn't want to share bad news with. One of her colleagues, Ted, whom she had a fun, flirtatious connection with that neither of them took seriously, mentioned that he was sorry to hear about Alex. "What do you mean?" Grace said, trying to sound calm.

Ted said that he heard that Alex disappeared in Italy during the European tour and no one had heard from him since, including Jillian. It was hard for Grace not to gasp in disbelief. She had left the ballroom earlier before Jillian took a call from the Italian consulate. Jillian failed to tell anyone at the event that he was reported missing until she got confirmation. Apparently they did several shows in Milan, Rome and Venice. The last place anyone saw him from the theatrical company was also the last place Grace and Alex had a romantic encounter.

15. Chapter

The news was too much for Grace to bear. She abruptly excused herself and had a car service drive her home. She felt numb inside, like maybe she was somehow responsible for Alex's disappearance. That sounded crazy but she couldn't help feeling guilty, especially after the way things ended between them in Venice.

The gondola ride was the perfect ending to another perfect evening for Grace and Alex in Venice, Italy a year and a half ago. After savoring delicious homemade gelato in a quaint little cafe and taking in the architectural beauty of Saint Mark's Basilica, the couple wandered toward the Grand Canal, considered the main street and waterway in Venice. Here is where they found a gondolier that would take them on a memorable ride through the canal.

As Alex helped Grace carefully board the gondola, she was thinking that this was truly the most romantic moment of her life. The sun had started to set painting the sky in beautiful orange, red and purplish hues that reflected off the water making for a spectacular site. They marveled at the colorful buildings that characterize so much of Venice. That's when Alex whispered in her ear "I can't live without you Grace. Tell me now that you'll marry me". She froze again, and said nothing at first. Instead of the answer Alex was hoping for, her response was, "I'll have to think about it".

16. Chapter

For the first time Grace actually saw Alex become visibly upset. He angrily but quietly said "You don't really want me to be a part of your life, I'm just an amusement for you." Grace, at that point, uncontrollably started to cry and blurts out "But I DO love you!" and Alex responded "Maybe you do, but you're not IN love with me!"

She felt confused and sorry that she hurt him but didn't know how to reply. Alex took that to mean his assessment was correct. Except for the sound of the gondolier's oar gliding through the water, the remainder of the ride through the canal was silent. Afterwards they both went on to have relationships with other people although nothing serious developed for either of them.

Grace was sitting out on her patio nursing a glass of Chablis and remembering that fateful night clearly. Not knowing what happened to Alex made her feel angry with herself thinking if she had agreed to become his wife, none of this would have happened. What she didn't realize was that the morning would give her the opportunity to get a third chance at having the love of her life.

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When the concierge called and mentioned they had a package to bring to her, she had no idea what it was since she wasn't expecting anything. She thought it may some contracts from her agent, but he said it was actually a box.

Grace signed for the package when the concierge arrived and was shocked to see where it was sent from. Venice, Italy was where it was mailed and the address was the hotel where she and Alex had stayed. She was almost afraid to open it, but at the same time not sure what she had to fear.

The package was simple, just cardboard with paper bag wrapping. She tore it open to find things that only had one connection and that was to Alex. There was a menu from the cafe where they had gelato, a jar of preserves like the one he bought for her at an open market, a street fair mask similar to other type she brought back and some other miscellaneous items. But all of them were things that only Alex would know they had shared. Grace was so excited that her hands were trembling. She knew in her heart Alex must have sent these items to let her know she was alive and well.

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Although there were several items in the box there was also no note. That made her a little nervous, not to mention she was unsure what she should do next. Alex has been missing, so could this be a cruel joke someone is playing on her? At the same time she was hesitant to share this box of inexpensive treasures that took her back down memory lane with anyone.

Then she picked up the menu from the cafe and put it close to her nose and took a deep whiff. It was very faint but she swore she could smell the cologne that Alex always wore. Of course she's not sure if she's going crazy or not, but she's certain he's responsible for sending the box. A feeling of warmth comes over her body, the thought of reuniting with her lost love comes to her mind clearly.

The next day finds Grace on a flight to Rome with a connection to Venice. She feels compelled to see if she can find Alex there. At this point she's convinced he's still in Venice and wanted her to find him.

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Grace finds the streets are even more interesting than they were before. More markets and fairs and for some reason the people are friendlier, the colors of the buildings seem brighter. Possibly because I'm here to finally find love, she thinks to herself. She arrives at the same hotel that the package was sent from that arrived at her home. She describes Alex to the concierge and asks if he was staying there. After checking the hotel registry and asking the manager they tell Grace they have no one registered by the name of Alexander Stanton.

Now Grace was truly heartbroken and wondering if the box that was delivered to her was really someone's idea of a cruel joke. Then another young clerk who overheard her asking about Alex came from around the counter to speak to her. He mentioned that a man matching Alex's description came in to get an address label for a package he wanted to ship to the United States. The clerk gave it to him, but thought it was odd since he wasn't staying at the hotel. Grace thanked him so much and asked if he knew more, but the clerk said he only saw him come in once but that he had seen him around in a couple of cafes as well as near the Grand Canal.

Grace's whole face lit up when she heard that. She happily thanked the clerk and tipped him. The clerk was confused but appreciated receiving such a large tip for simply telling a woman about a man he had seen in passing that wanted a mailing label.

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Although Grace roamed around looking through the cafes that she could remember them frequenting together, she didn't find Alex. Once the sun started setting she realized where he would be, near the gondolas. She was a little nervous since their last time spent together there may also bring up bad memories for them both, but at this point she had to try and find him. Alex, she knew was her true love and she had to let him know how she felt. She had come too far to turn back.

She could smell that cologne of his, that wonderful faint, musky scent she had grown to adore. There he was, alone, looking over the water sipping espresso at an outdoor table, people watching as they both always liked to do. Nonchalantly she waved and he returned the wave indicating he wanted her to come over to join him.

"I was sure I would find you here", Grace said to him, so relieved her trip wasn't in vain. "Once you got the package I knew you'd figure it out" he told her. When she asked why he disappeared without telling anyone he told her he needed to escape for awhile, especially from Jillian. They both laughed after that comment.

21. Chapter

Grace apologized for not agreeing to marry him when he asked her before. He told her he didn't want her to do anything she didn't want to. "Well", she said, "you sent me a package and I have something very special that I got for you." He looked at her with a quizzical expression on his face, wondering what she meant.

She reached in her handbag to pull out a small black ring box. "This is for you. I love you and know there's no other man I want to share my life with. Alexander Stanton, will you marry me?" Grace watched Alex's calm smile as she handed him the brushed gold band. "Of course", he said "you never give up on love."