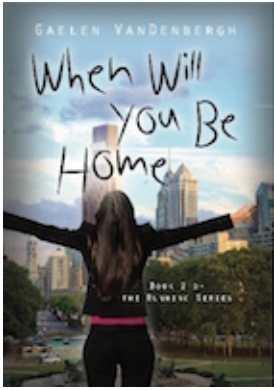


GAELLEN VANDENBERGH

# When Will You Be Home

BOOK 2 OF  
THE RUNNING SERIES





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Gaelen VanDenbergh

[www.GaelenVanDenbergh.com](http://www.GaelenVanDenbergh.com)

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**Contact the author:**  
[authorgaelenvandenbergh@gmail.com](mailto:authorgaelenvandenbergh@gmail.com)

# 1

## Paige

Paige lifted her head from her hands and blinked rapidly in the hazy light of her third-floor bedroom in Chloe's rambling six-bedroom Victorian. Her old friend had converted the third floor into a studio apartment of sorts, without a working kitchen but with a full renovated bathroom, a living room with a loveseat covered in a soft, taupe slipcover, and a bedroom area with an alcove facing a tall window. Chloe had slid a narrow wooden desk with a laptop into the alcove. Paige had slept in this apartment for weeks, grateful for all the thoughtful touches and amenities but not a minute closer to mentally settling in.

She pushed herself up from the bed and wandered out to the desk to check her email. The east-facing window invited plenty of light through in the mornings, except on steel gray, drizzly days in late autumn when the raw chill outside pushes and rattles against the pane and the rain drops are sparse but cold and unrelenting.

A tap on the door almost blended into the staccato rainfall against the roof, close overhead, but was soon followed by Chloe's voice asking her to open the door for her. Paige moved quickly to oblige and a steaming mug of coffee was pushed into her hands. The aroma perked up her mood a tad, as did the sight of her friend, swathed in a black pencil skirt and a black boat neck sweater that nearly exposed her pale shoulders. Her faint freckles and corn silk hair seemed even fairer against the black clothing. Her body was usually composed of sharp angles, all cheekbones and elbows and jutting hipbones, but this morning she appeared to be a slender black stem blooming delicately at its top. Her feet were shoved into fuzzy giraffe slippers, adding coziness to the chic.

Paige sipped her coffee gratefully. Chloe perched on the edge of Paige's bed and glanced around the room, the eaves slanting close over their heads. "I feel like we're back in your Uncle's attic," she said. "I mean, minus all the junk."

"Yes, and the pot you used to store there," Paige said. "We used to read for hours up there."

"And talk. I never heard you say two words downstairs. You seem so different now. When did you melt?"

"Just last year, I think. When David...sent me away." Paige felt a bitter gurgle of laughter lurch from her throat. "It's almost funny, now. He told me he was buying us a vacation home, up there in Wells Lake. Wells Lake! And he drove us up there and left me, with nothing, and no one. Just drove away."

Chloe shook her head. "But it worked out, didn't it? You have real friends now. Not that ruthless crowd of snobs you used to hang around. I guess they came with the life, though."

"Yes." Paige's mind cringed and fled from memories of her old life in Philadelphia. "Anyway, no matter now. David did me a favor, leaving me there."

"Yes, he did. So what now?"

"Who the hell knows. I guess that's why I'm back."

"What would your shrink say?"

Paige smiled, thinking of the old man and his cluttered office. She instinctually glanced around for a notebook, her method of communication with the good doctor who had lost most of his hearing. Paige took a deep breath and recited his words that she held close to her. "When you are thinking about what you are supposed to be doing with your life, what you want your life to be, you're thinking too large. Start with today, work up to tomorrow. What do you want

to do, right now? These small desires become small accomplishments, which are the bricks in the road that will take you where you need to go. Don't focus on the end of the road, focus on building the road."

"Holy cow, that was a mouthful. But wise," Chloe said. "You remember all that? I can barely remember my own cell phone number. Kids. They drain your brain."

"I wrote it down and read it over quite a bit," Paige admitted.

"So, what do you want to do today? Pick a brick," Chloe said, smiling and sitting up on the bed with her hands clasped around her coffee cup. She tapped her ring finger against the mug in a brisk clinking rhythm.

"Unfortunately I can't choose, today. I have to meet Lucien for lunch in Center City." She felt her heartbeat quicken as she said the words. Lucien was from another life, it seemed. They had been a couple, her first real relationship, early in college before he transferred from University of Pennsylvania to a college in Boston. Paige wondered now if he had left because of her. It was not a thought that stemmed from vanity, but remorse. She recalled the tentative reconnecting a few years prior and when they began emailing. The beauty and the curse of the Internet, she



thought. You can maintain a relationship without ever seeing someone or even hearing their voice.

In Wells Lake she had contacted him again, knowing she was moving back to Philadelphia. Their faltering friendship took flight, each circling above the other's life.

“Well, that’s a start,” Chloe said. “Hopefully you catch a glimpse of where your road is going someday soon. You seem very restless here.”

Paige nudged Chloe with her shoulder. “Now stop, you’re breaking the rules of this arrangement. No worrying about me. I have to figure this out, and you have a rather full life to attend to. Thanks for the room and board. I’ll be all right.”

Chloe sighed, her thin shoulders bowing forward. “Yes, speaking of which I had better get downstairs and make sure the boys haven’t burned down the kitchen. Greg is supposed to be watching them, but they’ve decided to make pancakes and he doesn’t seem to notice when they are destroying things. As long as they’re alive, his duties are apparently done.” She stood and drifted from the room. Before she closed the door behind her Paige noticed a flour handprint on her backside and a hole in the heel of her stockings. On most women, these would be indicators of chaos. On Chloe they only looked like touches of

whimsy. Paige envied how she moved with ease through the world.

Paige carried her coffee to the computer table and powered on the laptop. She pulled a throw blanket from her bed and wrapped it around her shoulders before settling into the chair and logging on. She signed onto her email account and picked through the junk emails to find an email from Bryce. The subject line read “Call me.” After a moment of deep concern came and went, she reached for her phone.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, as soon as he answered.

“Nothing, why?” He sounded as if he were moving about, his phone shifting on his shoulder.

“What are you doing? I’m having trouble hearing you.”

“I’m – hang on...There, can you hear me now? I’m holding the phone now.”

“Why weren’t you holding the phone before?”

“I was working on a sculpture before my art therapy class starts.” Bryce had been living in a sober living facility for several months. The creaking farmhouse was once a guesthouse situated on three acres on one side of Wells Lake, the town where Paige had lived for over a year. It was converted to a halfway house by Deirdre, the den mother who owned

and operated the guesthouse, and her fiancé, Darnell. Paige hadn't been back in Philadelphia long, but the absence of her friends, Bryce, Deirdre, Darnell, and Al, cast a pall over her days.

"You're doing sculpture while talking on the phone?" Paige asked, sipping her coffee and wishing he would mention something about Al.

"Hey, I used to snort lines of coke while I talked on the phone. This is better, right?"

Paige smiled. "Yes, much."

"Al's fine, by the way. Well, not fine. But okay."

"I didn't ask about Al."

"You did."

"I did not!"

"Telepathically, you did. Darling, I can read your thoughts, even from so far away."

Paige pulled the blanket off of her shoulders and peered through the window at the spitting rain. The pause stretched.

"So, aren't you going to ask me why I wanted you to call?" Bryce asked, finally.

"Yes, of course. Why did you want me to call?" Paige asked.

"No reason. I just had some time to kill before art therapy."

"And you missed me."

“Yes. I missed you.”

“Bryce...I think I should call Al.”

“Why?”

Paige shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “I don’t know.”

“It’s okay to say you miss him. But you left.”

Paige sank into silence. She did leave. She left. “But, do you think he would be willing to talk?”

Bryce sighed audibly. “He’s a broken man, Paige. You broke him when you left. He hasn’t been the same since, and I’m worried that if you call him it’ll just send him over the edge.”

Paige’s heart clenched. “Oh, no. Really?”

“No. Men move on, Paige. Like, immediately. Give him a call, I’m sure he’d love to hear from you.”

“You’re horrible!”

Bryce chuckled. “Oh, you love me. Okay, I have to go. The drunks are shuffling in for class.”

“Led by the queen herself.” She could picture Bryce wearing torn jeans, his favorite spiked dog collar, and perhaps a pair of sparkly chandelier earrings for the occasion.

“You know it.” He hung up, and Paige’s phone rang again, almost immediately. She slurped some coffee and glanced at the name. David. She wanted to crawl back into bed and begin the day again, starting

with dropping her cell phone in the toilet. Then she remembered that she and her ex-husband had paperwork to finalize. The process had already been delayed for months by David's ludicrous attempts to shortchange her. For all his nickel and diming, he hadn't noticed or didn't care that her cell phone was still on his plan, and he had been paying for it since their abrupt separation over a year ago.

"David?"

"Paige. I have another draft of our divorce paperwork for you to glance over and sign."

"Glance over and sign? You mean to have my lawyer review with me and then send back to you with necessary changes."

"You won't need to make changes this time. I think you'll see that things are fair."

Paige felt her temples begin to throb. "I can't wait."

"Great. Come by my office this morning."

"I can't this morning. I'll come by this afternoon."

"I'm playing squash this afternoon with a client. Come by my office and we'll order in lunch."

"I have a lunch appointment," Paige said in a sigh.

"Where?"

“Parc. On Rittenhouse.”

“I know where Parc is. Fancy. Back to your old tastes, I see. I guess that small hick town didn't change you.”

“I didn't pick the restaurant.”

He put her on speaker phone. She could hear him tapping on his keyboard. “Well...” His voice had quickly gone from intensely demanding to completely distracted.

“David!”

“Yeah, yes. I'll come by Parc and drop off the papers.”

*You haven't changed*, Paige thought. Still oblivious to the plans and privacy of others. Everything was on his terms, at his convenience.

“No,” Paige said, surprising herself a little bit. “No, that won't work. This is an important appointment and can't be interrupted.”

David took her off speaker phone and lowered his voice. “Okay, okay. I won't interrupt your *date*. But I need to get this finalized. I'll eat somewhere nearby and you can send me a text when you're wrapping things up and I'll walk over.”

“What is your hurry about this? Don't tell me Simone wants to get married.”

"This is about me. I have a life and I'd like to get on with it."

"Being married didn't stop you from having a life before."

"Can we just stop this? We're not together anymore. Arguing is a waste of my time!"

Paige drew in a deep breath and slumped back in her chair, blowing out. She pictured David in his office, red-faced and fidgeting, getting ready to take his frustration out on his assistant as soon as he was off the phone.

Paige smoothed out her tone with some effort. "It's not a date. It's a business meeting...Fine. Okay. I'll text you. But I'm not sure when we'll be wrapping up..."

"Whatever. See you later." He hung up. Paige twisted in her chair to gaze longingly at her bed. It looked safe and shadowed and comforting. She tried to imagine Al stretched out on one side of it, but the bed was empty. She wondered if he were sleeping alone too.

Chloe insisted on driving Paige into town. She worked from home more often than not, but today she was going into her office for a lunch meeting. After Paige dressed in what she decided was appropriate for

an interview, though it really was lunch with a lover from deep in her past, Paige settled into the Prius and Chloe trundled the kids down the part cobblestone, part antiquated trolley tracks of Germantown Avenue to drop them off at daycare, then she sped around the tree-canopied curves of Lincoln Drive, along the winding Wissahickon Creek, and down Kelly Drive along the Schuylkill River. Even in the raw drizzle a few diehard runners were out. Paige longed to be among them, instead of going to this reunion of sorts, and then having to face David and all his arrogance and paperwork.

As they sped along, Paige lurched back and forth in her seat with the sudden lane changes and bends in the road, making her regret not taking the train. Chloe grilled her about Lucien the whole time. What was their relationship like, in college? *It was like any other disingenuous, codependent relationship. The sex was fantastic.* Was he her first love? *No. My first love came along much later.* Would it be awkward working for him? *It will be awkward working for anyone. Just living my life is awkward.* Would they...

"Chloe, I promise you that if you bring a bottle of Chardonnay to my apartment tonight, I will tell you everything. At this point in time, however, I don't have any answers. What am I sitting on?"



"Cheerios, probably. The boys like to throw them over the seats. Chardonnay tonight. Done." Her lips curled into a mischievous smile. "Maybe I'll ask Greg to take the boys to the diner."

"Why?"

Chloe shot her a look as if she had just sprouted another head. Then her expression relaxed. "You don't have children. Even if Greg is watching them, they find me. Sometimes I hang out in their tree house when I need a few minutes to myself because they don't think to look there."

Chloe zipped down the Ben Franklin Parkway into Center City. Paige stared out the windows as her old neighborhood came into view. The stately Museum of Art, the Franklin Institute, the Ben Franklin Parkway, the skyscrapers, City Hall. Philadelphia. She was back. It stood before her, tall and teeming with people, some of whom she once knew, some of whom she never wanted to see again. Fear, loathing, excitement, heightened senses, prickly skin...The city.

Chloe turned another corner and screeched to a stop at one corner of Rittenhouse Square. Paige's breath grew shallow as she stepped silently from the car and stood still on the sidewalk. Chloe beeped her horn once and pulled away into traffic.

Paige held out her hand, feeling the raindrops fall onto her fingers. She turned to gaze at the park in the square. Its manicured landscape, walkways lined with benches and statues, could not be more different from Wells Lake, with its spindly trees, a single park bench before the small lake at the end of the main road of a ragged little town.

"Paige," a man's voice called behind her. "Come out of the rain, you'll wreck that lovely hair of yours."

Paige turned around slowly to face her past and her future.



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