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# FIRST LITTLE WINS

A NOVEL

ASHLEY ELSTON

FIRST  
LIE  
WINS



*Ashley Elston*

PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS | VIKING

VIKING  
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC  
[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)

Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Headline, an imprint of Hachette UK Ltd., London, in  
2024

First United States edition published by Pamela Dorman Books, 2024

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A Pamela Dorman Book/Viking

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Elston, Ashley, author.

Title: First lie wins : a novel / Ashley Elston.

Description: New York : Pamela Dorman Books/Viking, [2024]

Identifiers: LCCN 2023004942 (print) | LCCN 2023004943 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593492918  
(hardcover) | ISBN 9780593492925 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3605.L78 F57 2024 (print) | LCC PS3605.L78 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—  
dc23/eng/20230526

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023004942>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023004943>

Cover design: Ervin Serrano

Cover images: woman by Goldmund Lukic / Stocksy; house by Raymond Forbes / Stocksy  
Designed by Cassandra Garruzzo Mueller, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

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*For Miller, Ross, and Archer*

## CHAPTER 1

It starts with the little things: an extra toothbrush in the glass holder next to the sink, a few articles of clothing in the smallest drawer, phone chargers on both sides of the bed. Then the little things turn to slightly bigger things: razors and mouthwash and birth control pills all fighting for space in the medicine cabinet, the question changing from “Are you coming over?” to “What should we cook for dinner?”

And as much as I’ve been dreading it, this next step was inevitable.

It may be the first time I’m meeting the people gathered around the table, people who Ryan has known since childhood, but it hasn’t escaped anyone’s attention that I’m already fully embedded in his life. It’s the small touches a woman brings to a man’s home, like the matching throw pillows on the couch or the faint whiff of jasmine from the diffuser on the bookshelf, that every other woman notices the second she walks through the front door.

A voice floats across the candlelit table, dodges the centerpiece that I was assured was “delicate yet confident,” and hovers in the air in front of me. “Evie, that’s an unusual name.”

I turn to Beth, debating whether to answer her question that’s not really a question.

“It’s short for Evelyn. I was named after my grandmother.”

The women sneak glances at one another, silently communicating across the table. Every answer I give is weighed and cataloged for a later discussion.

“Oh, I love that!” Allison squeals. “I was named after my grandmother too. Where did you say you were from again?”

I didn’t say, and they know this. Like birds of prey, they will pick, pick, pick all night until they get the answers they want.

“A small town in Alabama,” I answer.

Before they can ask which small town in Alabama, Ryan changes the subject. “Allison, I saw your grandmother last week at the grocery store. How’s she holding up?”

He’s bought me a few precious moments of relief while Allison relays how her grandmother is faring following the death of her grandfather. But it won’t be long until I’m the focus once again.

I don’t have to know these people to know everything about them. They are the ones who started kindergarten together, their circle remaining small until high school graduation. They fled town in groups of twos and threes to attend a handful of colleges all within driving distance of here. They all joined sororities and fraternities with other groups of twos and threes with similar backgrounds, only to gravitate back to this small Louisiana town, the circle closing once again. Greek letters have been traded out for Junior League memberships and dinner parties and golf on Saturday afternoon, as long as it doesn’t interfere with SEC football.

I don’t fault them for the way they are; I envy them. I envy the ease they feel in these situations, for knowing exactly what to expect and what is expected of them. I envy the gracefulness that comes with knowing that everyone in this town has seen them at their worst and still accepts them.

“How did you two meet?” Sara asks, the attention once again back on me.

It’s an innocent enough question, but one that unnerves me all the same.

The smile on Ryan’s face tells me he knows how I feel about being asked this and he’ll step in again to answer for me, but I shake him off.

Wiping my mouth gently with one of the white cloth napkins I bought specifically for this occasion, I say, “He helped change my flat tire.”

Ryan would have given them more than they deserve, and that’s why I stopped him. I don’t mention it was at the truck stop on the outskirts of town where I worked in the small restaurant bar making sure no drink went empty. And I don’t mention that while they are familiar with lots of acronyms from MBA to MRS, the only one I’m acquainted with is GED.

These people, his friends, wouldn’t mean to, but they would hold such basic things against me. They might not even be aware they were doing it.



I told Ryan I was afraid of how they would judge me once they found out my background was so different from theirs. He assured me he didn't care what they thought, but he does. The fact that he caved and invited them all here and spent the week helping me get the menu *just right* tells me more than the whispers in the dark that he likes how different I am, different from the girls he grew up with.

Allison turns to Ryan, and says, "Well, aren't you handy to have around."

I watch Ryan. I've whittled down our entire meeting to one sentence, and so far, he's let me get away with it.

As he watches me, a small smile plays on his face that lets me know this is my show—for now—and he's happy to go along.

Allison's husband, Cole, adds, "I wouldn't be surprised if he flattened your tire just so he could be there to help you fix it."

Laughs around the table and probably an elbow to the ribs from his wife given how Cole is holding his side. Ryan shakes his head, still watching me.

I smile and laugh, not too loud and not too long, to show that I, too, am amused at the thought that Ryan would go to such extremes to meet me.

Amused that *any person* would have watched another long enough to know that he always filled up at that truck stop for gas on Thursday evenings after spending the day in his East Texas office. That someone knew he favored the pumps on the west side of the building, and that his eyes almost always lingered a little too long on any female who crossed his path, especially those dressed in short skirts. And that same someone would pick up on little things, like the LSU baseball cap in the back seat or the frat tee showing through his white dress shirt or the country club sticker in the bottom left corner of his windshield, to ensure when they did meet there would be things to talk about. That someone would hold a nail *just so* in a valve while the air whistled away.

I mean, it's amusing to believe one person would go to those lengths just to meet another.



“I totally nailed it,” I say, as I dip the last dinner plate into the sink full of soapy water. Ryan moves in behind me, his arms skimming my hips until they are wrapped around my waist. His chin settles on my shoulder, and his lips press against that spot on my neck in a way he knows I adore.

“They loved you,” he whispers.

They don’t love me. At most, I satisfied the first wave of curiosity. And I imagine before the first car left the driveway, every woman was in the passenger seat swiping between the group text message picking apart every aspect of the night and the search bar on every social media site trying to track down exactly who I am and what small town in Alabama I came from.

“Ray just sent me a text. Sara wants your number so she can invite you to lunch next week.”

That was faster than I anticipated. I guess the second wave of curiosity is barreling toward me, fueled by the discovery that all searches turned up just the bare minimum of information, and they are hungry for more.

“I sent it to him. Hope that’s okay,” he says.

I twist around until I’m facing him, my hands crawling up his chest until they’re framing his face. “Of course. They’re your friends. And I hope they’ll be my friends too.”

So now there will be a lunch where the questions will be more direct, because Ryan won’t be there to make sure they aren’t.

Standing on my tiptoes, I pull him closer, until my mouth is mere inches from his. We both love this part, the anticipation, when breaths mingle and my brown eyes stare into his blue ones. We’re close but not close enough. His hands slip under the hem on my shirt, his fingers digging into the soft skin at my waist while mine slide up the back of his neck, my fingers curling into his dark hair. Ryan’s hair is longer than it was when we first met, when I first started watching him. I told him I liked it like this. That I liked having something to hold on to, so he stopped cutting it. I could tell his friends were surprised when they saw him, because from my own social media research, his hair has never touched his collar. And then they looked to me, and I could see their questions. *Why has Ryan changed? And is it because of this girl?*

He drags his hands lower, gripping my thighs under my short skirt and pulling me up so my legs can wrap around him.

“Will you stay?” he whispers, even though we’re the only two people in the house. He asks me this question every night.

“Yes,” I whisper back. My answer is always the same.

Ryan’s mouth hovers over mine but still maintains a sliver of space between us. I lose focus on his face. Even though he’s kissing me, I wait for him to close the distance between us.

“I don’t want to ask anymore. I want to know you’ll be here every night because it’s your home too. Will you do that? Make this your home?”

I dig my fingers deeper into his hair and lock my legs tighter around him. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I feel his smile against my lips, and he’s kissing me then carrying me through the kitchen, down the hall to the bedroom.

Our bedroom.

## CHAPTER 2

**E**ver since Ryan asked me to move in with him five days ago and I said yes, he's been impatient for it to happen. I woke up the morning after the dinner party to him on the phone with a moving company, scheduling their services for later that day, thanks to a last-minute cancellation.

I convinced him to wait, even if it was just for a week, to make sure this was really what he wanted and not just something he said after an evening of expensive wine and perfectly cooked beef tenderloin. Plus, I mentioned he was getting a little ahead of himself by calling the movers when I haven't packed anything yet.

"If you didn't really want to move in with me, you'd tell me, right?" Ryan is standing in front of the bathroom mirror, knotting a dark blue and gray striped tie, and trying to act like he's asked me some insignificant thing. He's pouting. Something I've seen before when he doesn't get his way.

I hop up on the counter and scoot down the white marble surface until I'm sitting right in front of him. He looks over my shoulder as if he can still watch his progress in the mirror behind me. He's being a little bit of a baby this morning.

I've memorized his face, but I still study it every chance I get, looking for any small piece I may have missed. He's attractive in a classic way. His dark hair is thick and tends to curl at the edges when it gets too long, as it is now. His blue eyes are striking, and even though he just shaved I know by the time I see him tonight his jaw will be shadowed and I'll get goose bumps when it grazes my neck.

Brushing his hands away, I finish tying the tie for him. "Of course I want to move in here. Where's this coming from?"

Ryan looks down at the tie, straightening it even though it's already straight but needing something to do. He hasn't touched me this morning

and barely looked at me. Yep, total baby.

Since he hasn't answered me, I add, "Have *you* changed your mind about me being here? I know you think I've been avoiding packing, but I've set aside the entire day today to get it done, and Goodwill is coming by to pick up everything I don't need anymore. But I can call them and cancel . . ."

His eyes and hands are finally on me. "Yes, I still want you here. I didn't know that's what you were planning to do today. But you've picked the one day I can't help you. I'm swamped today."

Today is Thursday, and he'll be fifty miles away from here at his East Texas office for the day. Just like he is every Thursday.

"I know, the timing sucks. But today was the only day I could get off work and the only afternoon Goodwill could send a truck over. I don't have much, so even by myself, it shouldn't take long."

His hands squeeze my sides while he leans forward to kiss me on the lips. His pout long gone, I hook my feet around the back of his legs and pull him close.

"Maybe I can call in sick. I am the boss, after all, and it's high time I abused my position of power," he says with a laugh.

I giggle between kisses. "Save your sick day for something better than packing. And really, there won't be that much to pack since I'm giving almost everything away." I glance through the door to the bedroom. "My stuff isn't as nice as yours, so there's no reason to keep it."

His hands go to my face. "I told you, anything you want to bring here, we'll make room for it. You don't have to get rid of your stuff."

Biting my bottom lip, I say, "I promise you, you don't want my ugly secondhand couch in your living room."

"How would I know if I didn't want your ugly secondhand couch in my living room? You've never let me see it." I try to sidestep this landmine of a conversation by looking away, but his finger pulls my chin back so we're eye to eye. "You don't have to be embarrassed."

"Yes, I do," I say, matching his stare. Then I lean in and kiss him quickly to avoid another pout. "You'll see it on Saturday when we meet the movers there. I scheduled them yesterday. And Sunday will be spent finding space for my stuff here. Save your sick day for Monday. By

Monday, we'll both be exhausted and I'm sure we'll need a pajama day. Pajamas optional."

He leans his forehead against mine, his smile infectious. "It's a date." With a last quick kiss, he pushes away from me and strolls out of the bathroom.

Twenty minutes after Ryan's Tahoe pulls out of the driveway, I'm doing the same in my ten-year-old 4Runner. Lake Forbing is a medium-size town in north Louisiana that is known for its fertile farmlands and deep pockets of natural gas. There is a lot of money in this area, but it's the quiet kind. It takes fifteen minutes to get to Lake View Apartments from Ryan's house, and from what I can tell it's nowhere near the lake this town was named after.

I pull into the empty spot designated for apartment 203, right next to the idling Goodwill truck.

"You're early, Pat," I say to the driver once we're both out of our vehicles.

He nods. "Our first run didn't take as long as I thought it would. Which unit is it?"

Pat follows me up the stairs while his helper opens the back of the large box truck. Stopping in front of the door, I pull a key out of my bag. "This is me."

He nods again and heads back downstairs. It takes me a couple of tries to get the bolt to unlatch; lack of use has made it stubborn. Just as I'm turning the knob, I hear the *thump, thump* of the metal dolly bouncing up the stairs.

I hold the door open as Pat and his helper struggle to get the dolly through the narrow frame.

"Where do you want them?" he asks.

Glancing around the empty apartment, I say, "Just put them in the middle of the room."

I eye the first stack of boxes, each filled with the items I've spent the last four days picking out. Things Pat has been storing for me in that box truck until I was ready for him to bring them here. Things that I will move to Ryan's house on Saturday. Things I will say I've owned for years rather than days.

It takes two trips to get all the boxes upstairs. I pull five twenties out of my back pocket and hand them to Pat. This is not a service Goodwill offers, but for a slip of cash, he was more than happy to help.

The guys are almost out the door when I ask, “Oh, did you bring the extra boxes?”

Pat shrugs and looks back to his helper, who says, “Yeah, they’re in the back of the truck. Want them up here?”

If either of them thinks this is strange, they don’t let on. “No. You can leave them on the sidewalk in front of my car.”

I follow them back outside. As they unload the stack of flat cardboard, I walk to the back of my car, where I retrieve a small black bag from the cargo area. I thank them again as they climb back into the truck. There are only a few things left to take care of.

The layout of the apartment is simple. Front door opens to a small living room with a kitchen against the back wall. A narrow hallway leads to a bathroom and bedroom. Beige carpet meets beige linoleum meets beige walls.

In the kitchen area, I unzip the black bag and remove four menus from nearby restaurants and three pictures I printed from the kiosk at CVS of Ryan and me, plus seven magnets to hold each item in place on the refrigerator. Next, I grab the assortment of condiments and pour half of each one down the sink drain before lining them in the door of the refrigerator. Moving to the bathroom, black bag in tow, I pull out the shampoo and conditioner then pour half of each down the drain like I did with the condiments, before putting the bottles on the edge of the tub. Unwrapping a bar of Lever 2000 soap, I set it on top of the drain in the sink and turn the water on, rotating it every few minutes until the logo is gone and the edges are dulled, then drop it into the small built-in space on the shower wall. Toothpaste is last. Starting from the bottom, I squeeze a portion out but leave a glob or two on the rim of the sink, just like I do at Ryan’s house, even though I know he’ll fuss about it. Leaving the cap off, I drop the tube on the counter near the faucet.

Last stop is the bedroom. I pull out an assortment of wire and plastic hangers, the last items in the bag, and space them out on the empty metal rod. Back in the small living room, I scatter the neat pile of boxes around

until the floor is littered with them. I pick two boxes, one filled with books and one filled with an assortment of old perfume bottles, and pull them open. The box with books is easy to unpack so it's only a minute or so before I have several small piles next to the box as if I haven't gotten around to packing them yet.

The perfume bottles take a little more time. I move the box to the small kitchen counter and unwrap the four on top, setting them down on the Formica surface. The light from the window hits them just right, and the thin, colorful glass acts like a prism, shooting rays of blue, purple, pink, and green around the dingy room.

Of all the shopping I did this week, the perfume bottles were the hardest and, surprisingly, the most fun to find. It's a fluke, really, that I even needed to search for them, but after running across a Facebook post Ryan was tagged in, I knew this was just the sort of item I needed to "collect." He had gotten his mother one for her birthday last year. It was an Art Deco piece, a ball of etched glass wrapped in silver and adorned with small, mirrored squares, and looked exactly like the type of gift Jay Gatsby would have given Daisy. It was beautiful, and from the smile on her face, she loved it.

And if I was the type of girl who collected things, this would definitely be it.

I survey the room a final time. Everything looks exactly as I want it to. That I'm all packed except for the few lingering things I didn't get to, a few random possessions left to put away.

"Knock, knock," a voice says from the doorway, and I spin around. It's the woman who works in the office of this complex, the woman I rented this apartment from on Monday afternoon.

She steps into the room and looks around at the mess on the floor. "I was worried when I hadn't seen anyone here since Monday."

I slide my hands into my front pockets and lean back against the wall next to the kitchen counter, crossing one ankle in front of the other. My movements are slow but calculated. It worries me she's here, checking on me, and that she'll feel the same need to do so on Saturday, when Ryan is here moving me out. I picked a place where neighbors don't bother to get



to know one another, and the rent includes utilities since units can be leased by the week. And one week was all I needed.

It must have piqued her interest when I rented one of the few unfurnished units. Usually if someone goes to the trouble of moving furniture in, they plan on staying longer than seven days, but I didn't want Ryan to think my life was so transient that I didn't even have my own couch so the furnished unit wasn't an option. And here we are on day four and there's nothing to show for my stay except eight boxes, strategically placed around the room.

Her hand runs along the top of the nearest box and she's eyeing the perfume bottles on the counter. I know her type. Her makeup is heavy, her clothes tight, and once upon a time she would have been considered pretty, but the years have not been kind to her. Her eyes soak in everything happening around her. This is the sort of place that is rented for illicit purposes, and she rules over all of it, constantly on the lookout for any situation she can use to her advantage. And now she has crossed the parking lot and walked right into my apartment because she knows I've got something going on but can't figure out how to use it against me.

"Just want to make sure you're getting settled in," she says.

"I am," I answer, then glance at the name tag pinned to her low-cut blouse. "Shawna, your concern is unnecessary. And unwelcome."

Her back stiffens. My brusque tone is in opposition to my relaxed stance. She walked in here thinking she owned this situation, understood it on some level, but I've thrown her.

"Should I still presume this unit will be empty and your key returned by five p.m. on Sunday?" she asks.

"As I presume there will be no more unexpected visits," I answer, tilting my head toward the door and giving her a small smile.

She clucks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, then turns to leave. It takes everything in me not to throw the bolt closed behind her. But I'm almost finished here, and there's still more to be done before Ryan crosses the Louisiana state line at five thirty this afternoon.

## CHAPTER 3

Ryan's grandfather passed away three years ago, only a year after his wife, and left Ryan his home along with every piece of furniture, every dish in the cabinet, every picture on the wall. Oh, and a hefty sum of cash too.

From the way Ryan tells it, one day he dropped by to check on his grandfather, only to find he had died peacefully in his sleep, and then a week later Ryan was moving in. The only possessions he brought with him were his clothes, toiletries, and a new mattress for the bedroom. Ryan probably would have made room for an ugly second-hand couch . . . if I had one.

His street is lined with large oak trees, their branches shading every inch of sidewalk. The neighbors are all older, more established, and love to tell me how they've watched "that sweet boy" grow up since he was a baby. This is the kind of house you live in when you've finally made it. When you've had a couple of kids and the pressing fear of not being able to pay your bills lessens and no longer has the ability to suffocate you.

But it's too big for Ryan. It's two stories with a wide front porch and big backyard, white with dark green shutters, manicured flower beds, and a brick path that leads to the front door. It would take several minutes to walk through if you needed to check every room—big enough that someone could come in the carport door and you wouldn't hear it from the main bedroom.

I back my car into the driveway to shorten the distance I'll have to carry the boxes. It's not until I pop the rear hatch that I notice Ryan's neighbors to the left, Ben and Maggie Rogers, are watching me from their front porch. Right on schedule. Their morning walk coincides with our departure for work, and their evening cocktails on the porch are already in progress when we arrive back here at the end of the day. But that's the general vibe of this street since most everyone is retired or close to it.

Mrs. Rogers tracks me as I lift the first box from the back of my 4Runner. This clear indicator that I've become more than just an overnight guest will be passed along to the rest of the street when she makes her rounds during their walk tomorrow morning. The Rogerses take Neighborhood Watch to the next level.

They are silent spectators as I unload box after box. Ryan is pulling into the driveway just as I grab the last one. He jogs over the second he's out of his car to relieve me of it.

"Here, let me get that," he says.

I reach up on tiptoes and kiss him, the box keeping us from touching anywhere but our lips.

Before we head inside, he greets the Rogerses. "Evening!"

Mrs. Rogers stands up and walks to the edge of the porch, putting her as close as she can get without falling into her azalea bushes. "Y'all look busy over there!" she hollers back.

With his arms full, he can only nod toward me. "Evie's moving in." His big grin sends a little flutter through me, and I can't help the equally big grin that spreads across my face.

Mrs. Rogers throws a *told you so* look at her husband as her suspicions are confirmed. "Oh. Well, I guess you young people skip over a few important steps these days." She adds a stifled laugh to soften the jab.

Ryan is undeterred. "Our steps may be in a different order but we'll hit them all."

The breathy gasp escapes my lips before I can stop it, and I force myself not to read too much into this banter tossed between them.

Mr. Rogers joins his wife on the edge of the porch. "Well, we need to welcome Evie to the neighborhood properly, then! Join us for afternoon cocktails soon." If Mr. Rogers is bothered by the latest development, he hides it well.

"We'd love to. Maybe next week?" Ryan answers for us.

Mr. Rogers's smile is genuine when he says, "I just got a new whiskey smoker I've been itching to use."

Ryan laughs. "It's been a while since I've had one of your Old Fashioneds. I'm looking forward to it." Then he knocks his shoulder lightly against mine to get me moving toward the house.

Finally, we're inside, and Ryan sets the box down with the others in the wide back hall.

"I went ahead and brought my clothes and shoes over. How was your day?"

He shrugs. "It was long. I would rather have spent it packing with you."

Ryan is always tight lipped about what he does on Thursdays. And while he joked this morning about skipping work today, we both know he never would.

What he does on Thursdays is important.

He surveys the boxes. The empty ones the guys left on the sidewalk for me this morning are now filled with the only items I truly own and will keep here. He pulls at a lock of hair that's fallen out of my messy bun, twirling it around his finger. "Did you get a lot done at your apartment?"

I give him a big smile. "I did! I'm ready for that moving truck on Saturday, but truthfully, we could probably manage with just our two cars. I ended up giving every piece of furniture away. There's only eight or ten boxes left," I say, kicking the box nearest me.

Confusion and a little sadness cross his face. "Evie." He says my name softly. "You gave it all away?"

My thumb runs across his forehead, erasing the creases there. "You live in a home where every single piece of furniture holds meaning for you. A memory. You grew up around these things so they're a part of you. It wasn't the same with my stuff. They were pieces of necessity. Somewhere to sit so I wasn't on the floor and nothing more than that. It was easy to give them away."

The furniture I'm talking about might not have been given away today, but the feelings are true nonetheless.

Ryan slips his phone out of his front pocket and makes a call. I watch him, wondering what he's up to.

"Hi, this is Ryan Sumner. Evie Porter scheduled your services for Saturday but I need to cancel."

With his free hand, he pulls me close, tucking me against his side. He listens to whatever they are saying, then thanks them before disconnecting the call.