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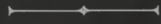
—MEGAN MIRANDA, bestselling author of THE ONLY SURVIVORS

# FIRST LIFE WINS

A NOVEL

ASHLEY ELSTON

FIRST  
LIE  
WINS



*Ashley Elston*

PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS | VIKING

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*For Miller, Ross, and Archer*

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## 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 killing 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.

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