

BOOK CLUB KIT

"Smart and sharp, fast-paced and twisty."

—MEGAN MIRANDA, bestselling author of THE ONLY SURVIVORS

FIRST LIE WINS

A NOVEL

ASHLEY ELSTON



ABOUT THE BOOK

REESE'S BOOK CLUB JANUARY '24 PICK

Evie Porter has everything a nice Southern girl could want: a doting boyfriend, a house with a white picket fence, and a tight group of friends. The only catch? Evie Porter doesn't exist.

FIRST LIE WINS—the adult debut from YA writer Ashley Elston—is a stylish and twisty thriller, already in development as a Hulu series by Octavia Spencer and Grey's Anatomy showrunner Krista Vernoff. The early buzz is fantastic—Lisa Gardner calls it “some of the best cat-and-mouse suspense I've read in years,” and Megan Miranda raves, “**FIRST LIE WINS** is a high-stakes thriller that brilliantly explores identity and love, truth and deception. Smart and sharp, fast-paced and twisty, this book kept me on the edge of my seat from the first page to the very last.”

The identity always comes first: Evie Porter. There's a disguise, a fabricated background, some sob story to explain why she doesn't like to talk about her past. Once she's given a location by her mysterious boss, Mr. Smith, she learns everything there is to know about the town and the people in it. Then the mark: Ryan Sumner. The last piece of the puzzle is the job.

Evie isn't privy to Mr. Smith's real identity, but she knows this job will be different. Ryan has gotten under her skin, and she's starting to envision a different sort of life for herself. Evie can't make any mistakes, especially after what happened last time, but things are about to go haywire anyway. Because the one thing she's worked her entire life to keep clean—her real identity, the one she'd hoped to return to someday—just walked right into town. Evie must stay one step ahead of her past while making sure there's still a future in front of her. The stakes couldn't be higher . . . but luckily, she's always been up for a challenge.

PRAISE FOR *FIRST LIE WINS*

"This fast-paced read has everything you could want in a thriller: secret identities, a mysterious boss, and a cat-and-mouse game that kept me guessing the whole way through. I did NOT expect that ending."

–Reese Witherspoon

"Buckle up. *First Lie Wins* features some of the best cat-and-mouse suspense I've read in years, while serving up plenty of heart along this wild ride. I'm still breathless."

–Lisa Gardner, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *One Step Too Far*

"What a box of tricks! *First Lie Wins* flickers past like a shadow play: just when you think you've worked out what you're seeing, the shapes shift, the scene transforms, and—hold on—maybe you had it wrong a moment ago? Cool and clever and full-on fun, the sort of slippery, high-stakes, now-you-see-me-now-you-don't thriller that few novelists are bold enough to attempt these days. Pick it up, please. This is a good one."

–A. J. Finn, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Woman in the Window* and *End of Story*

"A high-stakes thriller that brilliantly explores identity and love, truth and deception. Smart and sharp, fast-paced and twisty, this book kept me on the edge of my seat from the first page to the very last. Ashley Elston has crafted a truly unpredictable, unforgettable story. I loved it!"

–Megan Miranda, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last to Vanish*

"Wildly inventive, diabolically clever . . . Filled with meticulously plotted details and stakes that will wholly consume you. Ashley Elston also delivers one of the most likable, morally gray characters I've ever encountered. I devoured *First Lie Wins* and am now an Ashley Elston fan for life."

–Julie Clark, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lies I Tell*

"The most suspenseful game of deception I've ever read . . . Ashley Elston peeled back layer upon layer of a carefully crafted plot, revealing a series of twists and reveals I never saw coming. Brilliant!"

–Elle Cosimano, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Finlay Donovan Is Killing It*

"You don't know who to trust in this taut and expertly plotted thriller from Ashley Elston. *First Lie Wins* is an edge-of-your-seat read that's as emotionally moving as it is gripping. I loved every minute of it!"

–**Mary Kubica, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Local Woman Missing***

"A suspenseful and taut page-turner that is impossible to put down! *First Lie Wins* captivated me with its twisty premise and left me spellbound by the memory of its richly drawn characters."

–**Megan Shepherd, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Malice House***

"Who is the cat and who is the mouse? It's hard to tell when even the bad guys are so likable that you can't help but root for them. Clever, twisty, and suspenseful, *First Lie Wins* kept me on my toes right up to the satisfying conclusion."

–**Diane Chamberlain, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last House on the Street***

"Sharp, engaging, and unputdownable. Elston executes hairpin turns masterfully, leaving readers gasping in surprise but firmly in their seats and ready for more. A smart suspense with romantic elements that keeps the thrills coming and the reader thinking of the story long after the book is done."

–**Alyssa Cole, *New York Times* bestselling author of *When No One Is Watching***

"Outstanding! The deeply woven characters in *First Lie Wins* pulled me in from the first page, then took me on a spellbinding ride. Ashley Elston has crafted an ingenious, unforgettable cat-and-mouse thriller!"

–**Wendy Walker, bestselling author of *What Remains***

"A whip-smart, twisty thriller with a surprisingly big heart. *First Lie Wins* is the type of book that begs to be read in one sitting." –**Kara Thomas, author of *Out of the Ashes***

"Prepare to trust no one on this high-speed thrill ride through timelines, identities, and motives as you work to piece together Elston's expertly crafted puzzle. *First Lie Wins* is a fun, clever spin on the con-artist novel, perfect for fans of *The Lies I Tell* and *The Lady Upstairs*." –**Ashley Winstead, author of *Midnight Is the Darkest Hour***

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Identity plays a significant role in *First Lie Wins*. Evie assumes various aliases for her jobs and ultimately allows her Lucca Marino identity to take the fall for crimes she didn't commit in order to protect her future. Why is the name Lucca Marino so important to her? Do you think your name is essential to your identity? Why or why not? And will she be happy as Evie Porter?
2. Evie and Ryan are both morally gray characters. Despite her life of crime, there were lines Evie wouldn't cross: not leaving Miles unattended after his mother was injured, giving financial advice to Tyron, changing critical information about Ryan's business so Mr. Smith wouldn't be able to take it from him. Do you think this behavior redeems Evie in some way? Why or why not?
3. Evie's path to crime began as a way to pay for the medicine and medical treatment her mother needed. In today's world of high health-care costs, Evie believed she had no other option. Do you sympathize with Evie or think she was wrong to turn to a life of crime? Should she have continued in that line of work after her mother died? Discuss.
4. What are your thoughts on the author's use of flashbacks? Did each flashback give you further insights into Evie's actions or thought processes in the present? How so?
5. Evie's mother dies when Evie is still quite young, yet rather than seek out community, she takes on a job that is inherently isolating. Why do you think it was so important for Evie to find the others who worked for Mr. Smith? Do you think Evie finally found her family with Devon, Amy, and Ryan? By the end of the book, do you think Evie has achieved what she originally hoped she might? What is the significance of her garden?
6. Evie leaves an origami swan behind when each job is complete. What do you think this specific calling card means? Do you think Evie enjoys the chase? Or is there a part of her that wants to be found out? Is it possible for both to be true?
7. Evie says, "There are the short cons and there are long cons and I've just finished the longest one of my life." Did you know Evie was one step ahead of Mr. Smith the whole time? When did you realize who George was? Did you expect any of the reveals throughout the book?
8. Mr. Smith suggests that he and Evie are more alike than she might wish: they both con and manipulate others. Do you think Evie is aware of how much they actually resemble each other? At the end, it looks like Evie will take over Mr. Smith's business—do you think that's really what she wants? Can she do that job and also live happily ever after with Ryan?



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A CONVERSATION WITH ASHLEY ELSTON, AUTHOR OF *FIRST LIE WINS*

ASHLEY ELSTON worked for many years as a wedding photographer before turning her hand to writing. She lives in Louisiana with her husband and three sons. Elston has written six young adult novels; *First Lie Wins* is her adult debut.

***First Lie Wins* is a cat-and-mouse thriller about a con artist whose past is catching up to her. What inspired this book? How did you come up with the title?**

I read *If Tomorrow Comes* by Sidney Sheldon in high school. The main character was forced into a life of crime, and we followed along as she pulled job after job. It was clever and smart and felt like a roller-coaster ride that was both nerve-racking and thrilling. I was hooked and devoured every mystery and thriller I could get my hands on after that! I also loved *Alias*. That was such a cool show and, week after week, I was there with Sydney Bristow as she managed to stay one step ahead of those after her. I've always wanted to write a con-artist story where the twists and turns would give my readers that same breathless rush.

As for the title, there is an old saying (there are a few variations of the exact wording) that basically says the first liar is the one who is most believed. The first lie wins. It's the same concept that makes fighting disinformation on social media so hard! Just because someone says something is true does not mean it is, but most people will believe it because that's what they heard first.

Our protagonist is Evie Porter. She may look like a nice Southern girl, but really, Evie is a fake name and her entire life (the doting boyfriend, the tight friends, the white picket fence) is a job. What interested you about writing a character like Evie?

I don't think anyone (fictional character or real person) is either morally good or bad, it's more about where you fall on that scale. Evie has her own sense of right and wrong and that opinion is different from societal norms. Some lines she's willing to cross and others she's not, but Evie is very clear where those lines are for her. I also liked exploring why Evie is the way she is. There were events she had no control over and hard choices she made that led her to live her life on the wrong side of the law. She's good at what she does and embraces it. It was fun to write a character who offers no apology for who she is.

There are a lot of twists and turns in this book—how did you keep track of the plot? Do you have any tricks for creating suspense on the page and keeping readers on the edge of their seats?

First Lie Wins is probably the most complicated plot I've written. I used an eight-foot piece of brown butcher paper and a multitude of sticky notes to keep track of everything. That paper hung in my office, and I would move pieces around until everything finally clicked into place. The ending was probably the most challenging part of writing this book and I rewrote it seven different times. I hate when I'm reading a book and the ending falls flat, so it was very important that I got it right. And honestly, what helps in creating suspense and keeping readers on the edge of their seats for me is that I am never 100 percent sure where the story is going while I'm writing it! (Which is why I had to rewrite the ending seven times!) If I can keep myself guessing, then I hope I'm keeping the reader guessing as well.

***First Lie Wins* is your adult debut, after six young adult novels. What motivated this shift? How was writing this book different from your previous ones?**

I'm not sure it was a conscious decision to move from young adult to adult. I had the idea for *First Lie Wins* several years ago and I worked on it in between edits for *10 Blind Dates*. It was fun exploring older characters and situations that would only happen in the time after high school. My process was the same but writing it felt new and exciting. I think I was ready for a change and moving to the adult market was easier than I thought it would be. I still love the young adult genre and there's always a chance I'll go back there, but I'm loving this space and hoping to continue writing for adults.

Everybody is a little bit shady in *First Lie Wins*—not only individuals but also institutions, like college football. Tell us about your personal connection to the SEC and why you wanted to include this subplot.

The shady side is usually where all the fun is—in books, at least! I am a huge football fan but that wasn't always the case. Growing up, my family didn't watch football. We didn't have a team we loved and rooted for. My husband will watch it if it's on, but he doesn't plan his weekend around it. In 2009, my cousin's nephew, Thomas Morstead, was signed to the New Orleans Saints as a punter. We had met him a few times so it was really cool for my older two sons, who were seven and nine at that time, to see someone they sort of knew on TV. And if there was ever a year to start watching the Saints, it was that year. It was an amazing season that ended with a Super Bowl win. I found I loved watching football and loved that this was something my sons and I could do together, something we could bond over. As they got older, we watched not only the NFL but also SEC college football because hello, we're in the South, where SEC football is king. When I was thinking about jobs for Evie to do, I was looking for something that was a little different than the normal cons you see done. At that time, there was a lot in the news about schools getting in trouble for paying players and it just sort of clicked!

The book is primarily set in Louisiana and hops around to other Southern states like Mississippi and Tennessee. What role does the setting play in *First Lie Wins*, and how does it shape the story and characters? Were you trying to capture anything in particular about the modern South?

I love when *where* the book is set matters as much as the characters. It was important to me that the setting be a living, breathing thing where the events and actions of this story could only happen in these exact places because of the culture of the people who live there. I also loved the idea of setting these sophisticated crimes in a part of the country that most people don't see as sophisticated. The South is such a unique place and I wanted to highlight this part of the country.

Excitingly, *First Lie Wins* is in development as a series at Hulu, by Octavia Spencer and *Grey's Anatomy* showrunner Krista Vernoff. What can you tell us about the show?

Octavia Spencer and Krista Vernoff are a dream to work with and I couldn't be more excited they are bringing *First Lie Wins* to life on screen! I've read the script for the pilot and it is AMAZING! It stays true to the book while also elevating it for television.

What do you hope readers take away from *First Lie Wins*?

I hope the twists and turns kept them on the edge of their seats! I hope they fall in love with the special places where this book is set! I hope that if they aren't already a football fan maybe they'll turn on a game! I hope they loved reading it as much as I loved writing it!

