

### Excerpt from *The Ashwood Game*

Jenna kept running, her sneakers slapping the wet pavement, breath catching in her ~~throat~~lungs. She could still hear them behind her—two sets of footsteps, heavy and fast. Her legs wanted to give out, but she forced them on, every turn of Ashwood Heights a blur of shadows and broken streetlamps.

“Keep going,” she muttered, the words sticking in her ~~teeth~~throat. She hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but her voice felt ~~grounding~~, like it might hold her body together.

The alley she ducked into smelled like moldy cardboard and something chemical. The walls leaned in close, bricks sweating in the damp August night. She almost slipped on a slick patch but grabbed a drainpipe to steady herself, heart pounding so loud she was sure they would hear it.

She risked a glance back—empty. No figures, no flashlights. Just the dark mouth of the alley ~~swallowing~~silence. But she knew better. The Ashwood Game wasn’t over until someone was caught, and tonight, she was the target.

She pressed herself against the wall, trying to listen past her own ragged breathing. A dog barked three streets over. Somewhere, a car door slammed. Then—there it was. That whistle. Long ~~and~~, low, curling through the air like smoke. The same one they’d used at the school parking lot when they first found her.

Jenna’s stomach twisted. The whistle meant they were closer than she’d thought.

She bolted again, this time toward the far end of the alley, where a chain-link fence blocked the way. Its top ~~was strung~~curled with barbed wire, but she couldn’t go back. She grabbed hold, shoes scraping metal as she climbed. Halfway up, the fence rattled like it ~~was laughing at her~~would break apart.

“Don’t look down,” she whispered, fingers stinging ~~where the links cut~~. She ~~peeked~~looked anyway. A shadow slid into the alley below, long and thin, moving like water. Then another one joined it. Two of them, just like before.

Her pulse screamed in her ears. She scrambled the rest of the way, throwing herself over the top. The ~~barbed~~wires snagged her hoodie, tearing fabric and skin alike. She bit back a cry and landed hard on the other side, knees burning from the fall.

She didn't stop. Not when she tasted blood, not when the whistle floated again behind her, sharper this time. She couldn't stop, ~~—~~because if the rumors about the Game were true, if people really disappeared for good when they lost—then she was running for more than her own life.

The street ahead opened wide, lit by a single flickering bulb over a laundromat door. It looked ~~almost~~ safe. Almost.

But Jenna knew better than to trust ~~the light~~ anything in Ashwood Heights.

The laundromat door creaked ~~open~~ when she pushed on it, though she hadn't ~~really~~ meant to go inside. The smell of detergent hit her, sharp and sour-sweet, and for a ~~second moment~~, she thought she might be sick. Inside, a row of machines churned, all of them running, but no one in sight.

Jenna froze. ~~Were t~~The machines ~~weren't~~ supposed to be on? It was nearly midnight,; the place ~~locked had up~~closed hours ago. She should've turned around then, but the shadows in the alley pushed her forward.

She slipped between the rows, the hum of the dryers buzzing in her skull. A light above flickered once, then twice, like a signal.

Her hands shook as she pulled her phone from her pocket—still ~~no signal~~, no bars, just that gray void at the top of the screen. She hated the way it felt, like she'd been cut ~~out off~~ from the rest of the world, ~~—t~~like the Game had its own rules, its own space carved inside the town where nothing normal applied anymore.

A thump echoed from the far corner. Jenna ducked instinctively, sliding behind a dryer, her breath strangled in her chest. She listened. Another thump, slower this time, and then the sound of something dragging.

Her mind raced. Was it them? Or someone else trapped like her?

She peeked around the edge of the machine. For a moment she saw nothing but the checkered tile floor. Then, in the far corner, a figure stepped into view. A boy. Maybe a little older than her, hair matted, shirt ripped like he'd been running too. He looked at her, and his eyes widened, desperate.

“Don’t scream,” he whispered ~~hoarse~~, voice cracked and raw. “They’ll hear.”

Jenna’s throat tightened. She wanted to ask who he was, but the words ~~stuck~~ wouldn’t come. She only nodded, every muscle tensed, as the whistle sounded again—this time from inside the laundromat.