

# Assimilation



**Warning:** *The following excerpt is unedited. Typos and grammatical errors galore.*

**Double Warning:** *Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.*

**Triple Warning:** *Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!*

# Chapter 1

## SAWYER BLACK

The first day of my senior year was going to be epic. I could just feel it. You know how the hair rose on the back of your neck to warn you of trouble? Well, this was like that, except the total opposite. My skin prickled and blood rushed with excitement, telling me today was going to be huge in a good way. A real life changer.

My friends and I were going to be the top dogs at last. And what was even sweeter, the only other high school in town—South Bend—had just closed, as in permanently shut and locked their doors before tearing down their entire building. Why was this a good thing, you might ask. Well, now all these newbies would be flooding into North Ridge, forced to join our ranks. Ergo, there'd be even more clueless minions for us to rule than we'd originally dreamed.

“Check out this loser.” Mack nudged my arm before pointing at some dude entering the school. Tall but stoop-shouldered, he held the hand of the stick-thin girl next to him while he wore a T-shirt with South Bend's mascot on it.

I snickered. “Hey, man. Nice shirt.”

The Southie lover tossed me a harassed scowl before tugging on his girl's arm so they didn't pass too close to us.

My buddies and I burst out laughing. Yeah, we were going to assimilate so well.

On the final day of school last semester, Principal Crumb had gathered us into the gym for a lecture about how we were

supposed to *properly* welcome the new students flooding over from South Bend.

“I know this is going to be an adjustment for all of us. So I want everyone to be welcoming and friendly until they’re settled and realize this is their home as well as ours. This will be *everyone’s* school to share.”

I wanted to snort just thinking about his lame advice. Settle? Adjust? Welcome? Share? Yeah right. The Southies had been our sworn enemies since forever. And now that they were invading our halls, North Ridge had become a freaking war zone.

My group had established our metaphorical fort along the benches in the front entrance, ready, aimed, and prepared to fire at any hostile who dared breach our territory. Armed with spitballs and leering criticism, our battle line was drawn. We would take no prisoners. This school was ours. They could either bow to our superiority or leave.

“Oh, man. Check out this piece of work.” Dalton chortled from the other side of me. “Hey, what’s up with the tie?” he called to the dork who’d just pushed his way through the front doors right before he blew a wad of paper through a straw at him. “Did your mom pick out that outfit, little guy?”

The kid ducked and lifted his arm to shield his face before scurrying past just as Mack smacked Dalton across the back of the head. “Hey, no. That wasn’t a Southie. I think that was Danny Gracken’s cousin. He only lives three houses down from here. He’s just a freaking freshman.”

“Oh, crap.” Dalton cringed in attrition before calling loudly. “Yo, Tie boy! Sorry about that, man. We’re cool.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “You’re an idiot.”

“Hey, shut up.” Dalton jostled my shoulder hard. “You didn’t know either.”

To keep face, I had to bump my shoulder against his even harder. “But you didn’t hear me bashing him, now did you?”

We'd just dug our heels down onto the tile so we could push against each other with all our might when something went skidding past us, nearly tumbling over our shoes.

"What the...?" We jerked upright and lifted our feet off the floor as if to protect ourselves from the fallout before realizing it had just been a person wiping out, not a bomb or anything nuclear.

A mere girl from the looks of it: wild tangles of dark curls spilled over thin shoulders and down a narrow back where she'd taken a tumble directly in front of us. And no one had tripped her either; she'd just flat fallen of her own accord.

If that wasn't fodder for some good ribbing I didn't know what was.

"Wipeout!" Bindy cheered from the other side of Mack, who hooted, "Yeah, watch out for that floor there, honey. It'll reach up and grab your ankles, then yank your feet right out from under you."

"We don't take no klutzes here at North Ridge," Dalton carried on. "Maybe you should find some clown school to attend."

I didn't say anything. I'm not sure why. The girl was obviously from South Bend. I mean, I'd yet to see her face because she was too busy scurrying around the floor with her head lowered as she scrambled to retrieve everything that had spilled from her backpack, but there was no way I'd forget that long, dark untamed hair. It's possible she could've been a freshman, but I put my money on her being a Southie, which meant I should've attacked with the others.

But we hadn't really been targeting girls this morning. Other guys were much more enjoyable to pick on, and besides, what if we made some chick cry? That'd suck the fun out of our razzing welcoming committee. But I don't think that's why I held back either.

It was her hands that did it for me. They were slim and pale and bare except for a big, gaudy cheap-looking gem wrapped

around her middle finger. I swear it was one of those stupid mood ring things my little sister Sylvia loved to win from the quarter machines at the grocery store, except for some reason, on this hand, it looked classy. This hand that trembled so much it took the girl three tries to pick up the pen that had rolled far enough away she had to crawl on her hands and knees in her dress to fetch it.

My heart thumped hard in my chest as my pals continued to jeer.

Just from the way she moved and kept her face lowered and covered by her hair, I saw my sister in her—sweet, simple and painfully shy Sylvia—and that smothered my inner bully like rain on a campfire.

Morphing into protective big-brother mode, I lurched off the bench, startling the crap out of my friends, and crouched onto one knee to pick up the paperback that had landed close to me. It was called *The Devil's Arithmetic*, which only convinced me more this girl was a kindred soul to my sister. Sylvie was a consummate bookworm.

“Ignore these jerks,” I told her, extending the novel her way. “If they had any kind of grace themselves, they’d be jocks instead of the irritating bums they are.”

“Hey, that hurts,” Mack cried, clutching his chest. “That really hurts a lot, Black. I could be a jock if I wanted to.”

I ignored him, holding my breath and waiting for the girl to finally realize I’d picked up her book. She turned my way to search, only to pause when she saw it was being held firmly in a stranger’s grip. I wanted her to look up so bad I could taste the anticipation on my tongue. And finally, yes, her chin lifted.

Curtains of hair parted to reveal a slim, long face with a small pointed chin, big green-brown eyes and red lips that didn’t seem to be painted, they just looked extra red because her skin was so pale. But what surprised me most was the bean-shaped birthmark that curled around the outside edge of her right eye. It was about

three times the size of an actual bean and colored a dark mole brown.

As huge and unexpected as it was, it didn't make her ugly though. It actually, well, I think I was even more drawn to her after taking it in. It made her seem more vulnerable and scared.

"Thank you," she said in the softest voice I'd ever heard, so soft I was surprised I actually heard her. Or maybe I'd just felt her words deep in my bones.

She reached out slowly before snapping the book from my hand like a scared rabbit.

"Anytime," I murmured, remaining crouched on one knee as she popped to her feet and hurried off, her flip-flops slapping loudly against the floor as she fled. It suddenly struck me how old fashioned her dress was, like maybe it was either homemade or something a farm wife from the dust bowl had worn.

The other girls at North Ridge were going to crucify her for her lack of fashion sense. That made me scowl and want to chase after her so I could shoo away all the hoity-toity princesses who thought to turn their noses up at her for not being like them.

And why the heck I wanted to do that, I have no clue. That was just weird. Why was I being weird?

A shoe nudged me in the spine and had me straightening my back. I blinked myself back to the present before whirling around to glare at Dalton who'd kicked me.

"What?" I hissed.

He lifted his hands. "Dude, what's wrong with you?"

"Aww, does Sawyer have a crush?" Bindy taunted.

When everyone laughed, I scowled and straightened to my feet. "You guys are idiots." I glanced back at the girl but she was gone, swallowed up by the mass of students searching for lockers and classes and friends.

"Come on, Black." Mack motioned me back to the bench. "We're just messing with you. If you're really into wild Southie girls, we won't judge."

“I might,” Dalton added, which made Bindy crack up and announce, “Yeah, I’ll totally judge.”

I rolled my eyes. “You guys really are irritating, immature jerks.” And I took off away from them.

I wasn’t sure where I was going. It felt too weird to stalk the girl and yet I was still jonesing to find her and make sure no one messed with her.

As my friends called after me, beckoning me to return, I meandered along, noting how the two schools were integrating with one another, which they weren’t. The split was so noticeable you could cut a knife between them without nicking a single student.

It was obvious who belonged to which school with barely any deduction. North Ridgers had staked their claim at comfortable places with benches or close to the vending machines, while the Southies had lumped in clusters against cold hard, concrete walls or near the stinking bathrooms.

Principal Crumb was no doubt going to make us play those stupid mingling, get-to-know-you games before the day was over. If he asked us to sing holding hands or fall backward into a group of Southies to promote trust, that’d be one assembly I’d have to skip.

The first bell bellowed, warning everyone to get to class. I scowled at it for taking me away from that girl before heaving out a reluctant sigh and trudging to my locker to dig up a single pen and an already half-filled notebook. Gran didn’t believe in buying me new notebooks if I still had paper left in the one from the year before. I flipped to the first page to realize, yep, I’d owned this particular beauty since freshman year. Nice.

First hour was English for me. If my adviser had believed in the word mercy, he’d have let me stick with Plastics like I’d originally wanted. No one could concentrate on English first thing in the morning.

Well, at least I couldn’t.

I found a seat in the back and slumped down before tipping my head back and closing my eyes through a long exhale. Attending actual classes was the only thing I wasn't really looking forward to for my senior year.

"Yo, Black."

I cracked open my lids to find Bindy had English with me. Jessica Bindy was the only girl in my group, but she didn't dress or act like one. She kept her head shaved practically bald, so people usually mistook her for some kind of cancer survivor or a boy or something. And her T-shirts were always three sizes too big while her jeans slumped low and baggy. I wasn't sure if she was just the ultimate tomboy, a lesbian, or what; I'd never actually asked. It didn't matter, anyway. Bindy was just Bindy to me.

"Sup?" Kicking my foot against the seat next to mine so it would slide out away from its desk, I motioned for her to sit.

She paused, uncertain. "You sure? We're cool?"

I rolled my eyes. If she was talking about the way I'd ditched out on them by the front doors, I wasn't mad or hurt or whatever she assumed I was. It'd mostly been a pride thing. If I'd sat down with them after they'd heckled me, I would've been admitting defeat. But now I wondered if taking off had only proven I was a coward for running off and basically admitting to them that their words had ever bothered me.

"Sit," I commanded. "And stop being such a girl."

She scowled but dropped into the seat next to me. "I'm not being a girl."

"Whatever." I smirked more to myself over her obvious discomfort of anything girly. "What d'you have next hour? We got any more classes together?"

Bindy pulled up her schedule and we compared before realizing we shared the hour before lunch, putting us both on second lunch, and the last hour of the day together. "Sweet," I said holding out my fist for her to bump.

She tapped her knuckles against mine just as the second bell rang.

And my senior year at North Ridge High School officially began.

Despite the good feels juicing my veins, I had no idea it'd be so unlike any year I'd ever had before.