

*Tides of Grace*, a novel by W. B. Durham  
Book 1 of *The Grace Sextet*

Prologue. "That Part of Herself"

"Now hurry along. You'll be just fine. Your mother will tell you all about it." She didn't think she'd be just fine. At this very moment, she hated her sixth grade teacher, and she glowed with embarrassment. She gripped her long, pale blue skirt and pulled the fabric around to hide the stain. She felt more damp stickiness between her legs. Her efforts to cleanse herself in the girls' toilet had helped but only for a few minutes.

She walked the seven long blocks between Grant School and her home on East Seventeenth Street, mortification dogging her every step. Mother Nature had chosen a beautiful spring day to show the girl the treachery of her maturing body. The sun warmed St. Louis, and a gentle, dry breeze licked at her face.

Her mother had left early to spend the day with her Aunt Louise in St. Charles. Father had walked her to her school on his way to work, his eyes fixed on the walk ten feet ahead, his face pinched into a tight scowl, and his pace so quick she had to jog to keep up. He had left her on the school steps without a goodbye.

Her home huddled under the budding apple trees and peach trees surrounding it on three sides. She hurried past Grandpa Delaney's big garden, fallow now for the second year. The sight of the loamy plot without the familiar crouched figure stabbed at a spot in her heart, still tender from his passing.

At the front door, she immediately unbuttoned the waistband of her ruined skirt and stepped out of it. She raced up the front steps toward her bedroom and the WC between her room and her brother's. She wore but one petticoat and she loosed the string tie holding it up when she got to the top of the stairs. As the petticoat fell she could see that the bloodstain on it was bigger than the one on her skirt. She went in the WC and started water running in the zinc-lined tub, and then she dropped her underpants to the floor. She took off her shoes and stockings, stepped into the tub, and splashed herself clean. When she was done, she dabbed herself dry and quickly went to the box on the floor of the armoire in her bedroom where her mother had stored the gear she was told she would need. She put on a belt and pad and felt immediately better, but still she shuddered from her ongoing trauma.

She put on clean underpants, a fresh petticoat, and the rough cotton skirt she wore for chores. As she collected her cast-off clothing, she noticed her father's hat hanging on the coat tree by the front door. He wore it to work this morning. Why was it here now?

She piled all her soiled clothes in the kitchen sink then decided she should soak them in a laundry tub stored in the cellar. She went outside to the cellar door, which to her surprise stood wide open.

Her mother stored her laundry tubs at the foot of the stairs that led down to the cellar. As she reached for the handle of the tub, she noticed an outhouse stench in the basement. She peered into the gloom of the cellar and saw a large object against the back wall, under a window that pierced the foundation. The glaring light from the window blinded

her as she stepped toward the object. She edged nearer, feeling a slimy wetness beneath her bare feet. As she leaned forward to get a closer look, her right foot slipped and she caught herself on one knee. From the kneeling position she could see the object better.

The object was a man sitting in a chair against the cellar wall. She studied the man and slowly realized that he looked like her father, but his head was oddly shaped and his eyes bugged so that they seemed about to pop out of their sockets. The man's mouth was wide open and rimmed with soot.

Then deep within she felt a snap like a breaking tendon and instantly she became aware that she was now looking down on the scene of the kneeling girl and the seated man, looking down from an impossible position somewhere in the house over the cellar, looking down through the floor.

Then the girl felt another snap, and she knew she was looking at the ruined head of her father. That part of herself up there—an eye, a dark angel—directed her gaze to the shotgun lying on the floor. The girl wanted to scream, but the sound stopped in her throat. She pitched back, sprawling on the cellar floor.

Sometime later, the girl tried to push herself to a sitting position, but her hands slipped in the goo on the floor. Finally, she managed to stand and walk to the door. Before she climbed the steps, she picked up a folded slip of paper on the lowest step.

She rose into the light and looked down at herself, to see—once again—that she was covered with blood. It coated her hands and her bare feet. She looked at the back of her chore skirt and saw it was soaked with blood, and she knew the wetness she felt on her back and in her hair was also blood.

She walked across the yard and across Seventeenth Street to a house and knocked on the door. Mrs. Abrams answered and gasped. “Grace, whatever has happened? You’re covered with blood!”

“My father,” Grace said, and no more.