

Excerpt from Book 1 of
Janet Walker's *Amazed by Her Grace*

Two days later, on Wednesday morning, Tracy sat in the library, pretending to be absorbed in her history text but actually brooding over Splotch Eye's words. *You going out for basketball? You oughtta. You can play.* She knew Wanda meant well, and the advice would have worked on a normal girl. But Tracy *wasn't* normal; she knew this. A normal girl wouldn't suffer attacks of shyness so powerful they made her body forget how to do things it knew how to do.

She had gone out for the basketball team in eighth grade because the Haines middle-school coach had begged her to, but it had been a disaster. For one thing, Mama had refused to give her permission to play, just as she had done when Tracy asked to try out in the seventh grade. So, Tracy had forged Mama's name on the permission slip and secretly joined the team.

Her rebellion was short-lived, though, because she soon discovered that the skill she exhibited on the courts of the Area Place playground did not transfer to the inside courts of L. Carlton Haines. For some reason, she became disoriented in the formal gym setting, became nervous and petrified with so many people watching, and was unable to match ball to basket. And she had feared Mama would discover the deception. So, she quit after the team's first game, despite the coach's gentle reassurances, and never again tried out for an athletic team at Haines, not even when Miz Evans begged her to in the ninth grade.

But she was at Beck now. A sophomore. Grown. So, she shouldn't worry about freezing up again. Hadn't she done well Friday in P.E. with the basketball? Yes, she had. In fact, for the first time on an inside court, she had felt excitement burn in her chest and legs as she played with the other girls. She had! And she had made shots. So maybe she was over whatever it was that had immobilized her at Haines. Maybe, since she would be doing it for Jazz Nelson's wife, she could actually pull herself together enough to play ball on an inside court for Beck.

But it *was* Jazz Nelson's wife. And that was the problem.

Miz Grace didn't like her; Tracy knew this. And if she walked into tryouts next week, Miz Grace—and not just her but *all* the girls present—would look

at her and ask what she was doing in their gym, in their school, in their world. Because she didn't belong at Beck. No matter how perfectly creased her clothes were.

Several girls who had been sitting at a table near Tracy got up and left, and now the library, in the minutes before homeroom began, was empty of other students.

Tracy placed her history text in her backpack and stood. She walked toward the door, stopping along the way to examine first a globe and then a bulletin board, with no real interest in either.

Finally, she strolled up to a counter near one of the library's entrance doors. On the counter sat a thick oak bookstand, and on the stand lay an encyclopedia volume, its gilded pages open to a selected article. Tracy paused and stared. She had heard about the book and had finally come to school early enough, and gathered the courage needed, to venture into the library to check it out.

She glanced at the librarian, a tall woman with large curls in her hair, to make sure the woman was not watching, and then, in a casual manner, Tracy gazed down at the contents of the page. Without realizing it, she bent forward at the waist to get a closer look.

Gresham, Grace. U.S. track-and-field athlete who won four gold medals at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Canada.

Tracy paused, heart pounding, and had to take a deep breath. She had never before read something in a book about someone she knew. She surveyed her surroundings again quickly, then continued to read.

In doing so, Gresham became the first African American athlete, since sprinter Wilma Rudolph did so in 1960, to win more than three gold medals in an Olympic game.

Tracy felt something stir in her chest. So *that's* what Aunt Madge was talking about!

During the Montreal games, Gresham set new world records in the 100- and 200-meter dashes, the 4 x 100-meter relay, and the 4 x 400-meter relay, earning her

the nickname “Amazing.” In 1977, she was awarded the James E. Sullivan Memorial Award, given to the nation’s top amateur athlete. Born Grace Catarina Villanueva in Brazil on February 21, 1957, and orphaned at age eight, Gresham became an American citizen when she was adopted at age ten by Sidney and Margaret Tipton Gresham, of Seattle, Washington. The Greshams died in a plane crash in 1980, the same year the U.S. boycotted the Olympic Games in Moscow, for which Grace had trained. Discouraged by the boycott and her parents’ death, Gresham quit her athletic career and retreated from public life. She now resides in Atlanta, Georgia, where she coaches track and basketball at Beck Academy for Girls and is married to Darrel “Jazz” Nelson, shooting guard for the National Basketball Association’s Atlanta Majestics.

Tracy had become so absorbed in the text—indeed, had never in all her sixteen years been more engrossed in any reading material—that she was unaware of the entry of another person into the library. Only when she heard the voice did Tracy look up, startled.

On the other side of the room, two women stood, conversing. One was the librarian. The second woman was dressed in smart tailored tennis wear—a straight-cut tan skirt with a long-sleeved burgundy sport shirt, burgundy socks, and vibrant white Reebok sneakers. The outfit revealed, to Tracy’s interest, a set of shapely, bowed, muscular legs and the outline of the narrow hips and torso of an athlete.

With her back to Tracy, the woman asked if the librarian had “the book we spoke about.” The librarian said that of course she did and reached beneath the counter to retrieve a heavy book with a colorful plastic dust jacket. The woman in tennis wear received the book and said something about its weight that made them both laugh.

The beautiful athlete thanked the librarian and turned to leave. On doing so, she met eyes with Tracy, who stood transfixed above the open encyclopedia. The woman smiled briefly, faintly, and then walked out of the room.

Tracy’s heart pounded. Just like that, the woman from the page of the encyclopedia had materialized and gone.