

THE ARCHITECTURE OF GRACE

— *Book Six* —



THE DWELLING

*The Years We
Kept Coming Back*

JAMES ANTHONY RAMSDEN

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The Years We Kept Coming Back

BOOK SIX OF

The Architecture of Grace



James Anthony Ramsden

PART ONE



Knowing & Accepting Yourself



Who am I, when no one is assigning me the room?

THE FIRST AUGUST FOURTEENTHS OF ADULTHOOD — AND THE
LONG WORK OF LEARNING TO LIVE WITH THE SELF YOU ACTUALLY
TURNED OUT TO BE.

CHAPTER ONE

The Room With No Number

The cohort came back to the basement on August fourteenth of the year they all turned twenty-two.

They had finished college that May, most of them. They had walked across stages in four different cities and worn four different colors of gown, and their parents had cried in four different gymnasiums, and then it was summer, and then it was August, and then it was the fourteenth, and they came back down the stairs into Rosa's basement the way they had come back every August fourteenth since they were nineteen — which is to say, the way water comes back to the lowest place in a yard, without deciding to, because that is simply where it goes.

Sofia's mom made the sauce.

I want to tell you about the sauce, because the sauce is one of the few things in this book that does not change, and you are going to need at least one of those. It is a long sauce, a Sunday sauce, the kind you start in the morning and forget about and come back to, the kind that asks for nothing all day except that you be in the house. Rosa learned it from her own mother, who learned it in a country Rosa left when she was seven and remembers mostly as a smell. It has been the sauce at every August fourteenth dinner since the first one. It will be the sauce, with one substitution that I will tell you about when we get there, at

every August fourteenth dinner for the rest of these people's lives. You should hold onto that. A lot is going to come apart in this book. The sauce holds.

On this particular fourteenth, all ten of them came.

Mia flew in from Pittsburgh. She had just signed a lease on her first apartment that was not a dorm and not her parents' house — a one-bedroom over a bakery, which she had picked, she said, mostly for the smell, because she had read somewhere that the brain forgives a lot of a place if the place smells like bread. Amara took two flights and a shuttle from the east coast, where she had stayed after school to work for a city councilwoman whose name none of them could remember but whose causes Amara could recite in her sleep. She was wearing yellow. She had started wearing yellow in college and none of them knew exactly why and all of them had decided, privately, that it suited her, the way a color suits someone who has decided to be seen.

Maya drove three hours from the apartment she shared with two other artists, with paint still under her fingernails, which would be true of Maya at every dinner for the rest of her life. Priya came from the city, where she was waiting tables and writing at night and telling everyone, in a voice that dared you to feel sorry for her, that the waiting tables was research. Jordan came from the bookstore where he now had keys and a title — *assistant manager* — that he said with a small private pride the cohort noticed and did not tease him about, because the cohort had learned, somewhere around fourteen, the difference between the teasing that is love and the teasing that is not.

Darius came with a dog. The dog was new. The dog was not Pepper. Pepper had died in October of the year before, an old dog by then, gone the gentle way old dogs go, and Darius had said at last year's dinner that he was not going to get another one, and everyone had nodded and known he was lying, and here was the lie, eight months old, a brindle

mutt named Sergeant who was already too big for the basement and put his head in everyone's lap in turn as if taking attendance.

Theo came with Bex. Bex was new too, newer than the dog — Theo's girlfriend of five months, a tall quiet woman who laughed at the right places and helped Rosa carry plates without being asked, and the cohort liked her, genuinely, and said so to Theo in the kitchen, and Theo glowed in the particular way of a watcher who has finally been watched back. I am going to ask you to remember Bex. I am going to ask you to remember that the cohort liked her, that Rosa liked her, that on this night, the night they were all twenty-two, Bex stood at the bottom of the stairs with a stack of plates and laughed at something Kezia said, and was happy, and was loved, and belonged. Hold that, the way you are holding the sauce. You will need it later.

Kezia came from nursing school, where she was learning to hold lines that adults twice her age could not hold — the line at a bedside, the line on a chart, the line between *I can help you* and *I cannot save you*, which is the hardest line in any hospital and the one they teach you last. She came with Devon, who she had been seeing since spring, who was kind and a little overwhelmed by the ten of them and stood close to her all night the way you stand close to someone whose family you have just been let into.

And Marcus came last, the way Marcus always came last, with Lena, who he had met in a junior-year seminar and fallen for in the slow careful way of a person who has decided that the most important thing about love is not to lie inside it. Marcus had spent his whole childhood learning what a lie costs. He had a card on the Mistake Wall about it, the oldest card, the one about a bicycle and a girl named Aaliyah and a thing he said when he was six that was not true. Lena did not know the whole story yet. Marcus had told her the shape of it — *I told a lie when I was a kid and it took me years to make right* — but not the inside of it, not

the part that was still a stone. That, too, is later.

Ten of them, then. Around a long folding table, in a basement that smelled like sauce and bread and old concrete and Sergeant.

The room has no number.

That is the whole book, in a way. The first five books are about a teacher building something into ten children. This book is about whether the thing she built will hold once she is no longer in the room — once there is no room at all, only the one they keep choosing.

It holds.

But I am getting ahead. On this night they did not know any of what was coming. On this night they were twenty-two and finished with the part of life that gets graded, and just beginning the part that does not. Rosa called down the stairs that the sauce was ready. They came up in a herd, Sergeant first, and filled their plates, and came back down, and sat, and ate, and at some point — there is always a point — somebody said the thing that turns a dinner into the dinner.

It was Sofia, that year. It usually was. Sofia tapped her glass, not hard, just enough, and the table went the way a table goes when it has done this before, the laughter trailing off into a good and ready quiet, and she said what she said every year, the words Ms. Calloway used to say when they were small and the words had a number on a door behind them:

“Let’s go around the room.”

And they went around the room.

I am not going to give you all ten that first night. You will get all ten, many times, before this book is done. I will give you the shape of it. *Go around the room* means each person says one true thing about the year — not the headline, not the thing they would put on a holiday card, but the true thing, the one under the headline. Ms. Calloway taught them this in the first grade with a basket of stones, and she refined it for twelve years, and it had survived into adulthood mostly unchanged,

except that the stakes had gotten quietly enormous. A child's true thing is *I was mean to my sister and I feel bad*. An adult's true thing is the kind of thing that, said out loud at a table, cannot be unsaid.

That first dinner of their twenties, the true things were still mostly soft. Mia said she had moved for a job she was not sure she wanted, to a city where she knew no one, and that some nights the bakery smell was the only thing that felt like a reason to stay. Jordan said he had stopped doing the funny voice — the one he did to fill silence, the one that had been his whole personality in middle school — and that the silence underneath it was lonelier than he expected and also, somehow, more honest, and he did not know what to do with that yet. Amara said she had figured out that she wanted to run for something someday, an actual office, an actual ballot with her name on it, and that she had not said that out loud to anyone before this table, and that saying it made it real and the realness scared her.

Darius said the dog's name was Sergeant and that he had not wanted another dog and that he had gotten one anyway and that he supposed the lesson was that you do not get to decide in advance how much you are willing to love something again. He said it looking at the dog and not at the table, which is how the cohort said the things that cost the most.

Sofia went last, because the one who runs the room always goes last, a habit she had picked up from Ms. Calloway and would keep for the rest of her life, and which would become, in a few years, a kind of hiding. That night, though, she only said that she was tired in a way that sleep did not fix and that she was sure it was nothing. The cohort nodded. The cohort filed it under *grad-school tired* and *new-adult tired* and moved on, and I want you to notice that they moved on, and I want you to not blame them, because Sofia had spent her whole life making sure that when she said *it's nothing* people believed her. She was good at it. She

was the best of any of them at it. That is going to matter.

Then Rosa came down with the second pot, and the going-around dissolved back into a dinner, and Theo and Bex did the dishes, and Maya drew on a napkin, and Kezia and Devon left early holding hands, and Marcus walked Lena out to the car and stood in the August dark for a minute before he went back in, and the cohort stayed late, the way they always stayed late, in the room with no number, until Rosa turned the kitchen light off above them as a hint, and they pretended not to take it, and stayed a little longer anyway.

That is how it started, their adulthood — not with a door opening, but with a table, and a sauce, and ten people choosing a room nobody had assigned them.

You walk out, in Book Five. That was the whole last book: the walking out. The doors, the hallway, the world.

This book is what you do once you are out. Where you go. What you keep. Who you keep going back to.

You go back to the room with no number.