

AISLING RAWLE THE COMPOUND

A Novel



THE COMPOUND

a novel

Aisling Rawle



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N E W Y O R K

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For Dee and Dave

THE STUPIDEST QUESTIONS of all were asked by Mollie, the white mare. The very first question she asked was: “Will there be sugar after the rebellion?”

“No,” said Snowball firmly. “We have no means of making sugar on this farm. Besides, you do not need sugar. You will have all the oats and hay you want.”

“And shall I still be allowed to wear ribbons in my mane?” asked Mollie.

“Comrade,” said Snowball, “those ribbons that you are so devoted to are the badge of slavery. Can you not understand that liberty is worth more than ribbons?”

Mollie agreed, but she did not sound very convinced.

—GEORGE ORWELL, *Animal Farm*

PART

|

ONE

WOKE UP FIRST. THERE WAS no particular significance to it, only that I have always slept poorly and generally wake early in the morning. I had no way to tell the time, but I thought that I had slept a while: my limbs were heavy and stiff from a long, motionless sleep. The room was dark and windowless, with only a small skylight directly above my bed, though it didn't smell of sleep, or musk: it smelled fresh and airy, as if it had recently been cleaned. I thought I could detect the slightest trace of air freshener, citrus-scented, or maybe pine. There were ten beds, though only one aside from my own was occupied. The girl in the bed across from me was slowly emerging from sleep. She sat up and looked at me. She was beautiful, but that was to be expected.

"Hello," I said after a few seconds. "I'm Lily."

"I'm Jacintha," she said. "Nice to meet you."

I put my feet on the floor, feeling newly born. I stretched, arms high above my head, and heard my joints pop. There was air conditioning whirring, but I could feel the heat that lurked behind it, thick and cloying. When I looked over, Jacintha was standing. She was wearing underwear and a tank top. Looking down, I saw that I was wearing something similar.

It might have been awkward, but she smiled at me. "Will we find the others?"

We made our way through the house, exploring as we went. The house was at once familiar and entirely new to me. On either side of the bedroom were the dressing rooms: the boys' to the left, ours to the right. The boys' room held no interest for us, and we went directly to our own. It was

enormous, much bigger than the bedroom. It was where we could keep all of our things, once we had them. The room was mostly composed of storage space: built-in wardrobes, chests of drawers, cupboards, and some glittery boxes, similar to one I had used to store my dress-up costumes as a young girl. Running through the center of the room was a gray laminate-covered table, with a bench on each side. Along the table were lighted mirrors and the little screens. I touched one, but the screen remained black.

While the bedroom had been clean, the dressing room was distinctly untidy: there were clothes strewn across the floor, and makeup stains along the table, with the lingering scent of feminine products still hanging in the air. Jacintha and I looked through the drawers and storage spaces and found mostly clothes, the majority of them cheap and worn: swimsuits that had been stretched to the point of translucency, stained dresses, and tired-looking T-shirts. There were a couple of nice pieces, possibly designer—a few dresses, a skirt, and a jacket. They were stiff and creaseless, and I thought that they likely had never been worn.

Down the hallway was the bathroom, tiled and pristine. There were two toilets, a urinal running along the length of the wall, a shower, and a bath, large and inviting, shaped like an oversized canoe. There was a sleek gold bar on which towels hung, matching gold knobs on the cabinet doors, and a similar gold bar over the mirror by the sink. The taps were a fine brass color, with an impressive number of soaps lined along a shelf, and an artfully arranged stack of toilet paper. On the wall beside the bath was a painting, large and abstract. It was the only piece of art I had ever seen in the house. I knew that the place had changed drastically over the years, but the same piece of art stayed, unmoved. The bedroom and dressing rooms had been nice enough, but they were designed for practicality. The bathroom was pure luxury: perfect, except that it had no door.

Jacintha and I went downstairs. There were a number of empty rooms, perhaps four or five. There were some empty boxes left in them, and I thought that the rooms must have been used for storage. There were two

more bathrooms, and though they were nice enough, they were clearly the lesser bathrooms.

We came to the living room and paused uneasily in the doorway. While the dressing room had been messy, this room had been trashed. There was no sofa, but there were folding chairs that lay in one corner. There was a mirror on the ground, shards of which reflected the mess around it: a dented wall, a legless coffee table, a shattered vase. Nearly everything in the room had been broken or destroyed, except for the big screen, which hung on the wall, untouched. Like the little screens, the big screen was blank. Neither Jacintha nor myself commented on the mess, but we stayed standing in the doorway for a minute or so, waiting to see if the big screen would turn on.

Then there was the kitchen, large and mercifully well stocked. There were granite countertops with the usual appliances, and a small island with three barstools. The kitchen had an industrial feel to it, designed to accommodate several people cooking at the same time, or cooking in large amounts. Jacintha and I spent a while there, rooting through cupboards and drawers. There was enough food to last for a long time—weeks, at least.

Although it was well built and well supplied, it was incredibly messy; bewilderingly so. There were eggshells on the ground, splashes of sauce on the wall, and dishes in the sink. The floor was dirty, the counters sticky. The bins were overflowing and smelled of rotting meat.

“There’s no freezer,” Jacintha said.

“The fridge is huge, though,” I said. I opened the chrome double doors, admiring its wingspan, and smiled at her. She looked at me like she wasn’t sure about me yet.

There was a large window above the sink that stretched almost the length of the wall. It had a nice effect, though it meant that the kitchen was uncomfortably warm, almost pulsing with heat. Through it, I could spot the swimming pool in the distance. It was only when I saw the blue-tinted water, glinting in the sun, that I fully came to terms with where I was and what we were doing.

“Look,” Jacintha said. It took me a minute to see the girl, curled up as she was, sleeping on the ground at the lip of the pool.

We went out to inspect her. When we approached her, she didn’t move. I wondered briefly if she was dead. Jacintha crouched down and shook her by the shoulder. For a second, looking down at her, I thought that she looked a lot like myself, and felt a pulse of worry. Then the girl woke, and I could see that she didn’t actually look like me: she was just thin and blond too. She was faintly pink all over from lying in the sun. The girl looked up at us, adjusting her hair.

“Hey, guys,” she said. “I’m Susie.” Jacintha and I introduced ourselves, and Susie smiled and nodded. “Those are great names,” she said with energy.

We looked at each other, trying to think of something to say.

“Isn’t the pool incredible?” Susie asked.

I said, “I was just thinking that.”

“I don’t know how I woke up here. I don’t remember going to sleep, but that doesn’t really matter now, does it? Oh,” she said, looking around her. “There’s so much sand. Wow. It’s warm, too. I’ve only just woken up, and I don’t think I’ve ever been so warm in my life! Where did you two wake up?”

“We both were in the bedroom,” Jacintha said. Susie looked a little thrown, so I said, “You’re the first we’ve found.” She looked happier, and we set out to find the others.

As we wandered, we were able to take in, for the first time, the scale of the place where we would be living. The compound spilled out, varied and brilliant: red-brown earth, yellowed grass in some places and startling, vivid greenery in others; pebbled paths, small bits of vegetation and amenities, and surrounding it all, separated from us by a ring of bushes, the desert stretching endlessly to the horizon. Toward the back of the compound, the grass and vegetation bloomed, and an irrigation system spat lazy drizzles of water, the light casting rainbows through the droplets, a casual sort of beauty that contrasted almost garishly with the monotonous plains that lay beyond. The sight of the desert gave me pause; I had seen it before on the television, of course, but it was a different thing entirely to see it before me.

The pale gold sand and the flat, barren land seemed as though it had never been tempered by human feet. It was from there that the boys would come, and to there that we would be banished, if it came to that.

While the sheer size of the compound was incredible, it was distinctly run-down. It looked a lot like the home of a billionaire, if the billionaire's staff had gone on strike.

Directly in front of the house was a patio, wrapping around the side. To the west of the house the grounds were lush and attractive, with long paths intersecting pretty flower beds. There was a pond glimmering in the distance, and gates and walls that led to nowhere as though someone had started to section off parts, but had given up. At the farthest western point sat an immense maze, green and imposing.

The west was picturesque, while the east was functional. There was a tennis court: no net or equipment, but the ground had been properly marked. There was a small outdoor gym with a bench and a step machine. A little farther beyond, there was a ping-pong table, which looked fairly new, and a trampoline with rusted springs and tired, sagging canvas.

Curiously, though there were many parts of the compound which were in serious disarray, you could see that there had been a concerted effort to build a boundary. As well as the bushes, which had been planted a long, long time ago, there was a simple wooden fence running along the entire grounds, demarcating where our home ended at the expanse of the desert. Previously, I knew, there had been only barbed wire. The fence was an upgrade.

There was much to explore, but I was most interested in the huge, egg-shaped pool, and wherever we walked, I kept turning back to look at it again. The pool was the thing that held the place together: it was what transformed some ill-kept gardens and strange walkways into a residence.

The next girl found us; she was already awake. She was standing in a sandy patch of ground behind the house. She had her hands on her hips, looking out into the desert, so still that we hadn't noticed her at first. She raised her arm in greeting, and I felt her eyes move across us, taking in what she could. Even before we reached her, even from a distance, and with her

face partly covered, I could tell that she was beautiful. There was something in the way that she stood, or maybe something about the way her hair fell. Sure enough, when we reached her she dropped her hand, and I saw that she had the kind of face that drove people to madness, with desire or with envy.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Candice.” She looked at us expectantly, and we each introduced ourselves. I remembered that I wasn’t wearing any makeup.

I couldn’t help but stare at her, even as I tried not to look too bothered by her presence. Her hair was long and dark, intimidatingly straight despite the humidity. She had particularly striking eyes of a very light blue, almost translucent; they looked over us carefully, appraisingly. Her mouth was not of a shape or size that was currently in vogue; my own lips were carefully constructed to look full and plump. Her mouth was wide with narrow lips, a decisive slash of pink across her face. There was no part of her beauty that didn’t make me question mine.

“Four of us, now. I think I saw someone asleep by that flower arch. This way,” she said, and we followed her.

It took us a long time to find the others—probably a couple of hours. We searched the whole compound, except for the maze, which none of us wanted to enter, even in a group. When all ten of us had gathered together, we headed toward the pool. The heat was relentless, shocking even, and I had no thought beyond getting cool. We stripped down to our underwear and slipped into the water, relief coming at once.

I lay on my back and looked at the sky above me. It was a different blue than I was used to. It was clear, entirely untouched by clouds or smog, with no tall buildings to block out great chunks of it, nor artificial lights to disguise its hues. The compound was rough around the edges, definitely, and needed a great deal of work, but there was something about it that felt fantastically real. Wherever the cameras were, they weren’t easy to spot.

We all drifted about the pool aimlessly. We smiled if we caught each other’s eyes, but didn’t speak. I didn’t enjoy the silence. I thought it made it seem as though we were hatching plans of some sort, though I suppose people only wanted to be left to their own thoughts. Toward one end of the

pool, Susie was doing handstands. I didn't join in, but I swam toward her and watched. She was pretty good: her legs were straight as an arrow in the air, and when she was done, she did a tumble under the water and returned to the surface, smiling.

I've always been a passive kind of person; it is both my worst quality and the thing that people like most about me. If the others had stayed in the pool for the rest of the day I would have done the same, but apparently they only wanted to cool off, so when the others got out, I got out too, and when everyone sat under the shade of a tree, I did the same, though I dreaded the thought of insects on my bare skin. Were there ticks in the desert? I wanted to look it up, but remembered that I had no phone.

Candice was the last to get out of the pool. I watched her from the shade; we all did. She slicked her hair back in one casual sweeping motion, pressing it close to her skull and away from her face. She dived under the water: sleek, without a splash, only her ankles flashing in the air before she was fully submerged. For a few seconds, she traveled silently under the water, an abstract blur, and emerged at the other side. She walked slowly up the steps, exposing her body one inch at a time, until she was beyond the domain of the water and stood on the deck, dripping and strong-limbed, her hair still in place.

I could imagine just how impressive it would have looked for people watching. It was sort of embarrassing, actually: Candice knew exactly what she was doing, and the rest of us were just bumbling around, trying to avoid the worst of the heat.

When we all had found a comfortable spot to sit, we got to talking a little. A blond-haired girl named Eloise said that she liked my hair, and I said that I liked her nails. Another girl, beautiful and buxom, who I thought might be called Vanessa, added that she felt as though she might die from the heat. It was all harmless chitchat, as there wasn't much we could really say. Then Candice caught my eye, and said, "If the boys were to arrive this minute, what kind of guy would you go for?"

The gaze of every girl was resting on me. I wrung my hair out a little, to give myself time. It was a good question. It was the question we needed to get out of the way, before they came.

“Probably the guy who gets me into trouble,” I said. I thought it was a good answer, even if it wasn’t necessarily true; I had prepared it in the weeks before I came. I thought that it was open enough that I wasn’t hemming myself in before I’d seen anyone, and it made me sound adventurous. Some of the girls nodded thoughtfully as they looked at me. “And I definitely prefer an older man.”

“Do you have daddy issues?” Susie asked.

“Not that I know of,” I said.

“What about you?” I asked Candice. “What are you looking for?”

She shook her hair out; it was still wet, and small droplets flew about her, one landing on my ankle. I pressed a hand to my arm: it was warmer than the rest of me. I was burning already.

“I like boys who are driven,” she said. “A man who knows himself. That’s what I want.”

The question of what kind of man we each wanted was passed around from girl to girl. Susie liked boys who treated her nicely, and who liked to have fun. Susie didn’t like boys who were boring. Jacintha liked boys who were kind, especially to people they didn’t know. Jacintha cared deeply about her family, and she wanted a man who was also family oriented. Mia liked boys who worked out: it showed dedication, and she appreciated a man who could pick her up above his head. She liked to feel dainty. Short, scrawny guys disgusted her. Becca, who was quiet, and blushed as she gave her answer, said that she liked a man who was kind—that was all. The other girls didn’t answer, which I thought was suspicious.

“When do you think the boys will get here?” Mia asked.

We all glanced at each other.

“It can take a while,” Jacintha said carefully. I understood that Jacintha wanted to say that in previous years it had sometimes taken only hours and

sometimes days. She couldn't say this explicitly, because it would have broken one of the rules.

There were several rules at the compound. The first was that it was forbidden to discuss that the show was in fact a show, or that we had seen the show before. It ruined the experience for the viewer and the participants, we had been told. The second was that we couldn't discuss our life outside of the compound unless we had been instructed to do so. The third was that it was forbidden to harm another resident. There were other rules, but they wouldn't come into effect until the boys arrived. We all understood that if we broke any of these rules we would be punished.

"We should start getting the place in shape now, in case they're here by tonight," another girl said. I couldn't remember her name, but she was tall, with sharp features and a faint accent that I couldn't place. I imagined her as a marketing intern, going out for salads for lunch. As I examined her, she turned and looked at me. I pretended to stare at the sky behind her.

"Where to start?" Eloise said. "The whole place is a mess."

"The house," Candice said, and stood. "The rest can wait. We need to get the kitchen and bedroom in shape first." Candice held her hand out to me. Her grip was strong, and the muscles in her arms moved subtly as she pulled me to my feet. I was small and soft by comparison. The rest of the girls got up too, and we filed into the house like a line of ants. I kept looking around me, trying to make sense of the space, the condition that it was in. Along the way, we picked up the odd bit of rubbish that we found, left by the residents who had come before us.

—

WE SEPARATED INTO different rooms, and it was a relief not to have to look at all nine of the girls at once. Some went upstairs to clean the bedroom, while a group went into the living room to tidy up the mess. I helped in the kitchen, cleaning the surfaces and taking the rubbish out. There was no

hoover, and no dustpan either: we swept up the dust using a table mat. The absence of a Hoover particularly disturbed Mia, who said, "I didn't think it would be so poorly equipped. It's primitive, no?"

"We have a washing machine and a dishwasher," Vanessa said. "It's not a bad start."

I picked up a half-eaten apple from the windowsill of the kitchen, around which fruit flies had begun to swarm. The inside of the apple was brown, but not rotten. I reckoned it had been eaten a day ago, maybe less. As I was throwing it out, I saw greasy paper plates and pizza boxes in the bin.

"They had pizza," I said. No one responded or showed any interest, but it was interesting to me at least. It made the previous residents seem real. I had already begun to see the place as ours; it was strange to think of other people living there before us.

I didn't know under what circumstances they had left—as this year's batch of contestants we hadn't been allowed to watch for the last couple of weeks. The last time I had been able to watch, the rewards were just starting to get really good. One of the girls had gotten a hair straightener that I'd always wanted. "Salon standard," I remembered her saying, showing the steaming straightener to the other girls. She had shared it on the first day she received it, but after that had locked it in a drawer and did her hair only at night, when the others were asleep. The other girls would wake up, frizzy-haired, and look at her resentfully.

"I don't understand why they didn't take better care of the place," Mia said.

"It's not that bad," Jacintha said. She was standing at the window in the kitchen and pointed out to the garden beyond. "They planted flowers, see?"

I looked out into the garden, at the brushes of pink and violet among the yellow-green grass. Yes, the place was beautiful, even if it needed work. We could begin in earnest when the boys arrived.

We cleaned the dishes and left the kitchen in some semblance of order. But before we prepared dinner we opted to change for the evening, lest the boys arrive and find us as we were, hair uncombed and faces bare.

In our dressing room, we sifted through the various garments that had been left behind. We were generous with each other, bestowing pieces to the girl they would suit the best, and lavishly complimenting each other every time we tried something on. I found a couple of things I liked, and picked my second-favorite one to wear, a pink gingham romper. I decided I would save the nicest piece—a red dress with a sweetheart neckline—for when I needed it badly.

On the front of each wardrobe was a mirror, meaning that even though we turned our backs or retreated into corners there was no way to avoid seeing each other. As I stripped off my shorts and my tank top, I saw flashing limbs in the mirrors: someone's arm contorting to slip into a dress, someone else's thigh, hair being swept over a shoulder. I knew that there were a number of cameras in the room, and that we all were being filmed, but, oddly enough, that was one of the aspects of the day which perturbed me the least. I didn't bother to examine the room to see where the cameras might be. I more or less acted as I had on the outside—with the assumption that we were all being watched in some way or another.

There were very few makeup products, only some different shades of foundation, and two tubes of mascara which we passed around without hesitation. In a different situation I might have thought twice about sharing eye makeup with strangers, but we were in no position to be fussy. Jacintha hovered around when we were sorting through the foundation, and I saw that there was no makeup for dark skin. She met my eye and shrugged. "It's fine," she said.

"Sit down," I said. "I'll do your eyes."

I did her makeup with careful swipes, my hand pressed lightly to her cheek to stop her head from moving. When I was finished, she opened her hand and showed me something dark and spiderlike.

"Here," she said. "Have them. I don't think they've been used."

They were false eyelashes. I fingered them, feather-light and delicate. "Are you sure?"