
Chapter 1

Time: 4:05 p.m.

Place: the indoor swimming pool at the Ridge Valley Health and Day Spa.

For Gilly Roberts, it was the time of day she loved best and the place where she found the most peace of mind. At the age of twenty-two, she had found the perfect antidote for her restless, turbulent spirit, her job at the Ridge Valley Health and Day Spa as an exercise, yoga, and swim instructor. She taught three yoga classes, two exercise groups, and one swim class each day, five days a week. On her off day, she held private lessons.

The rigorous schedule would have exhausted most people, but Gilly thrived on it. Filled with nervous energy, she needed the release of her work. Naked, at a neat one-hundred-fifteen pounds on a perfectly toned five-foot-seven body, other women envied her looks. Her job as an exercise instructor saw to that.

And each day ended with a long swim.

Gilly's routine was always the same. She liked it that way. People, including her closest friends, thought she craved thrills and excitement, but what Gilly desired was stability. There was safety in familiarity and sameness.

Her shift at the spa was over at 3:55 p.m.

It was a quick beeline to the pool dressing area from the studio where she conducted her classes. Quickly, she would peel off her yoga pants and top and slip into her blue one-piece suit that looked great against her creamy-colored skin and red hair. Five minutes after four exactly, she would dive into a usually empty pool.

It was always the same. Familiarity she could count on.

But not today.

Today, she had company, and it wasn't even anyone she knew.

Gilly spotted the strangers the minute she entered the pool enclosure. Two men, dressed in thick, white terrycloth robes, carrying spa towels engraved with the spa logo, stood near the steps at the shallow end of the pool, talking quietly. When she entered the pool area, they both turned and gave her a cursory glance and then went back to their conversation.

Gilly suppressed a groan of frustration and told herself she was being unreasonable. The pool was open to the public from three in the afternoon until five. Smothering her irritation at this intrusion into her private world, she decided to ignore them completely. No friendly waves or "hello there".

But when she executed a perfect dive into the water, Gilly knew they were again watching her. She could feel their eyes scrutinizing her every move, and she wasn't surprised. Men always seemed to be interested in her. Her friends told her she was very pretty, but Gilly rarely looked back at her admirers. It wasn't that she didn't like men. She did! But she was always very wary. She was a woman on the edge, and it didn't take much to set her off. One false step could ruin a

date. Many of her admirers learned to tread carefully around her.

People joked her fiery temper came along with her flaming red hair, and Gilly let them think that. But she knew the truth. Her eagerness to go to battle stations came from something else, something deep inside her. She had become a fighter just moments after her birth, twenty-two years ago. She would have died of cold if she hadn't screamed her head off, drawing the attention of the people at the local women's shelter where she had been abandoned one September night.

Watch your surroundings and be prepared to kick ass! Gilly lived her life by that motto.

Today was no exception. She made another dive from the high board, executing a perfect swan dive. Pretending to tread water, she studied the two men. Her gut feeling told her something was off about the strangers, but she couldn't figure out what it was. She did a back flip, went under the water, and came up sputtering. The men were still deep in conversation.

Her attention riveted on them now. In their odd way, they looked amazingly alike: silver white hair and very tall. Perhaps they were twins? She guessed their age at any point between twenty-five to forty. Hard to tell. And most noticeably, they were both extremely pale. Perhaps they were albinos?

Her eyes were bleary from the chlorine, so she had trouble focusing.

Bored with her own questions, she began to swim her laps. She had promised herself to do forty each day. She was a good swimmer, and the first ten laps were a piece of cake. It was during the sixteenth lap that a thought came to her.

Why were those men just standing there in a pool area if all they wanted to do was talk?

They were dressed for swimming, but neither had gone in the water. Each of them had dry hair. It was clear they hadn't entered the water before she arrived. Why would someone go to

all the trouble of undressing, putting on a bathing suit and robe, just to conduct a chat?

Gilly surfaced, sputtering, and took another look. They were still there and still deep in conversation. They weren't looking at her now, but somehow, she sensed that they were talking about her.

Easy, Gilly, she told herself. Don't get paranoid! No need to go to battle stations. They hadn't caused a problem. They hadn't even tried to talk to her. They were probably just some odd balls. Maybe they were afraid to swim.

To break up her routine of laps, she glanced at the clock. She was running late. Tonight was 'pizza Thursday' and she had told her three best friends, Jessie, Nora, and Rose she would meet them at the pizza parlor for dinner, so she had better get going.

She took a deep breath and dove under water. Every day, her lung capacity increased, and she could stay under longer than the day before. Now she was up to three full minutes. No one believed her, but she was positive about her progress. When she was oxygen depleted, she began to see flashing green lights. That was her sign to surface, gasping, and take in large gulps of air. Today, she managed three minutes, five seconds. She forgot the two men as she rested and then swam until she finished her fortieth lap. Leaning against the side of the pool, she looked down at the shallow end.

The two men were gone.

Inside the men's dressing room, the two strangers conferred with a third entity on a computer screen.

"You were right. I think she is perfect." The voice spoke with authority. "She is a very desirable human. I am excited, just looking at her."

The two men were relieved.

"I thought you would find her interesting," one of them said.

"I've studied her closely and the only time she seems really happy is when she is in the pool."

"Perfect. I think she will make a fiery lover. Our sexual experiments will be very interesting."

The other man called over his shoulder. "Tonight? Correct?"

"Correct."

"My team is prepared for all eventualities."

"I would expect nothing less." The voice on the screen signed off with a nod of authority.

The two men smiled at each other. The slightly older one spoke. "I am glad our master is pleased."

The younger one smiled back. "So say I."

The older one winced. "No, no. You are supposed to say 'so am I.'"

The younger one nodded. "So am I."

The older one was stern. "Remember, Observer 1400. To blend in, one must speak their language perfectly. And from now on, you will be called Obe."

"Yes, Senior Observer. Obe. My new name." His silver-colored eyes flashed with approval.

After her swim, Gilly showered, then air dried her long red hair and pulled it back with a clip. She dressed in jeans, a blue tank top and low-heeled sandals that she had packed for a night out with the girls. A quick application of dusty blue eye shadow, mascara, and touch of blush, a dab of Siren perfume, and she was done. She studied her reflection in the full-length mirror and nodded her head in approval. She almost looked like everyone else. In fact, no one except herself saw that her arms and legs were too long for her body and her arms a little too thin.

'Stop being so critical,' her friends told her. 'Everyone thinks

you are gorgeous.' Gilly kept quiet but she saw her flaws all too clearly. Still, tonight, she looked good, and she was eager to see her dear friends. They were her family. She shoved her dirty clothes into a plastic bag, pushed the bag to the bottom of her large purse and headed for the lobby. It was required that she sign in and out each day.

She flashed a brilliant smile at George, the evening clerk at the spa. George had gone to school with her. It was almost time for the rush, but things were still quiet. Ridge Valley, Ohio was a small farming community rapidly growing into a suburb of Eastwood, a much larger town. Still, for the locals, it was a community where everyone knew everyone else.

"Is this the night for the Crazy Quartet to howl?" George teased Gilly. He knew she met her three old friends every Thursday night for pizza. It was a friendly question, not prying.

"You bet," Gilly confirmed. "We've been friends since forever."

"Even five years after high school, you guys are still close. I like that." George nodded.

"Me, too." Gilly turned to leave, and then a thought struck her. "Hey, George? Did those two men sign out from the pool?"

George's friendly expression went blank. "Two men? What two men? I've been here since three and only your last yoga class signed out."

Gilly felt a quiver of apprehension, remembering that something hadn't seemed right with those two guys. Her intuition was on target.

"Let me see the log." Gilly reached over and pulled it close. "They were in the pool area when my shift ended."

"Were they a problem?" George was immediately concerned.

"No, not at all. They were dressed for a swim and talking when I got there. I was doing my laps when they strolled out. But the odd thing was they never got in the water."

"Can you wait here a second? I'll go check. No one should have been there." It was clear George was troubled.

"Sure." Gilly put down her bag.

George used the side door to the pool area and was back in less than three minutes.

"Well?"

"No one. And the door is locked from the outside." George was clearly upset. "How could they have gotten past me? You sure you don't know them?"

"Positive." Gilly thought about it for a moment. "What about the security camera for the pool area? Can you get it on your computer?"

"Good idea!" George pulled it up immediately and ran it back a half hour. "Is this them?"

Gilly came around the counter and peered at the screen. There they were. Trouble was the security camera was on the far side of the pool area, and condensation blurred the screen.

"I see them heading for the men's dressing room," George said.

"Can we see in there?" Gilly laughed, but she knew that the dressing rooms did not have cameras. It would be a violation of privacy. "How about the hall leading to the door?"

George changed views, found the hall, and they saw the heavy metal outside door close shut, as if someone had just left the building.

"Damn." George played with the feed. "I don't get it. They just disappeared."

"It is odd, but they seemed harmless. Maybe they just wandered in before your shift and accidentally locked the back door when they left." Gilly had lost interest. Her mind wasn't playing tricks on her. There had been two men in the pool area, and they had left. She wasn't imagining things.

George was clearly relieved too.

"Yea. That must be it. Say hi to the girls."