

## Spine Angle

Luci strode through Golf Galaxy cleats squeaking, after-hours. The racks of nylon clothes smelled dry and plastic like the hospital where Roger's striking brother, Terry, supervised her as Head Nurse. As she approached Roger, legendary golf course fairways flickered on the padded wall ahead as he browsed the golf simulator's catalog, feeling out a fitting target for her.

In the glow of the projected images, the raised pink diamond on Roger's temple - the point-blank scar carved by an errant, career-ending drive that delivered him to the Emergency Room during her shift - stood in relief. By now, she saw the tremors in his left hand as an endearing flaw, like Napoleon's shorter arm. Although these evening lessons had started as a scheme to garner insider information about Terry and learn his favorite sport, they had become a playground for the very interests she felt would repel him, interests Roger took seriously. Luci gave the time on her pager a final glance; it was time to follow Roger's instructions.

"Prompt is good," Roger greeted her while adjusting the height of the simulator's video camera. "It demonstrates internalized discipline."

"I've been practicing all week what you taught me about hinging my wrists," she replied slightly out of breath. Grabbing a six iron from the "Lessons" bag, she stepped to the edge of the Astroturf tee box.

“Do some swings, loosen up,” he advised.

Crushing invisible golf balls as she moved her arms in methodical arcs, Luci ruminated through her list of anxieties: Would this approach work with Terry? He was so hard, so precise, so Ralph Fiennes in *Schindler’s List*. He was obsessed with golf, why wouldn’t he want to play with me? Because she had “better learn how to cook with a face like hers,” as her father liked to say. He was such an asshole. A drunk, ungrateful shit. She glanced at her overlocked fingers. Is Roger noticing how hard she’d been practicing? Could she keep taking these lessons if Terry took the bait? Terry wouldn’t know how to make her burn like Roger does. What if he wanted to learn how? Could he accept her like Roger has? She wasn’t being realistic. If she seduced Terry, she would have to ice her cravings.

“Golf is about waking the machine,” Roger advised as he watched. “You’re just a corpse. That ball is your dead heart. That iron in your hands is your shock paddle. Now hit some *real* balls and think about that. I’m going up front to lock the doors.”

Luci pulled two white gloves from the pocket of her warm-up jacket. She loved the smooth, tight fit of the leather/lycra material around her fingers and the firm constraint of the Velcro wrist flaps. She couldn’t wear gloves at first because she needed her nails exposed. But before long, Roger had caught her pinching herself whenever he was praising her progress. Gratefully, he hadn’t rejected her after she confessed that she

couldn't believe his compliments unless she could really *feel* them. When he volunteered to do it for her, so she need only focus on improving her swing, she melted.

As the lessons became a weekly ritual, Luci gradually allowed Roger to explore her body for different places he could pinch that provided more sensation but didn't block her swing path. To avoid the possibility of someday turning Terry off by having to admit that Roger had touched her sexually during her lessons, she made it very clear what parts of her were off limits. She coached him in ways to praise her that made him seem more sincere, more authoritative. She suggested how he should dress and what they should call each other. Roger suggested the alligator clips.

Far more exhilarating than pinches became the bites from the serrated teeth of the clips she agreed he could attach to her. The open red jewelry box sat teasing her from the corner of the mat as she warmed up. Inside, the ribbon of clips were coiled like a string of broken Christmas lights. She assumed the stance he taught her, swung, and knocked one neon Titleist after another at the distant flag projected into the shock-absorbent partition a few yards ahead. She rewarded herself to a lick of her sweet lip gloss between swings.

"The Champion is beginning the lesson," Roger announced upon his return. "Beginners prepare for recording." Lucy discarded her nylon jacket and tied her strawberry blond hair into a ponytail. The latex crossover bra she wore ensured the exposure of her naked neck and back.

“Swing,” he ordered from behind the camera. Luci complied.

On the simulator’s screen, Roger played her swing back in a slow motion loop. As she studied herself, he retrieved the alligator clips from the jewelry box.

“Beginners tell The Champion what they see,” Roger ordered as he positioned himself behind her.

“Beginners are still slicing the ball,” Luci reported. “Beginners have a weak follow-through. Beginners beg The Champion for instruction.”

Roger pressed the small handles together of the first copper clip on the ribbon and released them on the nape of Luci’s neck. She stiffened at the bite.

“Good setup with a well-squared left foot,” complemented Roger.

“Beginners thank The Champion,” accepted Luci with a hidden smile.

Roger sank the next clip into the skin at the base of her neck and offered, “The top of the backswing is nicely on the swing plane. Good hinging.” Luci bit her bottom lip.

“Beginners thank The Champion.”

Working down her spine, Roger clamped seven more compliments to Luci’s back, leaving a final clip to dangle against her white leather skort. Walking around to face his student, Roger straddled her six iron and grabbed it. He moved the club’s grip, centering it more squarely in her left palm.

“A stronger grip will get the ball going left,” he informed her. “The Champion can fix

a hook but not a slice. Swing again.”

“Beginners thank The Champion,” Luci replied in a shaky whisper. The piercing pain kept her alert and receptive for his lessons. She appreciated how cold his persona had become. As he molded her gloved hands around club once again; she strained against the impulse to chew on his body. Roger stepped back behind her and, forcing a clip under her waistband, attached it to the top of the cleavage at the base of her spine.

“Nice strong grip,” Roger observed.

“Beginners thank The Champion,” Luci replied through her gritted teeth. He was exquisite.

Attempting to raise the club stretched her skin taut against the rows of sharp copper. She imagined Roger coldly witnessing her struggle but enduring his own silent torture: an erection painfully stretching toward her only to remain unacknowledged.

“Swing,” he ordered.

Despite his wishes, Luci could barely lift the club to attempt clumsy swats at the ball. Roger grabbed a towel from a golf bag, wound it up, and snapped Luci on the back of one of her bare knees.

“Swing that goddamn club,” he insisted.

“HEY!” yelled Luci. “Who the hell said you could do that to me? Snap me with a towel? Have you lost your mind?”

“Oh god, I’m sorry!” Roger dropped the towel.

“You think you get to do that to me? Who the hell do you think you are, Roger? You think you’re *somebody*? Little mister ‘I’m a PGA Pro but I work at fucking Golf Galaxy’? You’re a piece of shit, Roger! A wormy little shit!”

“I’m sorry! Okay? I’m sorry!” Roger pleaded. “Please don’t get pissed. Okay? I just got a little carried away, that’s all.”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” she demanded.

“When we talked about your do’s and don’ts, you didn’t say anything about towels. But that’s absolutely fine. I don’t have to do that. I’m sorry. I really just got caught up in the moment. It will never happen again. I promise.”

Luci softened at his sheepish tone.

“Well, shit, Roger. That really fucking hurt my feelings.” She closed her eyes and shuddered through a wave of pain. “And now you’ve fucked everything up.”

“No,” Roger argued. “No, I haven’t. It’s still on. Nothing’s changed. Nothing has changed. You need to remember something: you still have a pathetic golf swing. You know how bad it is. You take lessons after hours because you’re ashamed of yourself.” Starting to pace in front of Luci, he strengthened his tone. “Look at you: you try to dress the part, you try to look like you’ve got it all figured out. You try so hard to look like you’re something, anything. But you know you’re still just a *hack*. An empty, puny hack.” He

leaned in close to Luci's ear and whispered harshly. "If you want to play with guys like Terry, if you want to earn their respect, you've got to know how to *submit to instruction*."

"You're just saying that to be mean to me," she replied through a flirty pout.

"It's the truth," he insisted. "Believe it. You're just a Beginner."

Under the starched cuff of his khaki pants, Luci watched the glowing colors from the simulator play on the shined leather of his pristine cleats.

"And Beginners need lessons," she smirked.

"Beginners resume their stance," Roger ordered.

Luci forced herself back into position and gripped the club with both hands. Roger stepped up behind her and carefully removed the clips from her neck and back. Each release induced a scalding flood of circulation and chills. Scarlet folds of skin stippled with deep white dents extended from her naked spine.

Roger turned the camera on again.

"Swing," he ordered.

Quivering with adrenaline, Luci applied the strong grip he taught her and ripped a careening hook deep into the projected fairway. She swung again and again, delighting in the consistent leftward trajectory of her hits. Roger played back the recording of her swing, comparing it to the swing captured at the lesson's start.

"Beginners need to maintain their spine angle to control their shots. Rigorous

practice is required,” announced Roger. “The lesson is completed.”

“Beginners thank the Champion,” exhaled Luci. She placed the borrowed golf club back into its bag and peeled off her sweat-soaked gloves. He held her jacket as she gingerly pushed her arms through the sleeves. They stepped together through the store’s dark aisles; he unlocked the door and held it for her.

“Sorry I brought up the whole ‘you work at Golf Galaxy’ thing,” Luci offered. “Sometimes, when I get like that, I just say the worst things I can think of; whatever will hurt the most.”

“I want to say something to you but I want you to feel it,” Roger said, turning to her with soft eyes.

“Okay,” Luci replied, turning to face him.

He reached over her shoulder and grabbed a fistful of hair, hoisting her up onto her toes.

“I love you, Luci,” he confessed into her widened eyes. Lowering her back onto the floor, he continued, “I’ve just got to say that...”

“Roger, I...I know.” Luci stammered. “Let’s not do this now, please. I’m not ready.” Shaking her head, she walked as fast as she could to her car. He watched her lower herself into the driver’s seat and shut the door.

“Terry would never do the work to love you,” he mumbled as she sped out of the

parking lot. "He's got fungus growing on his back. He's a horse's ass."