

GIRL IN THE RED CORNER

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EXT. TRAILER PARK - MORNING

MUSIC: Operatic and beautiful. Various CUs of a trailer park: a tire serving as a flower pot, a collection of empty beer bottles being used for target practice, a rusted Ford pick up truck with a rebel flag sticker on the bumper, an old washing machine that a cat pops out of, a tattered American flag beside a weathered sign that says "Greenbelt: A Manufactured Home Community."

INT. TRAILER - MORNING

Dolly pans through various scenes inside the home: a drippy kitchen sink, an ash tray full of cigarette butts, dirty clothes piled in a corner, duct tape holding the side of a table together, a collection of empty whiskey bottles that have been turned into candle holders.

INT. BATHROOM - MORNING

Operatic music continues as the camera slowly pushes in behind a WOMAN standing in the bathroom. The mirror is cloudy with mist and obscures her face. She is struggling to squeeze the last bit of toothpaste from the cheap generic tube. She squeezes so hard her hand shakes. The trembling matches the vibrato of the opera singer. Her hand wipes away the fog from the mirror revealing the woman's face. This is HALO. She's only in her 30s but hard times and hard drinking have started to take a toll. A knock at the door.

EXT. TRAILER DOOR - MORNING

In slow motion, Halo opens the door to find a past due bill stuck to it. Music continues as camera shows an insert shot of the bill stamped in large red letters: "PAST DUE. Final Notice." She grabs it off the door and runs into the barren front yard as her LANDLORD - a smug middle-aged man with a beer belly - gets into his Jaguar.

Still in slow motion and under the music, Halo yells and pleads towards the man.

The Landlord's WIFE sits in the passenger seat. She makes eye contact with Halo before pulling up her dark sunglasses.

Halo throws a rock toward the car as it pulls away. Larry shakes his fist out the window. Halo turns and is startled when she sees her 15 year old daughter ELLE standing in the doorway. Halo forces a smile.

Elle retreats inside. Wide shot of Halo alone in the yard looking toward her daughter. The operatic music finishes and resolves as camera pushes into CU Halo, her fake smile fading away. She walks into the trailer. The music ends.

TITLE: "GIRL IN THE RED CORNER"

EXT. MIDWESTERN INDUSTRIAL TOWN - MORNING

Heavy hitting rock music like "Hoochie Coochie" by Band of Skulls. Begin CREDITS as Halo's truck drives down a quiet road, passing stray cats and abandoned factory buildings and pawn shops. This is strip mall country.

EXT. WAL-MART - MORNING

Halo's truck pulls into the nearly empty parking lot. She walks towards the looming superstore, slipping on the bright blue vest.

INT. WAL-MART - MORNING

Halo unboxes items and stocks shelves. A fellow employee winks at her as he walks by. Halo nods, then hides her disgust. As Halo does her work, her aggression builds. The boxes are slammed down harder. Her lips become a tight line as she clenches her jaw. She looks at her watch.

HALO

Shit.

INT. WAL-MART BATHROOM - DAY

Halo changes from her Wal-mart clothes to brown pants and a white button-up shirt.

EXT. WAL-MART - DAY

Halo walks away from the superstore and tosses out her cigarette.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

As Halo drives to her next job her cell phone rings.

INSERT of phone: "High school"

HALO  
Hello? Yeah, this is her...

MUSIC ends.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The truck screeches to a halt on the rural highway, blue smoke billowing. Then a sharp, violent U-turn in the middle of the road as the truck accelerates in the opposite direction.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Halo bursts in from outside.

HALO  
Elle?!

She walks quickly through the small hallway.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Door opens to reveal Halo, in the hallway. Elle is curled up asleep. Halo waits for a moment. She hits the door loudly which jars Elle awake. Elle looks at her phone at the time.

ELLE  
Shit.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

A short time later, the two of them speed down the highway in the truck.

HALO  
You can't keep doing this.

ELLE  
First period is study hall. Don't even know why they called.

HALO  
They called because I asked them to.

Elle gives her best disgusted teenage daughter sneer.

HALO (CONT'D)  
You missed all those days last  
year. You're not doing it again.

ELLE  
I was going to go.

Halo gives her best disbelieving mother who isn't buying that  
shit sneer.

ELLE (CONT'D)  
I would've been there in time for  
pre-cal.

HALO  
It's a forty minute walk.

Elle looks away and doesn't respond.

HALO (CONT'D)  
No-

ELLE  
-Jordan said he would pick me up on  
his way to work.

HALO  
-Absolutely not.

ELLE  
He's only three years older than  
me.

HALO  
It's a big three years.

Silence.

ELLE  
Well, I'm on the pill now. Not like  
I'm gonna make the same mistakes  
you did.

Halo opens her mouth to respond and decides not to. Instead  
she pulls out a cigarette.

ELLE (CONT'D)  
You said you were going to quit.

Halo thinks twice and puts the cigarette away. She looks at  
Elle as if to say "There. Happy?"

EXT. SCHOOL - DAY

The truck approaches the school drop off area, but before it gets too close-

INT. TRUCK - DAY

ELLE  
Just pull up here.

HALO  
No.

ELLE  
Come on.

HALO  
I want to see you walk in.

EXT. DROP OFF AREA - DAY

HALO pulls up right in front of the school. Elle gets out and walks toward the school casually, almost mockingly slow. HALO looks at the clock on the dash: 9:23. ELLE gives her a mocking wave before disappearing into the school.

HALO  
(to herself)  
I love you too, you little cunt.

Now in the clear, Halo lights a cigarette before speeding away.

EXT. CRACKER BARREL PARKING LOT - DAY

Halo speeds into the parking lot distracted and nearly hits a woman. Through the windshield the woman glares at her.

GINA  
What the fuck.

Halo hurries out of the truck.

HALO  
I am so sorry.

GINA  
'the fuck is wrong with you.

HALO

I'm sorry I'm just running late for work.

For the first time Halo really takes in the woman. This is GINA (30s), Bosnian, though her accent is subtle. She's muscular, with tattoos on her shoulders, wearing tight braids and carrying a large gym bag. The most feminine thing about her is the hot pink shorts she wears.

HALO (CONT'D)

Don't want any trouble.

Gina takes her in, sizes her up in one glance. She knows exactly what kind of woman Halo is. Halo looks and feels very small in her presence.

GINA

Forget it.

Gina walks away towards the strip mall on the other side of the parking lot. Halo watches her walk towards a small gym with a "Low Guard Mixed Martial Arts" banner hanging over an old "Mani Pedi" sign. Halo grabs her apron and runs into work.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

Halo rushes in past the tacky country nic-nacs. Her manager STAN (40s) is there to greet her. He has an air of utter exhaustion- that the world is against him and the work he needs to achieve.

STAN

You're late.

HALO

I'm sorry. I had to take my daughter to school.

INT. BREAKROOM - DAY

As he speaks, he follows her into the breakroom area where Halo searches through a box of name tags.

STAN

We had a deal. You take doubles on the weekdays and I give you the church crowd on Sundays. I can't keep giving you those shifts if you don't show.

HALO  
It won't happen again.

STAN  
I've got other servers asking for  
those shifts-

HALO  
I know and it won't. Happen. Again.

Halo ejects herself from the conversation by clipping on her nametag. INSERT on the nametag as she straightens it: "HALO"

INT. RESTAURANT - DAY

CU on Halo's face, with a nice big forced smile plastered across it.

HALO  
Hi, I'm Halo. I'll be your server  
this morning. Can I get you  
something to drink? Sweat tea?

MALE CUSTOMER  
Naw...I'm sweet enough already.

HALO  
I'm sure you are, sir.

He winks; his wife doesn't even flinch.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - DAY

A beige sedan pulls into the Greenbelt trailer park. The car is a few years old but very clean. Almost too clean.

EXT. HALO'S TRAILER - DAY

ROY, (30s) stands outside the door knocking. He's wearing sunglasses and dressed in a shirt and pants that have been neatly ironed and pressed. Almost too ironed and pressed.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

HALO in the kitchen in a rush as other wait staff move around her. She's tense.

HALO  
I'm still waiting on that chicken  
fried steak and okra!

EXT. HALO'S TRAILER - DAY

ROY holds a phone up to his ear.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

HALO's phone buzzes in her apron. She checks it quickly, doesn't like what she sees, then puts it back in her pocket.

STAN

No phones on the clock.

Halo loads her tray with fried, gravy-covered food.

HALO

Sorry, Stan.

She walks away.

EXT. HALO'S TRAILER - DAY

ROY peeps through a window and takes in the condition of the trailer before walking away.

EXT. RESTAURANT BACK ALLEY - EVENING

HALO bursts through the back door as if she's coming up for air after a long swim. She's foodstained and disheveled. She pulls out a cigarette and drops it in a greasy puddle. She takes a deep breath and pulls out her last cigarette in the box, her "lucky" and slowly puts it into her mouth.

CU on her face, wreathed in cigarette smoke. She closes her eyes as if, for just a moment, she can block out the rest of the world.

An unfamiliar sound intrudes. Grunting and the sound of skin slapping against leather. She takes a few steps to the side to investigate.

In the empty area beside the gym, the place where you'd find dumpsters and employee parking spaces, GINA is training with DAN (late 40s). She's in gloves, he's on mitts. It's fast, furious, with each hit punctuated by a loud grunt. HALO flinches at the sound. At one point DAN sweeps out with a mitt and hits GINA hard on the left side of the head. She doesn't even flinch.

Halo's phone buzzes in her pocket and she hurriedly pulls it out. She sees who's calling and scowls. Answers.

HALO

Yeah.

INT. CUBICLE FARM - EVENING

ROY sits in a cubicle farm: clean, sterile, standardized, bathed in unforgiving white light. Tattoos peek out from the cuffs and collar of his carefully pressed shirt.

CUT BETWEEN HALO AND ROY THROUGH CONVERSATION:

ROY

Hey, it's me.

HALO

I know. I'm at work. We'll talk later.

ROY

When? I don't want to keep putting this off-

She hangs up on him.

HALO

Fuck!

Silence from the alley. HALO looks over. GINA and DAN have paused their sparring to look at her. DAN gives an awkward training mitt wave. Gina glares at her as if to say, "You again?"

Embarrassed, HALO hurries back inside the restaurant.

INT. BREAKROOM - DAY

Halo takes off her apron. Stan walks by the door.

HALO

Hey, Stan.

STAN

Yeah.

HALO

Any chance you could give me a couple extra shifts this week? I know I was late today and I'm sorry for that but I could really use-

STAN

Only extra shifts I have are the  
openers.

HALO

I'm dawn shift at Wal-Mart.

STAN

Well then, not much I can do about  
that is there?

INT. HALO'S TRUCK - NIGHT

Halo walks to her truck carrying two bags of leftovers. She climbs inside and notices a flyer under her windshield wipers. She reaches around and grabs it. On one side is a promotion for "THIS SATURDAY CAGEKONG MMA." On the other side is photos of fighters including a photo of Gina looking jacked and confident with her arms crossed.

INT. HALO'S TRAILER - NIGHT

Halo opens the door, carrying the bags of food.

HALO

Elle! They ran out of the chicken  
'n dumplins, so I got you that  
fried macaroni casserole thing.

No answer.

INT. ELLE'S ROOM - NIGHT

HALO walks into ELLE'S room to find it empty. She pulls out her phone and calls. No answer. She waits a moment, then sends her a text. No immediate answer. Halo looks around Elle's room. There are still some remnants of a little girl: a stuffed animal and an old lamp with a porcelain doll base. Mostly Halo sees the lacy bra hanging on the back of the door and the collection of angsty inspirational quotes hanging over Elle's bed.

Halo sighs and lays back on the bed. She looks up at the dirty ceiling fan and takes a deep breath. She closes her eyes for half a second before her phone rings.

HALO

Hey sweetie. Oh sorry. Bren, hey. I  
thought you were Elle.

(a pause as she listens)

Shit.

Halo gets up and runs out of the room.

EXT. BLUEBIRD BAR AND GRILL - NIGHT

Halo pulls up in her truck and immediately notices her mom TERRY (late 50s) struggling with BRENDA outside the bar. Brenda and Halo grew up together and both seem well practiced in dealing with Terry who's stumbling and fighting for her keys. Terry can barely keep her eyes open. It's obvious this is pills, not alcohol.

TERRY

Imgonna tell yer mother about this.  
Manhandling me.

BRENDA

Okay Terry that's fine. Now you  
just be good.

Halo approaches and takes Terry's keys from Brenda.

HALO

Thank you.

BRENDA

Wish I could say it's been a  
pleasure but-

TERRY

My angel.

HALO

I'm gonna take you home, Mom.

TERRY

I named her Halo 'cause she's my  
angel.

BRENDA

I know. You've told me.

HALO

You take something before you came  
over?

TERRY

(to Brenda)

You ain't an angel. (to Halo) She  
told them to cut me off.

BRENDA

She was kickin' the jukebox.

TERRY  
Wouldn't play my song.

HALO  
How many did you take?

TERRY  
What was that song? The one I used  
to sing you? I used to sing you a  
song. "La-la-la-la la-la-la...don't  
you cry." That's the one

Halo tries to look through Terry's purse but she pulls it  
away.

TERRY (CONT'D)  
"And if that mockingbirdon' sing,  
mama's gonna buy you a diamond  
ring."

HALO  
Okay, Mom we gotta go now.

Terry continues to sing as she struggles against Halo. Her  
eyes roll back in her head. Halo and Brenda do their best to  
restrain her. Terry breaks away and falls against the corner  
of the building, hitting her head hard.

HALO (CONT'D)  
Shit!

BRENDA  
Terry!

Halo moves to help Terry. Brenda starts to dial her phone.

HALO  
What are you doing?

BRENDA  
Calling 911.

HALO  
You gonna pay the ambulance fee?

Brenda stops. Terry starts to sing again.

HALO (CONT'D)  
Help me get her into the truck.

Terry turns around, her face is bloody but she can't feel the  
pain. Slow push in on her face.

TERRY

"If that diamond ring turns brass,  
mamas's gonna buy you a looking  
glass."

EXT. HALO'S TRAILER - NIGHT

Terry's song continues as the camera slowly pushes in on Halo's face. She drinks a large shot of whiskey and washes it down with a deep inhale from her cigarette.

TERRY (V.O.)

"If that lookin glass gets broke,  
mama's gonna buy you a billygoat.  
An-if that billygoat won't pull,  
mama's gonna buy you a cart and  
bull."

INT. HALO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Terry's song continues as the camera slowly pushes in on Elle's face.

TERRY (V.O.)

"An-if that cart and bull fall  
down, you'll still be the sweetest  
lil' girl in town."

She sits at the kitchen table looking at her grandmother asleep on the couch in the next room. Terry has been cleaned and bandaged, but still has some blood dried to her face.

Halo enters the kitchen and sits beside Elle.

ELLE

She gonna be okay?

HALO

I've seen her worse.

ELLE

(sarcastically)  
That's reassuring.

HALO

Where were you last night?

ELLE

At Sarah's studying.

HALO

Really. How was that?

ELLE  
 Awesome. Precal's a laugh riot.  
 Were you up with her all night or  
 did you get some sleep?

HALO  
 Got about an hour. It was just the  
 two of you?

ELLE  
 Yeah. Want some coffee?

Elle walks to the counter avoiding eye contact with her mom.

HALO  
 Sure. None of your other friends  
 were there?

ELLE  
 No. Oh shit, I forgot. Jordan came  
 over. And he brought his friends  
 from the basketball team and we had  
 this, like, big orgy. And Sarah  
 wanted them to use condoms, but I  
 was like--Sarah, cool kids don't  
 use condoms and you want to be cool  
 / don't you?

HALO  
 Okay, okay, okay. That's...enough.  
 That picture's in my head now  
 forever. Thank you.

ELLE  
 You're welcome.

Halo acts like she's about to say something, then hesitates.

ELLE (CONT'D)  
 What?

HALO  
 Nothing.

Halo rubs her eyes and takes a deep breath.

HALO (CONT'D)  
 I gotta get to work I have a double  
 today. Think you can stay here and  
 watch-

ELLE  
 No. Mom, no. It's my weekend. You  
 can't leave me here with her!

HALO  
I can't let her go home until I've  
had time to do a pill sweep.

ELLE  
Sarah and I are supposed to study  
together tonight, / please!

HALO  
Tell Sarah she can come over here.

ELLE  
Here? Are you serious?

HALO  
What can I say? Those are your  
options.

ELLE  
Fuck.

Elle goes into her room and slams the door. Halo yells after  
her as she goes.

HALO  
You think I like this?!...Shit.

Halo goes into her room and closes the door. Terry lays on  
the couch. Her eyes are open like she's been listening but  
her expression is blank.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

Halo's in the middle of the lunch rush. She's exhausted from  
not sleeping. There's a large bus group of seniors wearing  
matching lime green t-shirts. Halo is doing her best to keep  
her smile.

OLD LADY  
I need one ice cube in my coffee so  
it doesn't burn me.

HALO  
Yes, ma'am we will take care of  
that I'm so sorry that the coffee  
is hot.

Halo hurries to the back to grab ice.

INT. CRACKER BARREL KITCHEN - DAY

COOK  
Order fourteen is up!

Halo loads her tray with food and hurries out of the kitchen with the cup of ice in the other hand.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

Halo gives the cup of ice to the old lady.

HALO  
Sorry about that wait, ma'am.

OLD LADY  
Thank you sweetheart.

She turns and runs her tray into Stan. The entire tray of food comes crashing to the floor. The restaurant grinds to a silent halt for 2 seconds as all eyes follow Halo.

HALO  
I'm so sorry.

She slowly starts to clean up the food, holding back tears. She's covered in gravy and soup. Stan leans down wiping a bit of gravy from his face.

STAN  
Why don't I get somebody else to clean this up and you head home for the day?

HALO  
What? No. I can do this. I need the hours.

STAN  
(whispering)  
Then get your shit together.

Halo just nods and continues to clean.

EXT. STREET - AFTERNOON

Halo drives, numbly. She's still food-stained. Bad radio host banter plays on the radio as Halo drives through a busier part of town, taking in the scenery: a GROUP OF TEENS drag racing down the street, a desperate looking DAD standing outside a busy 7-11 scratching lottery tickets while his six year old DAUGHTER drinks a slurpee, a GROUP OF MEN wearing "Korean war Veteran" hats standing outside the VFW, a church with a sign that says "We're not Dairy Queen but we have great Sundays", an OBESE WOMAN on a Raskal scooter pattering down the sidewalk.

INT. HALO'S TRUCK - AFTERNOON

Halo comes to a stoplight and watches the obese woman on the scooter, accidentally making eye contact. The woman flips her off before scooting away with a scowl. Halo's blood is boiling.

EXT. BANK - AFTERNOON

Halo pulls into the bank and walks over to the ATM. She deposits her small amount of tips and looks at the balance on the receipt before crumbling it in her hand.

INT. TRUCK - AFTERNOON

Halo gets into her truck and lights her cigarette, hands shaking. She rubs her hand against the steering wheel then holds it tight. She hits the wheel once and it feels so satisfying that she hits it again. And again. She beats everything she can, taking off her seatbelt to breathe. Her movements resemble those of a woman in a straightjacket.

EXT. TRUCK - AFTERNOON

Halo screams from inside the truck. It is muted and sounds like a woman trapped in a cage.

INT. TRUCK - AFTERNOON

Halo breathes hard. The CAGEKONG flyer falls from the cluttered dash into the seat beside her.

INT. LAUNDROMATIC - EARLY EVENING

Shot of the dryer spinning. HALO stares at the row of dryers, clothes tumbling in cotton spirals. Her expression is one of resolve. She sits on one of those terrible hard plastic laundromat chairs. She's dressed in her Wal-Mart clothes while she washes her Cracker Barrel clothes. She holds the CAGEKONG flyer in her hand.

Two other women, Ramona and Candice, who are a little older than Halo sit nearby talking.

RAMONA

I'm not saying it's the only way.

CANDICE

Because it's not.

RAMONA

I'm just saying that's how my mother did it and my grandmother did it. I don't care if that shit says non-shrink, you know first time through the dryer / it's gonna-

CANDICE

I'm not arguing. I'm just saying that some fabrics hold their shape better / than others.

RAMONA

But all of them do it to some extent.

CANDICE

Rayon?

RAMONA

Well, / not rayon. But, you know. Anything with cotton.

Halo looks at the flyer.

HALO

Fuck it.

Halo jumps up and opens the dryer doors.

RAMONA

You say something Halo?

HALO

Nope. Just remembered I had somewhere to be.

Halo unceremoniously grabs her damp clothes.

RAMONA

I remember having to be places.  
Fucking exhausting.

Halo rushes out.

CANDICE

What about a poly-blend?

RAMONA

Goddamnit, Candice.

EXT. TEN-RING SHOOTING - EVENING

HALO'S truck pulls into an out-of-the-way office park. In the center of the park is a large, concrete building with double-doors and a sign that says "Ten-Ring Shooting." A banner is draped above the sign: CageKong Fight Night is written across the banner in bright, garish letters.

INT. HALO'S TRUCK - EVENING

Halo rummages through her truck trying to find something wear that isn't a waitress uniform. She finds an old band t-shirt wadded up under the seat. It passes the smell test- barely.

INT. TEN-RING SHOOTING - EVENING

During the day, Ten-Ring Shooting is a target-shooting gallery: a vast, empty concrete box. During CageKong fight nights the space becomes transformed. In the center of the space is a raised MMA ring with a full cage, a half-way decent theatrical lighting set up, and a four-screen live-display cube hanging above it. Rows of folding chairs are arranged around the ring--enough to hold upwards of a thousand people, and nearly all of them are filled. Nearest the stage are VIP tables--folding tables with slightly better chairs that are being waited on by Hooters waitresses.

This is the space HALO enters. In the cage two men are grappling on the mat. Save for the brightly lit stage, the space is dim and dark and filled with yelling, cheering fight fans. She squints through the dark and walks towards the cage. As she walks her phone rings. She checks it then ignores it.

INT. ROY'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

ROY holds his phone as we hear the beginning of HALO's voicemail message: "Hey this is Halo. Leave me a-" He hangs up. He walks out of the apartment.

INT. TEN-RING SHOOTING - EVENING

In the cage the fighters do something cheer-worthy and HALO is jostled by clapping, cheering fans. She approaches the edge of the cage in awe.

BRENDA

Halo?!

Brenda makes her way over and gives Halo a big hug.

HALO

What are you doing here?

BRENDA

Tinder date!

She waves to DARRYL (40s) who stands by the cage watching the fight. He waves back.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

He's a cop. He looks a lot better in uniform.

In the cage one of the fighters gets the other in a headlock causing his opponent to tap out. The referee declares the winner and the crowd erupts in cheers.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

Testosterone run amuck.

A HOOTERS WAITRESS walks by them.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

Hey, can we get an extra Ring Girl Special?

HALO

What's a Ring Girl Special?

BRENDA

Extra spicy chicken legs and light beer.

HALO

Jesus Christ.

BRENDA

Darryl got the VIP package so we're eating and drinking for free all night!

INT. TEN-RING SHOOTING - NIGHT

It's about an hour later and the table is covered with sauce-stained paper plates filled with stripped chicken wings. Brenda and Halo are holding giant plastic cups of beer. Darryl is still near the cage cheering on the fighters.

The fighters in the cage now are full-on strikers--no slow grappling with these guys. It's all punches, kicks, knees, and the occasional devastating elbow. Halo's eyes don't leave the cage.

BRENDA

So we jumped him; we did the current test; we swapped out the freaking battery for one of our spares. Car still won't turn over. And this guy is still all "I think it's the battery." And I'm like motherfucker we changed the battery. But he's like "I think you gave me another bad battery. I think you put it in wrong."

HALO

Sounds like a bad alternator.

BRENDA

Yes! Thank you. Of course it's a bad alternator.

The two men in the cage are clinched, arms wrapped around each other's heads, driving knees into midsections.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

And you know--you just know--that if I was a guy he wouldn't be pulling this shit. Right?

HALO

Right.

BRENDA

Not like I need a big swinging dick to tell me something's draining his battery.

Because she's only been half listening, Halo's a little startled by the "big swinging dick" line.

HALO

Huh?

One of the fighters gets the full clinch and drives his opponent's head down directly into his knee. Blood splatters across the floor of the ring. The crowd cheers wildly. Brenda grimaces.

BRENDA

Oh God.

The ref calls the fight. The winner is handed a trophy and poses with a pair of ring girls while the loser is helped out of the cage, still bleeding.

ANNOUNCER

Ladies and gentlemen, next up is our one and only women's bout of the evening.

The audience cheers- especially the guys who are very excited by the prospect of a "chick fight." Halo stands.

HALO

I think I'm gonna go over and watch from the side.

BRENDA

I'm good. New shirt. Don't want to get blood on it.

Halo walks over to the red corner where a group of fighters from Gina's gym have gathered.

EXT. HALO'S TRAILER - NIGHT

Roy looks through the window of the trailer. Elle is sitting on the floor doing homework. He takes a deep breath and knocks on the door. To his surprise, Terry answers.

TERRY

Roy.

ROY

Terry. Good to see you it's been- a long time. What happened / to your face?

ELLE (O.C.)

Mom-mom you need to lay down-

She arrives at the door. Roy is overwhelmed by how grown up and beautiful his daughter is.

ROY  
Elle?

ELLE  
Dad? When did you get out?

ROY  
A few months. I've been wanting to get in touch but--

TERRY  
Did Halo say you could stop by?

ROY  
I just...I just wanted to give you something. I made it in...Anyway, here.

He holds up a small package.

ROY (CONT'D)  
There's a card with my email address. I got email now.

Elle takes the package.

ROY (CONT'D)  
I should go. It's good to see you, sweetheart. Bye, Terry.

Roy starts to walk away and Elle retreats back into the trailer. Terry waits until she's out of earshot.

TERRY  
Hey, Roy? You come around here again, I'll shoot you right in that ugly face of yours. Bye, now.

Terry slams the door. Roy goes back to his car. Elle looks out the window. He gives her a wave then drives away.

INT. TEN-RING SHOOTING - NIGHT

The ANNOUNCER stands in the center of the ring.

ANNOUNCER  
In the red corner, with a record of seven wins and two losses, fighting out of Low Guard MMA, Gina Demirjian!!!!

From a dark hallway, Gina appears. She's dressed to fight: barefoot, hair bound in tight braids, dressed in a sports bra and baggy Muay Thai shorts. She wears fingerless MMA gloves. She's got the kind of blank, dark-eyed stare you'd see on a circling shark.

Gina is stopped by a fight official who checks her mouthguard and examines her hair and gloves while one of Gina's teammates smears Vaseline across her nose and forehead.

When the formalities are over, Gina walks to the corner where Halo is standing with the others. While the others give shouts of support, Gina and Halo share a brief look. Halo's is one of fascination and fear. Gina's is more of a "who are you and what the fuck are you doing here?"

Gina climbs up and enters the cage.

ANNOUNCER (CONT'D)

And in the blue corner, with a  
record of two wins and zero losses,  
fighting out of Greenbelt Krav Maga  
and MMA, Claudia Torres!

The crowd cheers. Torres makes her entrance.

Halo keeps her eyes on Gina in the cage. Gina feels out the edge of the ring, bouncing lightly on her feet. Then she settles into a slow pace, like a lion pacing out its enclosure with utter confidence.

Torres makes her way into the cage.

Gina and Torres meet in the center with the ref. This is the first time where it's obvious that Torres has got a serious reach advantage.

The REFEREE says something to them. Even this close to the cage, HALO can't hear it over the crowd noise. Torres and Gina nod, bump gloves, then take a step back. The woman in charge of the clock rings a metal bell with a hammer.

Gina and Torres converge.

The fight moves quickly. As it plays out from Halo's perspective, most of it is blur. A three minute round seems to go by in a flash.

Quick cuts as the camera pans into moments of intense speed to slow motion. The sensation is that of an eye that doesn't quite know where to look: cheering crowds; the buzzer; flashing lights; punches, kicks, grappling. Halo's face is rapt, unable to look away.

The bell. Gina takes a stool just a few feet from Halo. Halo watches every move. A naked fascination with the strength, stamina, and sheer tenacity. A man dressed in a "Low Guard MMA" t-shirt stands beside Halo. This is MEHBRATU, mid-twenties, African American, and fighter-fit.

MEHBRATU

Holy hell that was an intense round.

HALO

Was it?

MEHBRATU

Yeah. She's looking for her opening.

A Hooters girl comes into the cage to hold up the "Round 2" sign. Halo looks at this skinny woman with the push up bra as though she's an alien stepping into the wrong planet.

Halo looks back to the corner. CU of Gina. Her coach DAN holds her head:

DAN

You be patient, remember. Wait for it. Don't force something. It'll be there.

Gina nods. The bell rings and she walks back into the fight, determined.

Gina takes a few hits. For every one she lands, she takes three. For the first time it occurs to Halo that Gina could lose. She begins to cheer with Mehbratu and the rest of the crowd.

HALO

Come on take that bitch down!

As the round plays out Halo starts to notice the difference between the two fighters. Torres is tall and stays on her toes and looks more like a boxer. Gina stays lower to the ground like a viper waiting to strike. Suddenly - seemingly out of nowhere - Gina takes Torres down to the mat. The crowd erupts: this is what they've been waiting for. Gina gets Torres into a rear naked choke hold and Torres taps out before Halo can register what's just happened.

Everyone is on their feet cheering. There's no showboating from Gina. She gets a drink of water and wipes her face then joins Torres in the center where the ref lifts Gina's hand in victory.

Gina and Torres hug. Gina says something, nodding, like she's telling Torres it was a good fight. It is absolutely sincere.

MEHBRATU

You fight?

HALO

Me? No no no. Just...watching.

Mehbratu hands her a postcard.

MEHBRATU

I train and help out over at Low Guard. You should come check it out. First class is free.

This gets Halo's attention.

MEHBRATU (CONT'D)

You know in case you ever get tired of just...watching.

HALO

Thanks.

She twists her head around to catch a glimpse of Gina making her way out of the cage and out of the auditorium. Halo looks down at the postcard. Insert shot of the postcard.

CUT TO:

INT. ELLE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Insert shot of an old photo of Roy and Elle with a letter. Elle looks as though she's been crying. The sounds from the fight have continued over into this shot. The camera pans to reveal the gift: A small fairy, hand-carved out of wood.

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

Silence. Then Halo's alarm goes off. Her eyes open like she's barely slept. The alarm sound continues on top of piercing operatic music.

INT. BATHROOM - DAWN

Music/alarm sounds continue. Push in on Halo, standing in front of the foggy mirror. She can't squeeze out any more toothpaste.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAWN

Halo walks quietly through the living room, stopping to look at Terry, dead asleep and snoring on the couch.

EXT. WAL-MART LOADING DOCK - EARLY MORNING

Music continues. Halo with a coworker - the same guy that winked at her before - loading boxes off a truck. She's inside the truck, wrestling boxes around, sweating, straining and doing the brunt of the work before handing them off.

Over this scene on the loading dock we hear STAN, giving one of his required quarterly speeches. He has the tone of a manager who's one goal is to do his job. To do this job, people have to follow the corporate rules. The problem is that no one gives a shit about the corporate rules.

STAN (V.O.)

When you were hired, you all received employee handbooks. You were required to read them cover to cover. I know not many of you do. But if you flip to the back, you see it includes an Employee Code of Conduct.

HALO stands, stretches, and rubs the back of her neck. When her hand comes away, there's a thick, black smear of grease.

INT. HALO'S TRUCK - MORNING

A heavier rock beat slowly starts to join the more traditional opera music. The voiceover continues.

STAN (V.O.)

For those of you who've been here a while, you know I have to sometimes highlight certain things in the code because of the feedback- also known as critiques- given to us from customers and by corporate.

HALO drinks in the music as she races down the highway between Wal-Mart and the Cracker Barrel.

Full rock music takes over, but the operatic voice continues. As she begins head banging to the chorus, we see the grease still smeared across the back of her neck.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - THE SUNDAY LUNCH RUSH

Music continues. Halo stands next to a booth taking a middle-aged couple's order. Her smile is strained, distant.

STAN (V.O.)

In the past I've highlighted things like the importance being on time for your shift; employee uniform rules; rules about smoking; rules about swearing.

When she turns, the grease stain is displayed prominently. By now it's dried a little and looks as much like shit as like grease. Behind HALO'S back, the woman at the booth curls her lip in disgust.

EXT. SIDE PARKING AREA OF CRACKER BARREL - LATE EVENING

The music climaxes then drops out to just the voice. STAN has gathered the waitresses who are about to go off-shift together. They stand in a half-circle around him, wearing grim, exhausted faces.

As his speech continues, the camera slowly pushes in on HALO, her face a red mask of shame and frustration and jaw-clenching anger.

STAN

What I need to highlight today is hygiene. That means arriving clean and keeping yourself clean throughout the day. The code of conduct has a couple things to say about hygiene and I suggest all of you read it to refresh your memory.

HALO glances over to the gym.

Inside, we can make out a group of people sparring. The sound of grunts, hits and kicks, skin slapping on flesh and leather, carries across the parking lot through the open door.

STAN (CONT'D)

It's not that hard ladies. Help me help you.

The camera continues to push in on HALO'S face. The sound of Stan's voice is drowned out by the sounds from the gym.

Stan gives a loud clap.

STAN (CONT'D)

All right then. Any questions?

Murmured "No's" and "No Stans" from everyone.

STAN (CONT'D)

Super.

The group breaks, everyone heading to their cars while Stan heads back inside.

The operatic voice reaches a climax. CU on Halo. She looks towards the gym and walks out of frame.

End of music.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - LATE EVENING

Halo in the open doorway, hovering between coming in and running away.

The gym is a modest one. Maybe 1,500 square feet--two thirds of it covered by a giant padded floor. The rest is comprised of a row of heavy bags, wrecking ball bags, and a speed bag suspended from the ceiling; a rack of small lockers for shoes/clothes against the far wall; and a check-in desk right at the front. We see all this from Halo's POV. Other than a few fighters packing up, the room is mostly empty.

Cut back to HALO'S face as she takes in this alien world. She is about to step out.

MEHBRATU

Hey! You came!

HALO

I came.

MEHBRATU

It's a little late uh we just finished our last class of the night but-

HALO

Oh sorry, sorry I'll head out.

MEHBRATU

It's okay! We can get you signed up now - we'll need you to sign a liability form and provide your insurance information if you have it.

HALO  
I don't- I don't have insurance.

HALO takes a step to leave.

MEHBRATU  
That's okay! We can-

GINA (O.C.)  
What are you doing here?

Halo turns to see Gina, looking more fierce than ever. The tips of her hair have been dyed a bright purple.

MEHBRATU  
Gina hey this is- sorry I don't think I caught your name-

HALO  
Um, Halo?

GINA  
Um halo?

HALO  
(more firmly)  
Halo.

MEHBRATU  
We're happy to have you Halo. I'm Mehbratu and this is-

GINA  
Gina.

HALO  
Nice to meet you. Sorry if this is a-

GINA  
Why are you sorry?

Mehbratu eyes dart between the two ladies cautiously.

HALO  
Excuse me?

GINA  
Why are you sorry?

HALO  
Just seems like I've caught you at a bad time.

GINA  
Not a bad time. How many times a  
day do you say I'm sorry?

HALO  
Excuse me?

Gina and Halo look at each other.

MEHBRATU  
So Halo! We have a lot of great  
classes you can take. Do you want  
to sign up for one of the beginner  
classes tomorrow? We have Muay thai  
conditioning and no-gi basics...

Halo and Gina continue to stare at each other. Gina is  
testing her. Halo doesn't dare look away.

GINA  
We could just do a class right now.

HALO  
No one's here.

GINA  
So?

Halo is starting to feel the pressure which is exactly what  
Gina wants.

HALO  
Well I'm here so fuck it, why not.

She takes a step towards the mat.

MEHBRATU  
No shoes on the mat.

Halo takes off her ugly, food stained non-slip work shoes and  
steps onto the mat, still in her waitress uniform. The  
pressure is starting to get to her.

HALO  
Okay, here I am, I'm ready food  
stains and all!

Gina continues with utter calm.

GINA  
Feet first. You right handed?

Halo nods.

GINA (CONT'D)

Okay. Left foot a little forward,  
like this. Balls of your feet. No  
heels on the ground. So you can  
move fast. Knees a little bent.

Gina shows her the stance. Halo does her best to mimic it.  
Gina touches Halo and she puts her in the correct positions.  
Halo isn't used to being touched.

GINA (CONT'D)

Okay. Hands up like this. Head  
down. Give me your forehead, not  
your face. Now, your left. That's  
your jab. Straight out, shoulder to  
your chin, bring it right back. And  
you're stepping with it. Left foot,  
left hand, okay?

Halo throws a weak, slow jab.

GINA (CONT'D)

Step with it. And bring it right  
back. Hit, defend. Hit, defend.

Halo throws a quicker, better jab. She still forgets to step  
with it.

GINA (CONT'D)

Step with it.

HALO

Sorry.

GINA

Excuse me?

HALO

Sor-

Halo tries again. This time HALO gets it in the ballpark.

GINA

Again. This time into my hand.

GINA holds up a bare hand. HALO throws a jab into it.

GINA (CONT'D)

Again. Harder. Don't be afraid.

Another jab.

GINA (CONT'D)

Again.

Another jab.

GINA (CONT'D)

Again.

Jab.

GINA (CONT'D)

Good. That's your left. Now your right. That's your cross. That's your dominant weapon. You jab, then you cross.

GINA demonstrates a slow-motion jab-cross.

GINA (CONT'D)

Cross because it's coming across, see?

HALO tries out a slow right cross.

GINA (CONT'D)

Yes, but everything is coming from the hips. Hips are turning, body is turning, arm is being thrown.

HALO tries it again. Her hips get involved this time, barely.

Gina holds up her left hand, then her right.

GINA (CONT'D)

Into my hands. Jab here, cross here.

HALO shakes out her arms.

GINA (CONT'D)

Jab, cross.

A slow jab cross.

GINA (CONT'D)

Jab, cross.

A bit faster.

GINA (CONT'D)

Use those hips!

Jab, cross.

GINA (CONT'D)

Don't be afraid.



INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Halo enters the trailer. Terry's gone. The blanket is folded on top of the couch

Halo goes down the hallway to Elle's room and knocks on the door.

ELLE

What?

INT. ELLE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Halo opens the door. Elle has her headphones plugged into her phone.

HALO

Where's Mom-Mom?

ELLE

She went home.

HALO

Why didn't you call me?

ELLE

I did.

Halo checks her phone.

HALO

Shit. I turned it off at the gym.

ELLE

The gym?

HALO

I haven't had a chance to do a pill sweep yet. Who knows what she has stashed.

ELLE

Why didn't you tell me about Dad?

Halo stops dead in her tracks.

HALO

What about--

ELLE

He came over. Were you ever going to tell me he was out?

(MORE)

ELLE (CONT'D)

That he got early parole? That he's been trying to see me?

HALO

He showed up here?

ELLE

Answer the question.

HALO

Yes. Eventually I was going to tell you. I just don't want you to get hurt.

ELLE

I'm not going to get--

HALO

Do you remember what kind of man this is? Do you remember? Because I do.

ELLE

He's better.

HALO

Some things you don't get better from.

Elle shakes her head in frustration and closes her door.

HALO (CONT'D)

Shit.

INT. TERRY'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Halo stands with her phone to her ear. Roy's voicemail message picks up: "Hey this is Roy-" Halo hangs up.

Terry lays on her bulky thread-bare mauve-colored couch looking at a Family Circle magazine.

TERRY

I knew he was trouble the first time I laid eyes on him. Told you it, too.

Halo continues her pill sweep. As they talk she checks the couch cushions, cups in the kitchen, inside cereal boxes. Terry is unfazed- this is not the first time Halo has had to do this.

TERRY (CONT'D)

Sweeping in like he can just pick up where he left off. What's he gonna do take her out selling drugs with him?

HALO

He's been clean since he went to jail, Mom.

TERRY

Yeah, I'll believe that.

HALO

He's got a job. Better than mine. Office thing.

TERRY

How'd he swing that?

HALO

Has an uncle that works in HR.

TERRY

Lucky bastard. Some people just get shit handed to them on a silver platter. Rest of us get it dumped on our heads.

Halo opens the back of the remote control and pills rain out onto the coffee table from the area where batteries should be.

HALO

Wow. Gotta hand it to you, Mom. You make this harder every time.

Terry looks back at her magazine. Halo picks up the pills one by one.

HALO (CONT'D)

Hey...any chance you still have that old box of field hockey gear from high school?

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - LATE AFTERNOON

There are about a dozen fighters lined up on the mat. HALO is one of the few women. She is dressed in an "Aaronville High GO HAWKS!" T-shirt and running shorts that are a little too small and about a decade out of style.

All are jumping rope. Everyone else is skipping along quickly with few mistakes while Halo can't manage a half-dozen passes without getting caught up.

DAN

Twenty sit-ups, twenty push-ups.

Everyone else drops to the mat as one and begin doing sit-ups. HALO does her best to keep up.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - EVENING

In the center of the mat, DAN demonstrates a combo with another student. GINA stands by the check in desk talking to someone who looks like an advanced student. Halo eyes her cautiously.

DAN

Remember--get your guard back *then* throw the kick. Find a partner and go three-for-three.

Mehbratu walks up to Halo.

MEHBRATU

You wanna partner?

HALO

Sure.

Halo and Mehbratu find a spot in the middle of the group and square off.

Wide shot of the full room practicing. The camera pans around the mat, Halo and Mehbratu lost in the middle. There's music playing from the sound system, but it's nearly drowned out by the grunts, hits, and kicks.

A flurry of quick shots that isolate other students. Gloves hitting gloves, kicks hitting gloves--sweat dripping, feet shifting on the mat. Cut back to Halo, eyes darting around her, very aware that she's in the middle of this loud, violent, alien environment.

Halo jabs, then follows it with a jab, a cross, and the worst rear kick imaginable. She teeters and stumbles.

HALO (CONT'D)

Jesus fuck, that was terrible.

MEHBRATU

Go again.

Halo goes again. The only difference is that the punching is actually worse this time. Kick is still atrocious.

Dan sees this second attempt.

DAN

Okay, let's break down that kick.  
When you kick, you're gonna turn  
your hip over. Your whole torso is  
gonna go with it. Like this.

DAN demonstrates a rear kick on Mehbratu, who gets his gloves in position just in time. Mehbratu grunts and stumbles.

DAN (CONT'D)

You kick like you were doing,  
you're hitting him with your leg.  
You turn that hip, you start  
kicking him with your entire body.  
Try it again.

Halo tries again. She gets her hip about halfway turned. Mehbratu blocks with ease.

DAN (CONT'D)

Turn that hip all the way over. And  
when you go up, your foot is  
pivoting. Whole body.

Halo tries again. Her form is better, but there's zero power behind it.

DAN (CONT'D)

Okay. Good corrections. Now put  
some power behind it. See Mehbratu  
here. I want you to kick like  
Mehbratu isn't even there. You are  
gonna kick all the way through  
Mehbratu. Aim right for that  
kidney; turn it to mush.

Halo readies herself.

DAN (CONT'D)

And relax a little. This is fun.

HALO

Relax. Fun.

Halo takes a deep breath and looks Mehbratu in the eye. Then she hits him so hard with the rear kick that all three of them are surprised. She stumbles and almost falls again.

DAN  
That's what I'm talking about!

At the desk, Gina looks up from her conversation.

HALO  
I almost fell over.

DAN  
Yeah, we'll work on that. But the power was there. Keep going. Three-for-three.

Dan walks off. Halo's eyes follow him for a second, then turn back to Mehbratu. The barest hint of a satisfied smile plays across her face.

HALO  
Your turn?

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - NIGHT

Halo packs up her stuff. She's absolutely drenched with sweat.

MEHBRATU  
Good work today!

HALO  
Thanks. You too.

She looks around for Gina but she's nowhere to be found. Halo checks her phone to find a text from Elle.

TEXT: "Staying at Sarah's tonight."

Halo leaves alone.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

HALO'S bed is seen from above. She's sprawled out, dead asleep. It's a beautiful, deep sleep.

INT. BEDROOM - PRE-DAWN

Halo's alarm goes off and she reaches for it almost immediately.

She stretches, awake and alert and well-slept. She sits up and groans, muscles stiff and sore.

HALO

Oh man.

We can almost hear her muscles creak as she stands and hobbles toward the bathroom.

INT. CRACKER BARREL

A busy lunch rush filled mostly with families and seniors. Halo walks up to the hostess stand.

HALO

I've got ten and two free.

SANDY

Gotcha.

HALO

No more senior home groups, please. That four-top paid with a Groupon. It was expired and Stan let em use it anyway.

SANDY

That's cause Stan doesn't live on tips.

HALO stretches, working something out in her back.

SANDY (CONT'D)

You get laid last night?

HALO

What? No?

SANDY

You sure?

HALO

Uh--yeah. It's been long enough. I think I'd have noticed. Why?

SANDY

I don't know. You're, like, glowing.

HALO gives her a look like "What the fuck? Glowing?"

Through the country store, they watch a quartet of men approach the hostess stand. All four are in the business-casual uniform of khakis, button-ups and ties. The four are laughing and smiling at some unheard joke.

SANDY (CONT'D)  
You okay with the Hey Darlin'  
Quartet.

HALO  
They still got an expense account?

SANDY  
Yep.

Quickly and subtly, Halo smooths back her hair. The men approach the stand.

DARLIN' MAN ONE  
Hey, darlin'. Four for lunch.

HALO  
(Halo winks)  
Follow me, boys.

INT. CRACKER BARREL

HALO hands out drinks and "accidentally" presses against the shoulder of one of the men.

HALO  
Three Diet Cokes and a Diet  
Mountain Dew for the wild card.

DARLIN' MAN TWO  
Thank's darlin'.

INT. CRACKER BARREL

HALO walks back to the hostess stand.

SANDY  
I just put a guy in two. Asked for  
it specifically. Hey, you'd tell me  
if you were, right?

She raises her eyebrows in a way that means "getting some."

HALO  
Cold shower, Sandy.

HALO starts to walk away.

SANDY  
I gotta live vicarious through  
somebody.

INT. CRACKER BARREL

HALO walks up to a booth, seeing only the back of the guy's head until she's right there. ROY looks up at her, smiling.

ROY  
Hey, Halo.

HALO  
What are you doing here?

ROY  
You called. I thought maybe you were ready to talk.

HALO  
I'm a little busy. Raising our daughter and working two jobs--one of them right at this fucking moment.

She gives a sideways glance in Stan's direction. He's chatting up a customer and doesn't notice her.

ROY  
I have a job too, you know. And I only have forty-five minutes for lunch.

HALO  
Well you can't spend them here.

ROY  
I don't want to. I want / to talk.

Out of the corner of her eye, Halo sees Stan disengage from the customer and head across the restaurant.

HALO  
Our special today is the campfire chicken. That's chicken prepared and cooked in tinfoil with a selection of homegrown vegetables.

ROY  
What? Oh yeah. That sounds good. Biscuits with that?

HALO  
Yes, sir. Or corn muffins.

ROY  
I'll do the biscuits. With plenty of extra butter.

(MORE)

ROY (CONT'D)

Don't like it when the biscuits get  
all dry crumbly. Choke me right up.

Stan heads out of sight. Halo grabs Roy and drags him away  
from the table.

EXT. RESTAURANT BACK ALLEY - DAY

HALO

Okay.

ROY

Okay?

HALO

You're here. Talk.

ROY

I want more time with Elle. I've  
done everything the court said I  
needed to. I've got a steady job.  
I've got an apartment. I even got a  
futon in the living room if she  
wants to stay the night.

HALO

Stay the night?

ROY

Yeah.

HALO

Last time I left you with her for  
more than six hours I / came home--

ROY

Come on.

HALO

I came home to find you unconscious  
on the floor and our daughter  
having ice cream for dinner.

ROY

I'm clean.

HALO

You know what she told me. "Shhh.  
Daddy's taking a nap."

ROY

Yeah. Yeah, you told me. Six years.  
That was six years ago.

(MORE)

ROY (CONT'D)

I've been clean for five of them.  
I've got an associates degree. I'm  
employed. I make good money; better  
than you make here. I bought a  
duvet.

HALO

A what?

ROY

A duvet. For the futon. It's like a  
/ comforter.

HALO

I know what a duvet is.

ROY

What I'm saying is my shit is  
together. And I know you might not  
care about that. I know you don't  
want to have anything to do with  
me. But I don't want you making  
that decision for our daughter.

HALO has no response. ROY sees his opening and plows ahead.

ROY (CONT'D)

One evening a week--I was thinking  
Wednesdays, but whatever works for  
you. I'll pick her up from school;  
we can do dinner; I'll bring her  
home. And every other Saturday. She  
can spend the night and I'll bring  
her home Sunday morning. You'd have  
a night off.

A deep breath and pacing from HALO. She glances over to the  
gym. Through the window, she sees people moving, fighting,  
grappling. ROY'S voice brings her back.

ROY (CONT'D)

So?

HALO

I'll have to ask Elle. She might  
not want to stay over.

ROY

She's good with it. I emailed her.

HALO

Fucking hell / Roy.

ROY  
She emailed me first.

HALO  
She what?

ROY  
She asked about my job. I asked her  
about school; about her boyfriend.

HALO  
He's not her boyfriend. He's a  
sexual predator with a shitty  
goatee.

ROY  
He's just a guy.

HALO  
Yeah, a guy who's three years older  
than her.

ROY  
That's not that old. You just don't  
like him because his family is...

HALO  
What?

ROY  
Better off.

HALO  
Jesus...You can't drop into a  
situation after five years / and-

The back door opens and Sandy sticks her head out.

SANDY  
Halo. Expense account's food is up  
and they're getting antsy.

HALO  
One minute.

SANDY  
And Stan's antennae is twitching.

HALO  
I'll be right there.

The door closes.

ROY  
I'll pick her up this Saturday.  
Noon? Okay?

HALO  
I gotta go-

ROY  
You should also get your first  
child support check in a couple  
days. Let me help you take care of  
her.

HALO  
You buying me off so you can see my  
daughter?

ROY  
OUR daughter. And don't act like  
you don't need the money.

HALO  
Fuck you.

Halo walks away.

ROY  
Saturday. Noon.

HALO  
IF she wants to.

HALO storms back inside.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - MORNING

Halo and Mehbratu train. Halo's on gloves, Mehbratu on mitts.  
She's jab crossing as they move around the mat. She's all  
passion with no form, letting out all of her frustrations.  
She grunts and yells as they move.

GINA (O.C.)  
Why don't you let me hold the  
mitts.

She startles Mehbratu and Halo.

MEHBRATU  
Sure.

He hands off the mitts and steps aside. Gina doesn't say  
anything so Halo tries to go back into the jab cross  
sequence.

GINA  
Take a breath.

Halo takes a shallow breath.

GINA (CONT'D)  
A real one.

Halo takes a deep breath. She settles. Gina puts up the mitts. Halo does a jab cross and doesn't get her left back up. Gina hits her on the side of the head with her mitt, nearly knocking Halo over.

HALO  
Shit!

GINA  
Now we're gonna do this sequence back and forth across the mat ten times. You drop your left I get an opening.

She moves to hit Halo with the mitt again and Halo blocks.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Good. And breathe. If you don't breathe you'll run out of gas before reach the other end of the mat.

Halo takes a deep breath. Her and Gina start the slow and steady movement across the mat. There's a rhythm to it, steps, punches, breaths, accented by the occasional grunt when Halo drops her left and Gina smacks her shoulder. They make it to the other end of the mat.

GINA (CONT'D)  
One.

The rhythm continues over the following series of shots:

INT. WAL-MART STOCK ROOM - MORNING

Halo unloads and lifts boxes. She makes a point to pace herself and breathe.

GINA (V.O.)  
Two.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

Halo delivers a huge, heavy tray of food.

GINA (V.O.)

Three.

INT. CRACKER BARREL KITCHEN - NIGHT

Halo lifts a stack of plates and breathes.

GINA (V.O.)

Four.

Halo is sweating hard.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - MORNING

Halo's running out of gas. Sweat streams down her face.

GINA

Five.

INT. TERRY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Halo grabs pills and puts them down the toilet.

GINA

Six.

INT. BANK OFFICE - DAY

Halo in nicer clothes sits beside Roy in bank office signing papers for his child support. She looks pressured and full of doubt.

GINA (V.O.)

Seven.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - DAY

Halo's about the break.

GINA

Come on you can do this!

Halo makes it to the other side of the mat.

GINA (CONT'D)

Eight.

EXT. SCHOOL - AFTERNOON

Elle stands with JORDAN (18). She gives him a kiss then walks to the truck and gets in beside Halo without looking at her.

GINA

Nine.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - DAY

Halo gets a final burst of energy and pushes herself to finish the last pass across the mat with the best rhythm and form she's had the whole time.

GINA

Ten.

Halo collapses to the mat, coughing.

GINA (CONT'D)

You're a smoker, right?

Halo nods her head unable to speak.

GINA (CONT'D)

You should quit.

Gina walks away and leaves Halo on the mat.

INT. HALO'S TRUCK - DAY

Halo is parked outside a generic apartment complex. She's just come from the gym, still wearing her sweaty gym clothes—another old field hockey outfit. She's chugging a water. The radio is turned up.

Elle emerges from the front door, backpack slung over her shoulder. Roy is right behind her. He stands, holding the door open, and waves at Halo. Halo half-heartedly waves back.

Roy yells something to Elle. Elle says something back and they both laugh. None of this can be heard over the sound of the music.

Elle hops into the truck. She looks at her Mom's outfit and gives a little scowl.

INT. HALO'S TRUCK - DAY

Halo and Elle on the road.

HALO  
So, how was it?

ELLE  
Cool.

HALO  
What did you guys do yesterday?

ELLE  
Shopping.

HALO  
I thought you were going to the movies.

ELLE  
Yeah, but...I don't know. Haven't seen him in forever. It'd be weird to do something where you just sit in the dark.

HALO  
Right.

ELLE  
Anyway, I saw his place and I was like, Dad you need to decorate. I mean, seriously. He had nothing up, you know? So we went to Ikea and he let me pick out, like, all the stuff. Then we went back and decorated the whole apartment and watched Netflix and got pizza.

HALO  
Sounds like fun.

ELLE  
Yeah.

Elle shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

ELLE (CONT'D)  
Mom?

HALO  
Yeah?

ELLE  
You kind of smell.

Elle rolls the window down a little.

HALO

We could go shopping too. Maybe get you a couple new outfits for school.

ELLE

It's not a competition, mom.

INT. DICK'S SPORTING GOODS - DAY

A cavernous store filled with rows of sporting goods. Halo and Brenda walk down an aisle filled with boxing supplies. Different colored training gloves hang from the racks. About a month has passed but Halo already looks stronger. Her shoulders more upright.

BRENDA

How'd she handle it?

HALO

Great. Too great. He's buying her shit I've never been able to afford.

BRENDA

Well at least Elle gets to reap the benefits.

Brenda pulls a pair of bright pink training gloves off a rack. Halo picks up a pair of black gloves.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

Fine. Basic black. Fashion staple. Just make sure these don't go the way of my Zumba tapes.

HALO

You did Zumba?

BRENDA

Exactly! I also did the Ab-Blaster, the Thigh-Master. That thing--that--

She makes a motion like she's jerking off a horse.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

You know--like you're jerking off a horse?

HALO

Shake-weight.

Halo starts going through a rack of hand-wraps.

HALO (CONT'D)

This is a little different than a shake-weight.

BRENDA

Yeah. It's more expensive. How much is it a month? A hundred bucks?

HALO

Ninety-nine dollars. Just finished my month free trial.

BRENDA

How are you swinging that? Oh Roy-right.

HALO

Roy isn't paying for my classes I am.

Brenda gives her a look.

HALO (CONT'D)

His check is helping me pay the bills so I actually have a little of my own money to do something for myself for once. Is that okay?

The idea of Roy paying for her training zaps Halo's excitement about buying gear.

BRENDA

Yeah. Chill. On second thought maybe it's good you have your gym class to help you deal with all that pent up aggression.

Halo half heartedly throws a three-pack of hand-wraps into her basket. They turn the corner into another aisle.

HALO

It isn't gym class. You make it sound like high school.

BRENDA

You know Sharon at Pep Boys? She does self defense things. Workshops.

HALO

I'm not doing this for self-defense.

BRENDA  
 Supposed to be for women that live  
 alone, you know?

HALO  
 It's not for self-defense.

BRENDA  
 Okay. Why are you doing it?

HALO  
 I'm training cause I want to fight.

This surprises Halo as much as it does Brenda.

BRENDA  
 Sorry I don't mean to overstep here  
 but - are you sure that's the  
 example Elle needs right now?  
 Shit's been crazy for you guys  
 forever and now that things might  
 settle down a little you want to  
 take on a violent hobby?

HALO  
 It isn't violent.

BRENDA  
 MMA: two people get locked inside a  
 cage and beat the shit out of each  
 other. What part of that isn't  
 violent?

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - NIGHT

Two people collide in a grappling class. We see them in the foreground as Halo watches. Halo looks uneasy- like she isn't quite comfortable with the move yet.

DAN  
 Okay who wants to go next. Katie?  
 Halo?

The two women begin in what looks like a wrestling position. They're practicing maneuvers out of various holds. Halo holds Katie and Katie completes the move.

DAN (CONT'D)  
 Good! Now switch.

Halo gets into the same position. Halo pops out of the hold and swings around, but gets a little too excited and knees herself in the face.

HALO  
Oh fuck!

KATIE  
Shit.

DAN  
You okay?

HALO  
I'm fine. I'm fine. Let's do it  
again.

DAN  
Are you sure?

HALO  
Yeah let's do it.

They get into position and do the move again, perfectly this  
time.

DAN  
Good!

When Halo stands up Gina is there watching.

GINA  
There's some ice in the freezer.

HALO  
Thank you.

INT. WAL-MART BATHROOM - DAY

Halo looks at her black eye in the mirror. She tries to cover  
it with makeup.

HALO  
Ah man.

A fellow employee comes out of another stall and washes her  
hands. She's a road weary lady sporting a mullet who talks  
like she's smoked a pack a day since she came out of the  
womb. She sees Halo.

WALMART LADY  
Trick is to get some of that green  
foundation stuff that we sell to  
hide teenager acne. Use that as a  
base before your foundation and it  
works like a charm.

Halo is both horrified and grateful.

HALO

Thank you.

The woman walks away. Halo's phone rings: "High School"

INT. GUIDANCE COUNSELOR'S OFFICE

Halo and Elle sit in a bland school office facing the Guidance Counselor. All we see of him is a bald spot and the back of a cheap suit. Despite Halo's best attempts, the black eye is still extremely noticeable. Elle is visibly embarrassed for numerous reasons.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

And while there's been considerable improvement, it'd be nice to see more. Especially if Elizabeth is looking to switch to the college track next year. So consider tutoring next semester.

HALO

Okay. We will. Thank you.

Halo and Elle stand.

Elle walks out while Halo shakes the Guidance Counselor's hand.

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

Ms. Preston, are you, um...

HALO

Oh, I'm fine. It was my fault. I mean, knocked my knee into my face in a grappling maneuver. I'm fine. Really. Thank you.

Halo hurries out.

EXT. SCHOOL PARKING LOT

Elle and Halo walk toward the truck. Elle is mortified.

HALO

I'm sorry that-

ELLE

Don't. Just don't.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

Elle tears in through the front door with Halo behind her.

ELLE

I've never been so embarrassed.

HALO

Don't make this about me, Elle.  
You're failing three / classes.

ELLE

I'm not failing. They just said  
there's room / for improvement.

HALO

That you're in danger of failing.

ELLE

But I won't. I'll be fine.

HALO

Yeah. You'll cram at the last  
minute and get a C-.

ELLE

So?

HALO

God.

ELLE

What?

HALO

You are smarter than this.

ELLE

I'm not going to / fail.

HALO

Kind of a low bar, Elle.

ELLE

It's freakin' high school. You're  
the one who's always telling me  
don't treat high school like it's  
supposed to be the best days of my  
life.

HALO

What about afterward? You getting  
into college / with a C-.

ELLE  
I could just drop out and get my  
GED.

Elle storms into her bedroom with Halo on her heels.

INT. ELLE'S ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

Elle starts sorting through books and notebooks and tossing some into her backpack.

HALO  
You're not dropping / out.

ELLE  
Dad did. Shit--he went to prison  
and took online classes and he  
still got a good job.

HALO  
He got a good job because his uncle  
is the head of HR.

ELLE  
Whatever.

HALO  
Don't whatever me. You want to know  
what happens when you get shit  
grades and don't go to college and  
just whatever? This.

Halo makes a gesture that could mean the trailer or her  
waitress uniform or both.

ELLE  
So, like, what? This is your worst  
case scenario? I'm your worst cast  
scenario.

HALO  
Elle--you know that's not what I  
meant.

Elle shoulders past her and out the front door.

EXT. TRAILER - LATE AFTERNOON

Elle is double-timing it down the trailer park street. Halo  
stands in the door calling after her.

HALO  
Where are you going?

ELLE  
Sarah's picking me up. We're gonna go study. You know--so I don't end up like you.

Elle turns her back on Halo. Sarah pulls in and Elle gets inside as quickly as she can.

Halo stands alone as they go. She slams the side of the trailer.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - EVENING

We come in mid-training. Halo is holding pads for another student. The buzzer sounds.

Gina comes in through the front door dressed in scrubs and walks to the check in table to check the schedule.

DAN  
All right. Quick burn out. Wall sits.

A scattering of groans. The students line up against the wall, bending their knees, and pressing their backs against the padded wall as if they're sitting on invisible chairs.

Feeling less intimidated by Gina in this get up, Halo takes a position closest to the check-in desk.

HALO  
(straining from the effort)  
Hey, Gina?

GINA  
Yeah.

HALO  
How long. Until I can take. The advanced class.

GINA  
Oh, a while.

HALO  
How long is a while?

GINA  
Six months.

HALO  
Six months?

GINA  
Sometimes less.  
(Looks at Halo struggling)  
Sometimes more.

Gina walks to the back where she descends down a flight of stairs. Halo watches her.

DAN  
(yelling to the class)  
Keep those knees right above your feet!

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - EVENING

The camera looks up at HALO as she heads down the narrow stairs. There's a sense of claustrophobia, of light dimming, like she's descending a mineshaft.

INT. THE DUNGEON - EVENING

HALO turns a corner and finds herself in a brightly-lit room. It's floor is thickly matted; one wall is covered by the same kind of chain-link that the cage was constructed of at CageKong. In one corner is a fan and a dehumidifier doing their best to cool down the hot, airless room. On a shelf, bluetooth speakers pound out the music. On the same shelf, there's a digital clock counting down. :29 seconds to go.

In the center of the room, Gina is holding pads for Belinda—a petite woman about five years Halo's junior. The two circle each other. Gina is not calling hits, just holding up the pads, and the hits are coming fast.

The timer runs out; a buzzer sounds.

GINA  
That was good. Don't be afraid to go for the clinch, though.

BELINDA  
Yeah, I know.

GINA  
Get the clinch, you can get the elbows.

BELINDA

Got it. I gotta run. Pick up the kids.

GINA

Run then.

Belinda brushes past Halo on her way out. Gina notices Halo.

HALO

Dan said. I can get one-on-one training. It comes with the fee.

GINA

Dan does most of the one-on-one. Also Joe. Joe's very good.

HALO

They're only available when I work. Please?

GINA

Don't make me tell you no to your face.

HALO

WHY? Why don't you like me?

GINA

It doesn't matter whether I like you. I don't respect you.

HALO

Well why don't you respect me?

GINA

Seriously we're gonna do this right now? I have another class.

HALO

You disliked me from the minute you first laid eyes on me and I think I deserve to know why.

GINA

Cause I know your type. Blame the world for the shitty hand you've been dealt. Everyone's against you so you bottle it up inside and think that coming in here and punching a bag will make you feel better. And maybe it does for a little while.

(MORE)

GINA (CONT'D)

But it'll never fix the fact that the person you actually want to be fighting is yourself. And until you figure out how to fight FOR yourself you're just wasting my time.

(She takes a step to leave)

I gotta hand it to you though, I didn't think you'd last through the first week. So you can at least give yourself a little pat on the back for that one.

Gina tries to get by her but Halo blocks her exit. She doesn't say anything because she doesn't have any words. But she knows she's not gonna move.

GINA (CONT'D)

You do know that I could literally demolish you right now with my bare hands.

HALO

Wouldn't be any worse than anything else I have to deal with as soon as I walk out those doors. Come to think of it, I think I'd actually prefer a good punch to the face. At least I'd see that blow coming.

She finally has Gina's attention.

HALO (CONT'D)

Coming in here is the first good thing I've ever done for myself. When I'm fighting in here, I feel like I can keep fighting out there. Please.

Long pause.

GINA

Okay.

HALO

Okay?

GINA

But you have to be on time. And no calling out sick.

HALO

Got it.

GINA  
 Unless it's ringworm. Stay home if  
 it's ringworm.

HALO  
 Okay. Thank you.

INT. WAL-MART - EARLY MORNING

Halo is stocking shelves, one earbud plugged into her ear.

HALO  
 All the way through New Years? Are  
 you crazy? That's her entire winter  
 break.

INT. ROY'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

Roy is picking out his clothes for the day. Even though all  
 the options are various shades of office drone, he takes  
 great care with them. Like someone who's thankful for having  
 the few choices he has.

CUT BETWEEN HALO AND ROY THROUGH CONVERSATION

ROY  
 I know it's a big ask.

HALO  
 Yeah. Yeah, it is.

ROY  
 But my folks haven't seen Elle in  
 five years.

HALO  
 They can come here.

ROY  
 They're old. My Mom doesn't travel  
 well. Grandma Ruth will be there  
 and, you know. Mom says she  
 probably won't make another  
 Christmas.

Halo breathes heavy into the phone.

ROY (CONT'D)  
 You know, you're...I mean...you're  
 invited, too. If you...want...

HALO

Jesus Christ, no. I mean...Thank you. For the offer. You know she's having problems in school, right?

ROY

Yeah. Yeah, I know. We talked about that. I told her, she's got to get her grades up. Or, you know...

HALO

Or you know what?

ROY

There'll be consequences, you know.

HALO

Yeah--that she doesn't go to Portland for two weeks.

ROY

Well...my Mom needs to buy the tickets.

HALO

Repeat after me: B minus or better or you don't go.

ROY

Okay.

HALO

No. Seriously. Repeat it.

ROY

B minus or better or you don't go.

HALO

Thank you.

ROY

She's a good kid and a hard worker.

HALO

So was I and look where it got me.

INT. SARAH'S CAR - EVENING

Elle cranks up the music on the radio and laughs. Camera pans to reveal Sarah in the drivers seat drinking a beer. She passes it over to Elle who takes a big drink then yells as Sarah speeds away.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - EVENING

The music that was playing in the car continues through the training. Halo wraps her hands at the gym.

GINA  
Let's do this.

Gina is holding pads for Halo. They've got the mat pretty much to themselves.

GINA (CONT'D)  
One-K.

Halo jabs then kicks.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Two.

Halo throws a jab/cross.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Two-K.

Halo throws a jab, a cross, and a kick.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Again. Hip.

Halo does it again. Her form with the kick is a little better.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Four.

Halo throws a jab, cross, hook, cross.

There's a beep from the timer. It reads :30.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Thirty seconds. Burn-out. Fast as you can, hard as you can.

Halo throws the jab-cross combo again and again and again-- quick and hard and sloppy.

INT. SCHOOL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Elle and Sarah get out of the car and Elle greets Jordan with a big kiss. They both share a drag off a joint before he grabs her ass and kisses her again.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - NIGHT

The timer goes off. Halo is spent.

GINA  
One minute break.

Halo goes to her phone. Checks it.

The last message is from Halo to Elle: "Hey I'll be a bit late getting home. What are you up to?" No answer from Elle yet...

HALO  
You have kids?

GINA  
No. No kids. My father keeps telling me it's not too late. "You are still young, Gadara. Children are a blessing. Children are your legacy."

HALO  
What do you tell him?

GINA  
I tell him I'll make other legacies.

Halo nods thoughtfully.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Lazy time over. Let's work on those shitty knees of yours.

The music ends.

EXT. HALO'S TRAILER - NIGHT

Halo pulls into the driveway. A souped up Subaru sits in her usual spot. Halo bursts into the house.

INT. LIVING ROOM/HALLWAY - NIGHT

Halo runs straight to Elle's room and opens the door.

INT. ELLE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Jordan and Elle are already scrambling to put their clothes on. Halo pulls Jordan off the bed and decks him right in the nose. Elle screams.

HALO  
Stay away from my daughter.

JORDAN  
You're fucking crazy I'm calling  
the cops!

HALO  
You just try motherfucker. You know  
I could have you thrown in jail for  
having sex with a fucking 15 year  
old minor!

JORDAN  
I thought you were sixteen?!

ELLE  
MOM!

HALO  
Get the fuck out of my house!

Jordan stumbles out to his car. Elle looks at her mother. Tears streaming down her face.

HALO (CONT'D)  
Did he hurt you?

ELLE  
No. You're the only one that hurts  
people.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - MORNING

Operatic music: A glowing Santa statue stands beside the "Greenbelt: A Manufactured Home Community" sign. The Santa's nose looks like it's been missing for some time.

EXT. WAL-MART - MORNING

A Salvation Army volunteer rings a bell by the front entrance.

EXT. HIGHWAY - MORNING

Wide shots of houses with tacky blow up Christmas yard decorations.

EXT. ROY'S APARTMENT COMPLEX - DAY

Halo drops Elle off at Roy's place. Roy grabs a massive suitcase out of the back of the truck. Things between Halo and Elle are still really tense.

ROY  
Holy. You got a body in here?

ELLE  
Mom made that joke already.

HALO  
Be safe. Text me. Everyday.

ELLE  
Sure.

HALO  
And I don't care if weed is legal there. You're not / smoking up.

ROY  
Halo.

HALO  
Okay. Love you.

Elle runs into the apartment.

ROY  
She'll be fine.

HALO  
Sure.

ROY  
Listen I've been meaning to talk to you about... Are you sure this fighting stuff you're doing is a good idea.

HALO  
What?

ROY

Well when I hear stories about you punching a teenager I start to worry.

HALO

If you think I would EVER lay a hand on her you-

ROY

I don't I don't. I just think that maybe you need to take these two weeks to figure some shit out. I want to create a stable environment for her. It's no wonder her grades are slipping.

HALO

You're gonna blame that on me? Where would she be without me? I rescued her from you.

ROY

Well I just hope I don't have to return the favor.

HALO

Just bring my daughter home in one piece asshole.

ROY

Merry Christmas to you too, Halo.

Halo slams the door of her truck.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

Halo drives down a cold, December rural highway. That she's not going to see Elle for two weeks is starting to sink in. She fights back tears.

She turns on the radio. Even the rock station has been taken over by Christmas music. She slaps the radio off.

She lets the tears come.

INT. BREAKROOM - NIGHT

Halo in the Cracker Barrel breakroom counting up her tips. Obviously on her way out for the evening. Stan approaches.

STAN

Halo.

Halo looks up, wondering what she's done wrong now.

HALO

Yes?

STAN

I just finalized the schedule and I wanted to thank you for volunteering to do the holiday shifts. I know those aren't very popular. So--way to lean in.

HALO

No problem.

STAN

I know the waitresses with families appreciate it.

HALO

Happy to.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - NIGHT

Halo is finishing up a jiu jitsu class. She's rolling on the mat with a student nearly twice her size. The buzzer sounds. They break.

The other student gets up and helps Halo to her feet. They give a quick, exhausted fist-bump.

Dan yells from the front desk.

DAN

Just a reminder that we're closed December 24 through 26. Get all your ya-yas out now.

Halo approaches the desk.

HALO

The gym's closed all three days? I wanted to get a lot of work in.

DAN

Everyone's doing family things, classes are pretty vacant. It's not worth opening up. Unless one of the trainer's wants to come in for some open mat.

INT. DUNGEON - NIGHT

Halo enters the downstairs training dungeon. Gina is there sparring with Mehbratu.

GINA  
Come on. Set the pace, set the  
pace.

Mehbratu comes on quicker and stronger.

HALO  
Hey.

Gina pauses the sparring.

MEHBRATU  
Hey you.

GINA  
Yes?

HALO  
Are you here over Christmas?

GINA  
Am I here?

HALO  
In town?

GINA  
Yes.

HALO  
You want to come in Christmas day  
and train? I've got the lunch  
shift, but I'm free after three.

GINA  
I...No. I have obligations.

HALO  
Okay. What about the day after?

GINA  
I have another job.

HALO  
When does it start?

GINA  
It starts at 10 in the morning.

HALO  
How about before?

GINA  
I would need to get here; train  
you; go home, shower/ change.

HALO  
I don't have Wal-Mart til that  
afternoon so I can be here as early  
as you want.

GINA  
Early as I want?

HALO  
Yeah.

GINA  
Okay. Six a.m.

HALO  
Six a.m. Morning after Christmas.  
Okay.

Halo bounces back up the stairs.

INT. ALDI GROCERY STORE - EVENING

Halo is making her way down the frozen food aisle. Every few steps, she opens the case and tosses in a frozen dinner. As she walks, she leaves a message for Elle on her phone.

HALO  
Hey it's me. Just wanted to say hi.  
Hope everything's okay up there, I  
haven't really heard from you. I  
um, got those slippers wrapped to  
give Mom-mom so...I'm sure she'll  
love them. Okay call me tomorrow,  
okay? Love you.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - MORNING

Halo delivers a tray of gravy-covered food to a big table - an extended family of grandparents, parents, and a trio of excited, laughing children. The family is decked out in holiday colors.

Halo's only holiday color is a wreath pin underneath her usual nametag.

An older man and woman get up from their table.

OLDER WOMAN

You have a merry Christmas,  
sweetie.

HALO

Thanks. You, too.

Halo smiles as they leave. But her smile dies a little as soon as their back as it turned.

INT. TERRY'S LIVING ROOM - EARLY EVENING

Halo and Terry sit on the couch, the remains of an early Christmas dinner on TV trays in front of them. The only real light in the room comes from the flickering TV--some nameless Hallmark movie.

Terry is asleep and snoring. On her feet are a pair of bright pink fuzzy slippers.

The credits start rolling. Halo disposes of the leftovers and folds up the TV trays. Halo taps Terry's leg. No response. She taps her again. Terry snortles awake.

TERRY

Wuzzit.

HALO

Movie's over Mom.

TERRY

Okay.

HALO

I'm gonna go home.

TERRY

(barely awake)

Okay.

HALO

I'll tell Elle how much you love  
the slippers.

TERRY

Oh yeah yeah, thank you, sure.

Craving affection, Halo attempts to hug Terry before she leaves. It's stiff and uncomfortable. Halo leaves.

EXT. TERRY'S HOUSE

Halo is sliding into her truck when her phone buzzes. She answers.

INT. BRENDA'S PARENTS' HOUSE

A kitchen packed with people--Brenda's entire extended family crammed into too small a space, all laughing and jostling, most of them too old for Brenda to really have fun with. It looks hot and claustrophobic and exhausting.

CUT BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN HALO AND BRENDA

BRENDA  
Hey--Merry Christmas!

HALO  
Merry Christmas.

BRENDA  
What are you doing?

EXT. AN OPEN FIELD - NIGHT

Halo's truck is parked in the middle of a played-out cornfield well outside of town. The truck's headlights create ragged shadows across the old furrows in the earth. Halo and Brenda are laying down in the bed of the truck. They're working on what appears to be the second of a pair of six packs and staring up at the sky. Halo smokes.

HALO  
Haven't had a cigarette in almost  
three months. Tastes so damn good.

Brenda finishes a bottle and tosses it into the field.

HALO (CONT'D)  
We're gonna have to get that before  
we go.

BRENDA  
Never picked them up before.

HALO  
We were in high school.

BRENDA  
Right. We're adults now.

She cracks open another beer.

BRENDA (CONT'D)

Thanks for...coming out. If I had one more great aunt ask me when I was going to find someone to make an honest woman of me...

HALO

Yeah?

BRENDA

Yeah. And it's Christmas, so I didn't want to call Auntie Beth a cunt.

HALO

Better than being stuck in that apartment with my mom...God. I think she's using again.

BRENDA

Shit.

HALO

I was watching this family today. This perfect family. Just...smiling and happy and I was like...that's what it's supposed to look like. Wife had perfect hair. Homecoming queen hair. Eleven in the morning at a Cracker Barrel. Perfect.

BRENDA

Sounds like obseshiv...obsessive compulsion disorder--you know what I mean. Women like that are secretly miserable.

HALO

Or...

BRENDA

Or?

HALO

Or maybe she made all the right choices and she's exactly what she looks like.

BRENDA

Homecoming queen. Oh shit. I forgot.

She drunkenly stumbles out of the truck.

HALO  
Watch out.

BRENDA  
I found a thing.

Brenda goes into the cab and comes back with a yearbook. She and Halo perch on the tailgate and look at the book.

HALO  
Jesus.

BRENDA  
Found it at my folks' today. Hang on. Here.

She flips to a page she has marked.

CU of a yearbook photo of Halo. She is smiling and it's not a fake smile. She looks impossibly young.

HALO  
God.

BRENDA  
Yep.

CU on the scribbled notes down the side of the page. "Good luck." "Have a great summer." "Have a great life!" Etc.

Brenda flips the yearbook closed. CU on the cover. "Aaronsville High 2002: Imagine Your Future."

CU on their faces, close together, looking down at the cover, faces blank and sad and a touch grim.

BRENDA (CONT'D)  
Fuck it.

Brenda tosses the yearbook off into the darkness. She holds up her beer.

BRENDA (CONT'D)  
Fuck the homecoming queens.

She and Halo toast bottles and chug.

HALO  
Fuck 'em.

Wide shot of the field, the two women laughing.

EXT. LOW GUARD MMA - PREDAWN

Gina's car pulls up to the front of the gym. The parking lot is nearly vacant. The sun is just starting to peek out over the horizon.

Gina gets out and unlocks the gym.

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

Halo lays sprawled on her bed, still dressed from the night before.

On the nightstand, her phone lights up and the alarm goes off. Halo does not budge.

INT. LOW GUARD GYM - DAWN

Gina sits on the floor, back against the padded wall. She glances at the clock. 6:35.

INT. BEDROOM - DAWN

Halo sluggishly rolls over, eyes fluttering open. She slowly lifts up her head, grabs her phone, and looks at the time.

                    HALO  
                    Shit...Shit!

She bolts out of bed fighting her way through the tangled covers.

INT. LOW GUARD GYM - MORNING

Halo hurries into the gym. She's managed to dress herself in gym clothes. Barely. One shoe is untied and her shirt's on inside out.

Gina is still sitting where we left her. Waiting less than patiently. She pointedly looks at the clock. 7:34.

                    HALO  
                    You're here.

                    GINA  
                    Yes. I am here.

HALO

Look, I know. I'm sorry. I didn't hear the alarm. It must have gone off for an hour. I don't know.

Gina just nods.

HALO (CONT'D)

Seriously. I set it.

GINA

I believe you.

HALO

And I came. Look. I'm here.

GINA

It's too late to do anything useful.

HALO

Come on. When do you have to go? Eight? That's like half an hour.

GINA

By the time you warm up, it will / be almost--

HALO

I'm warm. Seriously. I'm good to go.

GINA

No.

HALO

Come on. I see Belinda come in for, like, twenty minutes of sparring. Or Mehbratu? Same deal.

GINA

That's sparring. That's different. You're too new.

HALO

I've been doing this for four months. Come on. Let's go.

GINA

Okay.

HALO

Yeah?

GINA  
Yes. Let's go.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - DAWN

Gina and Halo square off on the mat. Both wear training gloves, mouth guards and shin pads.

The timer counts down 3-2-1. A buzzer sounds and the clock resets to three minutes and begins counting down.

Gina and Halo bump gloves and get into Muay Thai stances. This is Halo's first time sparring, so she does what most newbies do: waits for Gina to strike first.

Gina throws a few range-finding jabs. Halo blocks them easily. Gina comes in with a cross that Halo dodges.

There's a gleam in Halo's eye as her confidence grows. She moves in on Gina. She throws a few combos, all of which Gina blocks.

Gina responds with a right cross that Halo sloppily blocks. But it was a feint. Gina uses the opportunity to get Halo in a clinch, locking her hands behind Halo's head and pulling Halo's head down and forward.

Halo gets her gloves down just in time to absorb most of the impact from the knee that Gina drives into her stomach.

Panicking, Halo twists out of the clinch and stumbles back. Gina pursues, throwing a jab-cross to get Halo's guard up then sending a left hook into Halo's body. It's a perfect liver shot.

Halo's face contorts in pain, then panic. Gina sees this and runs and grabs the wastepaper basket from by the desk.

Halo tears one glove off just in time to be able to pull out her mouthguard before she throws up the remains of last night in the basket.

GINA  
You done?

Halo nods.

Gina sets the can aside.

HALO  
That was a little brutal.

GINA  
You think that was brutal?

HALO  
That liver shot? Yes.

GINA  
That was thirty percent. And half speed. When I say you're not ready to spar, you're not ready / to spar.

HALO  
Okay, okay. Lesson learned.

GINA  
No. No, you see...This is why I don't work one-on-one with new people.

HALO  
What? Because I didn't block one / hook.

GINA  
Because I never know if they're going to be serious. If they're going to care. I want people who are going to show up.

HALO  
I'm sorry I was late.

GINA  
And drunk.

HALO  
I'm not / drunk.

GINA  
I smell it. You're sweating it.

HALO  
I was out late last night. It was a really rough Christmas. My daughter's in Portland / and my Mom-

GINA  
You know how I can tell if someone is not going to be serious? Excuses. They give excuses. I don't care about excuses. Nobody cares about your excuses.

HALO

Okay. First--they're not excuses. I have a life, you know? Things outside of here and sometimes / shit happens.

GINA

I have a life, too. I have things. Places to be. But I came here when you asked. Because I thought you were someone who...who needed this. Who needed to do this? That you were serious. I thought you seemed serious. Not someone looking for a-a-hobby. But...

Gina waves dismissively.

HALO

Oh fuck you. You don't know me. You don't know shit about me. But you're right. I don't need this. I do not need this. I have enough people throwing bullshit at me. I don't need to pay a hundred bucks a month for more of it.

Halo grabs her things, shoves them into her bag, and storms out of the gym. Gina, stone-faced, watches her go.

INT. BLUEBIRD BAR AND GRILL - NIGHT

The Bluebird is jam-packed with bodies. It's New Years Eve and it seems like half the town is packed into the bar. A jukebox is playing a string of fan-favorite dance hits and the dance floor is a mass of men and women moving with a drunken grace.

Brenda and Halo are huddled at the same table as before. They have to shout to be heard above the din. Halo is working her way through a plate of mozzarella sticks.

BRENDA

You can slow down. They won't take them away at the stroke of twelve.

HALO

(mouth full of mozzarella)  
Sorry.

BRENDA

Don't apologize. It's weirdly erotic.

HALO  
Gave up fried shit when I was  
training.

BRENDA  
And now you're cramming in four  
months worth?

Halo gives her the finger.

BRENDA (CONT'D)  
So you're not going back.

Halo shakes her head.

BRENDA (CONT'D)  
I mean, they have other  
instructors, right?

HALO  
Doesn't matter. I mean--it was  
dumb, right? Me, like, fighting. It  
was just stupid.

BRENDA  
Yeah.

HALO  
Yeah. I mean, you were right. Shake-  
weight.

BRENDA  
Shake-weight.  
And, you know, if you want to get  
back into it, they probably have  
DVDs. Something.

HALO  
Yeah.

A slightly drunk, somewhat attractive Roadhouse Dude comes  
over to the table. Even with the background noise, he's  
yelling a little too loud.

ROADHOUSE DUDE  
Brenda!

BRENDA  
(matching his volume)  
What?!

ROADHOUSE DUDE  
It's three minutes until midnight!

BRENDA  
Yes, it is!

ROADHOUSE DUDE  
You're gonna dance with me!

BRENDA  
I am!

ROADHOUSE DUDE  
Totally!

BRENDA  
(to Halo)  
I'm totally gonna dance with him.

HALO  
Go dance with him.

Brenda joins Roadhouse Dude on the dance floor. She's super into the dancing, and just a little into the Dude.

Halo sips her beer and stares at the crowd. Nobody's coming over to ask her to dance.

She picks up her phone to text Elle. Insert shot of phone:

TEXT: "I miss you. Happy new year."

INT. PORTLAND HOUSE - NIGHT

Elle reads the text quickly then continues on with her conversation in a crowd of Portland family members. Everyone including Roy seems to be having a great time.

INT. BLUEBIRD BAR AND GRILL - NIGHT

Halo looks at her phone. No response. Camera slowly pushes in on Halo's face as she sits alone in the bar. She gets up and walks outside.

EXT. BLUEBIRD BAR AND GRILL - NEARLY MIDNIGHT.

Halo lights her cigarette and takes a deep drag. She looks up and sees a familiar car.

HALO  
Mom?

Terry behind the wheel of her station wagon is singing "Auld Lang Syne." Her car is headed straight for the bar.

HALO (CONT'D)

MOM!

Halo runs to the car and throws open the drivers door and pushes terry over as she pulls up the emergency break. Terry retaliates and clocks Halo in the nose. Halo pulls away holding her nose as Terry stands up out of the car. She immediately falls and vomits violently. Halo is crying now. She goes and holds her mom as she continues to heave in the parking lot.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM - NIGHT

Terry asleep in the bed. Halo sits close by holding her dirty clothes. She's wearing a clean white t-shirt. Her nose has been bandaged.

Gina walks into the room with a chart and sees Halo.

GINA

Well fuck me.

HALO

Happy new year I guess.

GINA

Yeah. I take the holiday shifts so folks with family can- you know.

Gina looks at Terry.

GINA (CONT'D)

She took a lot of vicodin.

HALO

Yeah. I think this is the worse I've seen her.

GINA

I can give you some recommendations for places-

HALO

Thanks. Hard to find places we can afford.

Gina nods, understanding.

GINA

I need to apologize.

HALO

No.

GINA

I got angry and that was wrong.

HALO

No. You were right. I was an asshole. Seriously. Huge asshole.

GINA

Yes. Okay. But I shouldn't have said the things I said that way.

HALO

I really want to come back.

GINA

You never had to leave.

HALO

I was wrong. When I said I didn't need this. I need this. I need something where if I work at it, I get better. Like--I can see myself getting better. And when I get something right. When I work and work at it. Like that spinning elbow. Right? That fucking spinning elbow and I finally just nailed it. That feeling. Nowhere else. I don't get it anywhere else. And I'll tell you, I don't just want to train for the sake of training. I want to work towards a smoker. I want to walk into a ring. I want to know what that feels like. And...I want to prove I can do it. I just want to prove it.

GINA

Prove to who?

Halo thinks about it for a long second.

HALO

Me. Just me. And maybe my daughter a little bit.

Gina thinks about it, then eventually nods.

GINA

Okay. Take a day then I'll see you for one-on-one.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Halo helps Elle carry her bags into the trailer.

HALO  
You hungry? I did a run to the store and got some healthier stuff.

ELLE  
No. I'm good. You still going to the gym.

HALO  
Yeah, I am.

Elle nods.

HALO (CONT'D)  
It helps, you know.

ELLE  
Is that where you got the-

She points to Halo's nose.

HALO  
No that was a late Christmas gift from Mom-mom.

ELLE  
Is she okay?

HALO  
No.  
(a beat)  
Listen I know I really fucked up with the way I handled things with Jordan. I'm sorry.

ELLE  
Thanks. He's already seeing a new girl so. Guess he wasn't the greatest. I'm gonna crash for a while okay?

HALO  
Sure.

Elle starts to walk back to her room.

ELLE  
It smells different in here.

HALO  
 Oh I uh- finally quit smoking.  
 Threw out all the ash trays.

Elle nods. The faintest hint of a smile across her face.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - DAY

Music. Halo is in the middle of a Muay Thai class. A flurry of punches and kicks as Halo and her partner trade combos. Gina watches from nearby.

GINA  
 Gone for two weeks and your form goes to shit. Where's your guard? Do you want another bloody nose.

HALO  
 I know, I know.

GINA  
 Not protecting your face. Shit. / It's shit.

HALO  
 It's shit. Got it. Do you know any other swears? Seriously. Just for variety.

GINA  
 Your guard is fucking shit.

HALO  
 Thank you.  
 (Gina smiles)  
 Did you just make a joke?

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

Music continues. Halo walks up to Sandy at the hostess table.

SANDY  
 Hey--here come your boys.

Through the window, we see the Darlin' Quartet hop out of their car.

HALO  
 Table for four?

DARLIN' MAN ONE  
 You know it.

HALO  
Right this way darlin'.

DARLIN' MAN TWO  
Hey that's my line!

INT. THE DUNGEON - NIGHT

The lights flicker on. Halo makes her way down to the dungeon with the advanced class.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

Halo distributes food.

HALO  
I know how you boys love your biscuits so I threw on a few extra.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - NIGHT

Halo does speed kicks on the heavy bag.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

HALO  
How was everything?

DARLIN' MAN THREE  
Really great. Thanks.

HALO  
Is that a new tie.

DARLIN' MAN THREE  
No. But I don't wear it a lot.

HALO  
You should. It looks good on you.

DARLIN' MAN THREE  
Thanks.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - NIGHT

Halo rolling with one of the jiu jitsu students, slowly getting him into an arm lock. He taps out.

INT. CRACKER BARREL - DAY

Halo walks away from the Hey Darlin' boys and winks at Stan.

HALO  
Doing good work, Stan.

STAN  
Thank you.

Her confidence catches him off guard.

INT. LOW GUARD MMA - NIGHT

Halo sparring with Gina. Rather than gloves, Gina is holding a pair of four foot long foam noodles and is thwacking Halo on the the side of the head. Halo's goal is to defend against them. Gina is almost smiling.

HALO  
You're enjoying this.

GINA  
I'd enjoy it more if you'd learn to slip better.

DISSOLVE TO:

Gina holding the pads as Halo throws combo after combo.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Ten seconds. Win this, win this!

Halo doubles her speed.

The buzzer sounds. Halo raises her arms in triumph the collapses to the mat.

Music ends.

INT. LOW GUARD GYM - NIGHT

Halo packs gear into her bag. Gina walks over.

GINA  
I have good news. Sort of. There's a woman--she trains out of Bare Knuckle Boxing.

HALO  
You got me a fight?

GINA  
Maybe. It would be at Bare  
Knuckle's Spring Smoker.

HALO  
What's wrong with that?

GINA  
Eh. Bare Knuckle. They make a big  
thing out of their smokers. It's  
supposed to be low-key. Not a  
big..ego thing.

HALO  
So they're the bad guys. They're  
like Kobra Kai? Sweep the leg!

Blank stare from Gina.

HALO (CONT'D)  
It's a thing from a / movie.

GINA  
I know Karate Kid. No--they're very  
nice. They just like to put on a  
show. It's also soon. This other  
woman--she's been training much  
longer.

HALO  
I can do this. I want to do this.

GINA  
Third thing--she wants to fight at  
120.

HALO  
Okay. 120 it is.

GINA  
Okay.

Gina grabs a pen and paper from the front desk and starts  
writing down a list.

HALO  
Training breakdown?

GINA  
Grocery list.

## INT. TERRY'S KITCHEN - EVENING

In the microwave, a plate of food is slowly spinning--a modest piece of lean chicken and a mountain of broccoli. Halo watches it with a mixture of hunger and dread. Terry lays on the couch. Elle sits at the other end of the couch.

HALO

You gonna eat some food mom?

No answer.

HALO (CONT'D)

You've lost a lot of weight since New years I think you should eat something.

Halo takes her some food and sits beside her. Terry curls up in Halo's lap like a child.

HALO (CONT'D)

"Hush little baby don't say a word  
Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird.  
And if that mockingbird don't sing,  
Mama's gonna buy you a diamond  
ring. And if that diamond ring  
turns brass, mama's gonna buy you a  
looking glass."

Terry starts to sing along quietly.

HALO/TERRY

"And if that looking glass gets  
broke, mama's gonna buy you a billy  
goat. And if that billy goat won't  
pull, mama's gonna buy you a cart  
and bull."

Elle joins them for the last few lines.

HALO/TERRY/ELLE

"And if that cart and bull fall  
down, you'll still be the sweetest  
little girl in town."

The three of them sit for a moment in silence.

## EXT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - LATE AFTERNOON

Hard hitting music.

Bare Knuckle Boxing is nestled in a nondescript industrial park.

A line of people--men, women, and children--is peeking out the door. Just inside they hand somebody in a Bare Knuckle Fights T-Shirt the \$20 entrance fee.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - LATE AFTERNOON

The space is like Low Guard on steroids. Five times as big, with high ceilings and multiple training spaces. In the center is a full-size ring that looms above the audience who are seated in rows of folding chairs surrounding the ring or standing in thick clusters against the wall. People are laughing and talking, drinking beer and eating pizza--which is being sold out of coolers and stacks of pizza boxes by the door--and watching the fighters get ready.

By a small platform, a couple of Bare Knuckle employees are fiddling with the sound system. Holding the microphone is a tall, statuesque woman who looks a little too put-together, a little too beautiful. She's wearing a Live With Angie On WKYZ T-shirt.

There are dedicated areas for fighters. In corners around the giant space, men and women in fight gear warm up with their trainers.

Halo is off to one side with a contingent of people from Low Guard. She's dressed in full fight gear: layered sports bras underneath a giant sweatshirt; Muay Thai shorts; hair bound tight to her scalp, hands wrapped. She's not the only person from the gym fighting in this smoker. Mehbratu is dressed for a fight, as well.

It's clear he's going first. He's already got gloves on and is bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Halo is looking around the space, shifting from side to side, watching the other fighters, the growing audience. Gina is standing next to her. It's clear that her fighter is suffering from serious nerves.

GINA

Come on.

Gina leads Halo away.

EXT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - EVENING

Brenda and Elle walk from the parking lot toward the front door. Brenda is smiling and bouncing with each step. Elle is expressionless. Brenda pulls out money and pays for both of them.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING TRAINING ROOM - EVENING

Gina and Halo walk into an adjacent room. It's wall-to-wall matted, but there are only a couple other pairs of trainers/fighters working here.

Gina slips on a pair of mitts. Halo puts on her gloves.

HALO  
Shouldn't I stay out there.

GINA  
You're seventh. You have time.

Gina and Halo stand in silhouette in the hallway. Jab. Jab-cross. Jab-cross-hook. Jab-cross-hook-cross. Gina leads Halo through the numbers--simple combos to clear her head, get her settled.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - EVENING

Elle and Brenda walk through the main space, looking around for where to go. This kind of thing is old hat for Brenda but Elle looks like she's stepped into another planet.

Brenda waves to somebody in the crowd and leads Elle over.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING TRAINING ROOM - EVENING

Halo and Gina have moved on to kicks.

There's the click and hiss of the microphone going live.

ANGIE  
(amplified from the other  
room)  
Hello everybody! We ready to get  
this fight started?

The crowd roars.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - EVENING

Angie stands on the platform, holding the mic and the room.

ANGIE  
Welcome to the seventh annual Bare  
Knuckle Spring Smoker. I'm Angie  
Agular from WKYZ Live With Angie--  
Carter County's morning drive-time  
favorite.

Elle and Brenda have found chairs near the ring. Brenda turns to Darryl, who's in the row behind her.

BRENDA

Oh my God--I listen to her all the time.

ANGIE

For those of you who've never been to a smoker, here's how it goes. These are exhibition matches, which means no winner will be declared. But that doesn't mean you can't cheer them on. Let's hear your cheer.

The crowd cheers.

ANGIE (CONT'D)

Come on.

The crowd roars, standing, clapping

In the doorway to the training room, Halo and Gina stand and watch.

Gina pulls Halo away.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING TRAINING ROOM - EVENING

GINA

Come on. Not done warming up.

Halo and Gina continue warming up--Halo throwing the strikes that Gina calls.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - EVENING

ANGIE

Don't forget to purchase food from our lovely volunteers. All proceeds go to help our veterans returning home. Now--who's ready for our first fight?

The crowd cheers appropriately.

ANGIE (CONT'D)

All right. From Donnolly Kickboxing-

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING TRAINING ROOM - NIGHT

Halo is full focused on training now--hit followed by hit. The announcer's voice is drowned out by the sound of her breathing and the hit of leather on leather.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - NIGHT

Another series of quick cuts to show the passage of the first few fights. One set of fighters can be young and hesitant, doing more circling than attacking until one eventually gets up the courage and drives forward.

One fighter getting another in a corner, driving knees up until the Ref has to separate them.

Another fighter in the corner, nursing a bloody nose.

Elle watches all of this in amazement and fear. She looks around nervously for her Mom.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - NIGHT

The third fight on the card is Mehbratu. Halo and Gina have come out to watch this one. He looks worlds away from the slightly nervous guy that Halo met at Gina's match months ago.

A flurry of quick camera shots.

Mehbratu is driving hit after hit home when the Referee separates them.

REFEREE

(to the fighters and the  
corner teams)

I'm calling it. Good fight guys.

MEHBRATU

(through his mouthguard)

It's over?

Mehbratu hugs his opponent.

MEHBRATU (CONT'D)

Good fight, man.

The Referee raises the arms of both fighters.

The crowd cheers.

Mehbratu walks down the steps out of the ring, coming over the Low Guard crew. There's a lot of back-slapping.

Halo hugs him.

Elle sees her Mom.

Halo sees her and waves.

Gina leans toward Halo.

GINA  
Five more to go.

Halo nods.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Come on.

Gina leads her away.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING TRAINING ROOM - NIGHT

The room has emptied out. Halo and Gina are the only ones here.

Halo grabs her gloves.

GINA  
No, no. You're warm enough. Sit.  
Breathe. Relax.

Halo sits on the mat; she takes a deep breath. She is in no way relaxed.

Gina kneels behind her and looks at Halo's hair.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Who did this?

HALO  
I did.

Gina begins undoing the braids. When she's done, she begins redoing them--tighter, straighter, with fingers moving fast and sure.

Eventually Halo settles in, letting the tension seep out of her shoulders and arms. She closes her eyes.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING - NIGHT

Out in the main room, the fights continue. Flashes of strikes and kicks, sweat and blood, and the crowd cheering and clapping.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING TRAINING ROOM - NIGHT

In the training room, we close in on Halo's face--eyes closed, breathing controlled, totally centered.

INT. BARE KNUCKLE BOXING

A pair of fighters are walking out of the ring as Angie takes the microphone.

ANGIE

Next up is our one women's bout of the night. In the blue corner, training right here at Bare Knuckle boxing, Katie Sickles.

Kate walks to the ring, followed by her two corners, then climbs up and in. She paces the ring, going to each corner, marking her territory.

In the doorway of the training room, Halo and Gina watch her.

GINA

You're ready.

HALO

I think so.

GINA

No. You are. Remember to relax. And don't let her set the pace. You press it. You make the rhythm. Whatever happens I'm proud of you. Now go in there and kick her ass.

ANGIE

And in the red corner, fighting out of Low Guard MMA, Halo Preston!

BRENDA

Here she comes, here she comes.

Halo walks out. She's taken off the sweatshirt. In full fight gear, she looks worlds away from the woman who first walked into Low Guard. All the nerves are gone. She looks like she belongs here.

Brenda and Elle leap up and cheer. That whole section stands and cheers--people from the gym, waitresses from Crackerbarrel--all of Halo's friends have come out to support her. Elle stands as well, clapping, still not sure how she feels about this.

Brenda opens her jacket to show off her T-shirt. It's Halo's yearbook picture, blown up to life size, and underneath the inscription: "Most Likely To Kick Your Ass."

Halo laughs when she sees this. She looks at Elle, then her eyes turn to the ring and it's all business.

Gina and Dan hold the ropes down so Halo can climb over.

Katie and Halo come to the center with the Referee.

REFEREE

Remember--no elbows; anyone goes to the ground, we break and reset. I can stop the fight at anytime. You want to tap at any time, yell tap or raise your hand. Do you understand?

Katie and Halo nod.

REFEREE (CONT'D)

Okay. Have a good fight.

The fighters bump gloves, then step back.

The buzzer sounds.

Halo and Katie circle each other, each looking for an opening. Katie throws some range-finding jabs. Halo blocks, then steps in and connects with a solid right cross.

Halo's cheering section roars. There's a look in Halo's face--something that says maybe she really can do this.

Then Katie comes at her again, and the next few seconds it's all Halo can do to block.

The rest of round one continues like this. Halo getting in a few good hits, and taking three for every one she delivers.

The bell rings. Halo sits heavily on her stool in the corner. Gina crouches in front of her.

GINA

You're letting her hit you. Why are you letting her hit you?

HALO  
(through the mouthguard)  
Letting her?

GINA  
Don't let her get in close. Kick,  
kick. Use those monster quads of  
yours. Keep her at a distance.

The Referee signals to the fighters. Katie bounces up. Halo stands slowly.

The bell rings for round two.

This round begins a lot like the last one ended: Halo playing defense to Katie's power punches.

Gina yells from the corner.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Come on! Teep! Teep!

Halo delivers a front push kick that drives Katie back. Katie takes a step forward and Halo delivers a rear kick to Katie's head. Katie stumbles and goes to one knee.

Halo's crowd erupts. Elle's mouth is open, stunned that this is her mother.

BRENDA  
Yes! Yes! Oh my God, where do I  
sign up? Where do I sign up?

REFEREE  
Hold!

Katie holds up a hand--not one that means tap, but one that means "I'm fine. Let's go."

She stands.

The Referee signals the fight to begin again.

The next minute is almost an even match with Halo taking every opportunity to get some distance and deliver those kicks, and Katie still connecting with those punches.

Then with thirty seconds to go, Halo attempts another push kick. Katie catches her leg, throws Halo off balance, and follows up with a quick cross-hook that sends Halo to the mat.

The Referee gets between them, but Halo jumps right back up, signaling she's good to go. Her eye is already beginning to swell.

The next twenty seconds are brutal. Katie owns Halo. Hit after hit connects with Halo's head and body; low-kicks from Katie threaten to chop Halo's legs out from under her.

With two seconds to go, Katie delivers a punch that lands squarely on Halo's nose.

The bell rings. Halo walks to her corner, face a bloody mess.

The Referee comes over.

REFEREE (CONT'D)

You okay?

HALO

(through her mouthguard)  
What?

GINA

Your nose.

Gina takes out Halo's mouthguard for her. Then she takes a wet washcloth and cleans Halo's face.

GINA (CONT'D)

(to Referee)  
One second.

The Referee gives them some space.

GINA (CONT'D)

I'm going to tap. It's a good fight  
You did good. But she's got more  
training. It's a bad match up for  
you.

HALO

I can do this.

GINA

There's no shame in it. No shame.

Halo looks over at her cheering section. She sees Elle, on her feet, eyes filled with concern.

Halo smiles at her.

The Referee comes over.

REFEREE

(to Gina)

You want to call it?

HALO

I'm good. Let's go. (to Gina) Let's do this. Three minutes to go. I'm here for the full nine.

Gina sees how serious Halo is.

GINA

Okay. (to Referee) Two seconds.

The Referee retreats to the center of the ring and waits. He nods to Katie in her corner, signaling that the fight is still on. She nods wearily, surprised and not entirely pleased.

GINA (CONT'D)

Keep kicking. Stop dropping your left unless you don't like your face. Things get away from you, take the hit and drive forward. You're getting hit anyway. Make her pay for it.

Gina sticks the mouthguard back in.

Halo meets Katie in the center of the ring. The bell rings for round three.

Round three is all about survival. Both fighters are exhausted. Form is sloppy, stances are weak. But Katie is still dominating.

A minute into the round, with Katie stepping into Halo with combo after combo, Halo opens her guard. She takes a hit and steps into Katie, then wraps an arm around Katie, getting a hand on the back of her head. Katie stops her from getting the other one in place.

The two dance in the center of the ring, clinch sparring, each trying to gain control. As they do, they each drive knees up into the others' ribs.

Our experience of the fight narrows. All underscoring stops and it just the sound of the fight. Closeups of gloves pressed against heads, knees ramming, shoulders straining, feet stumbling. The sound of Halo's labored breathing, grunting as each knee drives home.

Then suddenly, Halo has the full clinch. She locks both hands behind Katie's head, drops her weight onto it, and begins driving knees up into Katie's stomach.

The Referee pulls them apart. Katie and Halo stumble back. Katie looks shellshocked.

Half a round to go and both fighters are just trying to survive and make their trainers proud.

The bell rings.

Halo stands there, hands still up, for half a second before she realizes the fight is over.

There's a huge roar from the entire room.

Halo and Katie wrap their arms around each other in an exhausted, elated hug.

The Referee raises both their arms in the air.

Halo walks to the corner and Gina helps her out of the ring. Gina is flat-out smiling.

GINA (CONT'D)

Good fight. That was a very good fight.

A flurry of hugs and congratulations from her teammates. Then Elle is there.

ELLE

Are you okay?

Halo nods, so spent she can't speak.

ELLE (CONT'D)

(through tears)

You finished. You made it through the whole fight right til the end.

Halo smiles and puts an arm around her daughter in a brief half-hug.

We pull back, up and away from mother and daughter as the crowd cheers.

EXT. HALO'S TRUCK - DAY

Heavy rock music. Halo's truck barreling out of the trailer park driveway and speeding off down the highway.

EXT. LOW GUARD PARKING LOT - DAY

The truck screeches into a parking space. Elle jumps out of the driver's side, pulling a gym bag behind her.

INT. LOW GUARD - DAY

Halo is at the front desk when her daughter comes in.

Elle is kicking off her shoes and pulling gloves out of her bag.

HALO  
You're late.

ELLE  
Sorry. Homework.

Elle takes her place on the mat with the rest of the class, pulling on her gloves.

Gina is standing in front of the class.

GINA  
You missed warm-up.

ELLE  
Sorry.

GINA  
One hundred burpees. End of class.

Elle nods.

GINA (CONT'D)  
As I was saying...This week we're learning shifting stances. If you're orthodox, you go southpaw. Southpaw goes orthodox. It keeps your opponent off guard. It gives you advantage where you didn't have it before. Come here, tardy girl.

Elle comes to the center of the mat with Gina.

GINA (CONT'D)  
Okay. This will start simple. A two-K.

Gina demonstrates the move on Elle.

The music swells, drowning out Gina's voice.

Cut to Halo watching her daughter train. Elle looks at her mom.

Halo smiles.

THE END