

DEEP CLEAN

by El Schaefer

DEEP CLEAN

FADE IN

INT. SERA'S APARTMENT - EARLY MORNING

The opening credits play over serene music and a slow fly-through of a disordered studio apartment - a dying laptop (its beach desktop wallpaper covered in work files) sits open next to piles of papers and junk mail, a photo of a twentysomething white man (CALEB) is shoved in a trash can, dishes are piled high in the sink, a hamper is half-full with scattered clothes tossed nearby, a potted flower wilts on a windowsill as cars honk outside.

Fly in toward the bed, where a form is bundled under the covers. Close in on the nightstand as the music's sound quality grows tinny - it's from a sleep sounds video playlist playing on a smartphone.

The music and calming video are abruptly cut off by new ones, as a spa advertisement takes over the phone screen. The framing and setting are typical, with lots of pastel colors and slow-mo, but the images each have body-bending twists - a woman's head removed bloodlessly from the body with a towel around her hair and cucumber slices over her eyes, a skinless bathrobe-clad woman smiling into the camera.

AD BANNER (TITLE CARD)
DEEP CLEAN

The ad is then itself interrupted by the phone's bright, bubbly alarm going off.

Clumsily emerging from the blankets, SERA, a slim twentysomething black woman in baggy pink pajamas, fumbles for the phone, her eyes squeezed shut, only to knock it off the nightstand as the alarm beeps away. With a groan, she forces her eyes open and leans over the side of the bed, picking up and silencing the phone.

Now unfortunately conscious, Sera rolls onto her back, phone hand hanging over the side of the bed as she stretches. She rubs at her face and eyes, and takes a deep breath, but right before she can release it the phone starts pinging with notifications (which block out her lock screen, a photo of her, HANNAH - a white woman in her early forties - and friends on a night out, clearly taken quite some time ago).

Huffing shallowly, she brings the phone up to her face. It doesn't unlock with facial ID, so she rubs at her eyes and forces her face into a wakeful expression. The phone unlocks, and her face slumps again.

On the phone, she pulls down and dismisses several spam notifications before tapping on her new texts. She grimaces as she sees the 17 new texts from Caleb.

CALEB (TEXT)

- U up?
- How was work?
- Just wanted 2 talk
- Barkley misses you (picture of dog)

The rest are cut off as Sera scrolls down, rolling her eyes and closing the app without reading. She opens her email.

INBOX (SUBJECT LINES)

- FEELING BURNED OUT?
- Productivity meeting 1:00
- RE: Updated Sales Figures
- Phones at Work Policy Reminder

She absently deletes the first spam email as she reads the headers of the others.

By Sera's right eye, her skin opens - not a cut, but a clean, bloodless seam in the skin, maybe a centimeter long. She absently pushes it closed as she opens an email, the skin fusing back together.

MONTAGE - With each shot, starting from lying flat, the angle of Sera's body increases, moving across the shot like the hand of a clock from 9 to 3.

0 DEGREES (CONTINUOUS)

She lies on the bed, flopping her arms down on the bed and breathing in deep. Holding that breath, she pushes herself up-

30 DEGREES (INT. SERA'S APARTMENT - MINUTES LATER)

She lies against the arm of her slightly-too-short couch, slurping coffee from a cartoon-covered mug. Her phone sits on her knees, playing a news report - a few seconds of gunfire and sirens play before she leans up to turn it off-

60 DEGREES (INT. SERA'S CAR - MID-MORNING)

She's stuck in traffic on her way to work, dressed for the office - a nice, slightly wrinkled blouse, hair pulled back, a jacket tossed in the passenger's seat - leaning back as she applies her mascara in the driver's mirror. As traffic starts again, she retakes the wheel-

90 DEGREES (INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - MID-MORNING)

She sits in a conference room, jacket on, crammed in at the end of the long table next to her (mostly white, mostly male) coworkers. She's putting more effort into sitting up and looking attentive than parsing the drone of her MANAGER's presentation. A stack of papers is passed around, and as it skips her to move across the table she reaches out-

120 DEGREES (INT. OFFICE BATHROOM - LATE MORNING)

She sits in the bathroom stall, hair falling loose, brow furrowed, pants down, holding her phone too close to her face as she types out a message. Hitting send, she brings her hand to her face and slumps forward-

150 DEGREES (INT. SPARSE CUBICLE - LATE MORNING)

She rubs at her face, hunched over her desk, hair down, looking despondently at the spreadsheets on her computer. A notification pings - reading it, her head falls from her hand-

180 DEGREES (INT. BREAK ROOM - LATE MORNING)

She is laid out face down across a table, jacket flung over the back of her chair, hands out before her grasping a stained corporate-logo'd coffee mug. After several seconds, just as she takes a deep breath in, a hand reaches from offscreen and pats her on the shoulder.

END MONTAGE (CONTINUOUS)

Sera shoots up, hurriedly smoothing herself out, as Hannah - more casually dressed, holding an energy drink - keeps her hand on Sera's shoulder, looking at her with concern and sympathy.

As Sera rakes her hair back and brushes Hannah's hand away, the other woman leans forward, pointing questioningly to the side of Sera's face - the seam is open again, a bit bigger than before. As Sera pushes it closed again as she puts herself together, Hannah digs through her bag, pulling out a folded slip of card stock. Hannah offers it to Sera, but Sera pushes it back guiltily as she gets up out of her chair. Hannah holds it towards her more insistently but is rebuffed as the unheeding Sera swings her jacket around as she puts it back on. As Sera adjusts the jacket, Hannah hurriedly takes out a pen and scribbles something on the outside of the slip.

With a sharp, determined inhale, Sera passes Hannah as she steps toward the door, not noticing Hannah tucking the slip into her jacket pocket. Striding with purpose, Sera opens the breakroom door and walks through-

WIPE

INT. SERA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Sera swings through the door to her apartment, closing the door and leaning up against it, eyes screwed shut, breathing deep in.

Look out from inside the fridge - Sera opens the door and stares around at the barren shelves and scattered ingredients.

A kettle whistles on the stove. Boiling water pours into a cup of instant ramen. Sera, blouse now off and just in her bra, reaches absently for a utensil on the counter, looking up and frowning when her hand meets only air - while the cups of forks and knives are full, the spoons cup is empty.

Sera sits down at the kitchen table, her jacket tossed across the tabletop next to her. She goes to sip from the cup ramen, but flinches as she burns her tongue. Frowning, she sets the cup aside, leaving the fork in it.

The phone pings, and Sera checks it absently.

CALEB (TEXT NOTIFICATION)

- How was ur day babe?

Face twisting in disgust, Sera slaps the phone down on the table. The impact unbalances the cup ramen, the weight of the fork pulling it over and spilling it on the jacket. Gasping, Sera scrambles up and pulls the jacket off the table, frantically inspecting it and brushing it off, but a good portion is already soaked in broth.

Sera's arm falls, damp jacket trailing against her bare feet, broth slowly spreading over the table behind her. Her breath is ragged, her shoulders are tense, her face tightens and the seam opens nearly an inch long, and she presses her hand to her eyes - as much as she's trying not to, she chokingly begins to cry. Every breath she takes is halted by sobs as her shoulders slump and shudder as she stands, isolated, boxed in, in her small, cluttered apartment.

Sniffling, she harshly rubs her hand across her face and shoves the seam closed. She shakes herself, fists clenching as she huffs. Shuffling toward the laundry hamper, Sera absently checks the jacket's pockets, pausing and looking down as she finds something inside. She pulls out Hannah's slip, looking it over as she tosses the jacket aside absently. At first she sees the outside, one corner stained yellow by noodle broth, a message scrawled in Hannah's loopy handwriting.

HANNAH (NOTE)

For your next day off - you
deserve it!

Unfolding it, Sera stares down at the coupon's blocky pink and teal designs, holding it up to the light to read.

COUPON
~SKIN DEEPER SALON~
75% OFF Head & Hands Package -
Full Deep Clean!

WIPE

EXT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - MORNING, THE NEXT DAY

Sera lowers the slip - now she stands in front of the salon building on a business-lined street, the sky above smattered with morning clouds. Skin Deeper is nothing outstanding - the paint over the bricks is scuffed, the teal awning has frayed edges, and the pink lettering hand-painted on the bubbled glass window is a bit uneven - but it's well maintained.

Sera looks at the shop front skeptically, the bus pulling away behind her. With a breath in, she steps forward and opens the door.

INT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - CONTINUOUS

A bell above the door jingles as Sera enters and looks around, apprehensive.

The salon's architecture is straight out of the 70s, with none of the décor newer than the 2000s. The décor is all bright and funky, even with a recurring theme of anatomical and medical imagery. Along the left wall, a waiting area with poofy chairs and magazines (a mix of celebrity news, fashion, and medical journals) lines the front window, and three reclining salon chairs are stationed along the wall, lit by arm lamps and partitioned by standing screens. Along the right, the front desk with a cash register and service bell, a counter with a pair of sinks and overhanging cupboards, and a circular worktable and folding chairs in the back corner. A doorway to a back area is hung with a beaded curtain.

The salon's employees mill about their tasks -

TAMMIE, a plump, comfortably dressed East Asian woman in her 60s, sits at the worktable, looking at papers and making notes on a clipboard. JACLYN, a wiry, colorfully clothed Latina woman in her early 40s, sits next to her, idly reading a gossip magazine and making the occasional face.

WANDA, an athletic, casually dressed South Asian woman in her late 40s, and BIANCA, a curvy, buttoned-up Black woman in her early 30s, clean the second salon chair, Bianca wiping down the area with a dust cloth as Wanda collects various tools and carries them to the back room.

DELANEY, a slender alt-styled White girl in her early 20s, stands at the front desk, checking out a cheery male CUSTOMER.

As the customer goes to leave, waving goodbye behind him with a smile, he almost runs into Sera. She leans away awkwardly, and he exclaims in gentle surprise as he pushes through the door.

Delaney notices Sera, giving her a little wave and putting on her customer service smile as she approaches the counter. Sera halfheartedly returns the wave before digging in her purse, pulling out the coupon and sliding it across the counter.

Reading the slip, Delaney's smile goes from trained to genuine, eyes lighting up as she looks up at Sera, then back into the store as she ding-ding-dings the service bell. The other ladies - Tammie and Jaclyn at the table, Bianca leaning out from behind the standing screen, Wanda poking her head through the beaded curtain - all look up with varying degrees of curiosity, confusion, and annoyance. As Sera looks on, bemused, Delaney waves the coupon into the air for them all to see.

Immediately, the ladies are on their feet - Bianca jogs to the third salon chair to turn on the lamp and wipe it down, Jaclyn takes Tammie's papers and clears off the table, Wanda ducks back into the back room, and Tammie hustles up to meet Sera as Delaney hits a button switching the "OPEN" sign in the window to "BUSY" as she swings around the desk.

Delaney drags Sera toward the third chair, while Tammie inspects her - pinching at her cheek, running her fingers through her hair, grabbing at her hands. Sera is half-pushed into the chair by Tammie as the other ladies converge on her, abuzz with enthusiasm - Delaney takes her purse, Wanda wheels out a squeaking cart with bottles and a large bowl, Bianca snaps on a pair of gloves and unrolls a roll of rattling tools to hang on the standing screen, Jaclyn drags a stool over and holds two different colored bottles in Sera's face for her to choose from.

Sera's eyes are unfocused, her breath shaky, her body tense. Tammie reaches for her face, and Sera flinches away, the seam splitting open.

Tammie's face falls, and she calls for quiet, waving down and shushing the other ladies who pipe down and step back. She leans in as Sera gathers herself, embarrassed.

Sera reaches to close the seam, but Tammie gently places her hand over Sera's. After a pause, Sera meets Tammie's gaze. Tammie gives her a sympathetic look, before shooting an exaggerated scolding glare at her employees, who offer their own looks - a centering nod from Wanda, an embarrassed grimace from Jaclyn, a hung head from Bianca, an encouraging smile from Delaney - to Sera in return.

Turning back to Sera, Tammie takes her hand in both of hers, looking deep into her eyes and cocking her head toward the others, an unspoken "ready to give this a go?" After a moment's hesitation, Sera meets her gaze and nods.

Tammie gently leans Sera back into the chair. The other ladies take their positions around her, readying their tools and themselves as they hover. Sera takes a deep breath in and closes her eyes. Leaning in, Tammie places her fingertips at the corners of Sera's eyes, right on the seam, and with practiced care, removes the skin. This isn't a visceral, gruesome peeling of flesh, nor is it completely rigid and mechanical - the skin is flexible but holds its shape like a leather domino mask, coming away cleanly from the muscle underneath. Sera winces slightly, exposed muscles twitching as the skin comes away, but remains still and calm, taking a quavering breath in.

The process begun, the ladies move like a well-oiled machine. As Tammie places the eye skin on a tray and moves on to the rest of the face (forehead/temples, the cheeks, the ears, the nose and upper lip), Jaclyn swings the arm light away from Sera's exposed eyes and uses padded forceps to remove the eyes, placing them in small opaque jars labeled R and L.

Delaney ducks under Jaclyn and squats down by Sera's hands, which are curled tightly around the armrests. Delaney's face is soft as one hand reassuringly squeezes Sera's bicep, the other gently uncurling her fingers. Sera's hand relaxes, and Delaney can't help but smile as she begins to deglove the hands.

After Tammie completes her skinning at the lower lip and chin, passing the tray off and moving around to the back of the chair, Bianca goes to work removing the teeth (which come out connected, like dentures) and tongue.

Tammie pulls the scalp and hair away like a wig, then moves aside to let Wanda take her place, who deftly peels the muscles (of a texture similar to silicone) away from Sera's skull. Delaney takes the muscles and ducks away to the back, while Bianca lifts away the skullcap.

As Bianca sits to polish the cranial bone, Wanda works her fingers in around the brain and delicately lifts it up and out of the head. Placing it in the bowl of warm water on her cart, Wanda pours in some pale green soap, and begins to massage the brain, applying gentle pressure as she lathers, running her fingers through the folds.

MONTAGE - scenes of Sera's deep clean process throughout the day. Scenes are interspersed with closeups of the cleaning process, the ladies' practiced work. All conversations are inaudible under the bright, relaxing retro music.

INT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - LATER

Jaclyn and Tammie sit next to each other at the round table, the face parts laid out on a tray between them, the former carefully cleaning out the inner right ear while the latter scrubs the skin of the chin, both chatting idly as they work. Jaclyn makes a joke, causing Tammie to chuckle warmly and the various parts of Sera's face to twist in amusement - lips curling, nose scrunching, eyes crinkling.

INT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - LATER

Bianca sits by Sera's chair, laser-focused on flossing her right jaw joint, not noticing Wanda rolling the brain back toward the body until she taps her on the shoulder, jolting her out of her flow. After Wanda gestures questioningly to the cranium and Bianca shakenly waves her assent, Wanda pulls the cart around back of Sera's body and gently replaces the brain.

Wanda reaches to pick up the skullcap from Bianca's workspace, but Bianca, flustered, shoos her off. Wanda moves off without argument, taking her cart with her as she returns to the back, and Bianca stands up, setting her tools aside, taking the skullcap and, with slow, exacting alignment, replacing it where it fuses back into the rest of the skull.

INT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - LATER

Jaclyn and Tammie are still at the round table, Jaclyn finishing up the inner eyelids and passing them off to Tammie for external cleaning as she takes up and begins cleaning the inside of the nose. In the background, Bianca is still at the chair, scrubbing out the nasal bone.

Wanda, between tasks, passes by the table and makes a comment to Tammie, gesturing to the eyelids, which Tammie quietly rolls her eyes at. Wanda presses her point, leaning in to point closer, but Tammie bats her hand away, sniping back at her. The two begin to bicker - Tammie gesturing with her tool, Wanda holding her hands up in defense, Jaclyn slumping in exasperation.

Before their argument can escalate, the disruption to Jaclyn's cleaning strikes a nerve, and Sera sneezes - the eyelids squeeze shut, the nose and mouth spasm, and the body in the chair lurches forward, skull smacking directly into Bianca's face.

Bianca reels back with a shout, and the others look up towards her, their argument forgotten in their concern. As Bianca shakes off the shock and it becomes clear that she's alright, Tammie begins to giggle, and soon everyone is laughing as they return to their work.

INT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - LATER

Bianca, Tammie, and Wanda sit around the work table, the former with her back to the door as she cleans the teeth (removing each one from its socket to polish), the latter two facing the shop interior as they moisturize the hand skin and massage the cheeks respectively. The tongue sits by Bianca on a tray, the ears on another between Tammie and Wanda.

Delaney barges in through the door, laden with drinks, the jangling bell not shaking the others' focus as they mutter their greetings.

Delaney comes to the table, passing each lady a drink - Tammie's cappuccino, Wanda's tea, Bianca's iced coffee - before coming to her own iced fluorescent purple concoction, rattling the ice excitedly as Bianca raises her eyebrow and Tammie holds back a laugh.

Struck by a thought, Delaney leans over the table, Bianca leaning out of her way while continuing to work. Delaney speaks to Sera's ears and gestures to the drink, asking if she'd like to try some. The tongue wiggles in assent, and Delaney holds her finger over the end of her straw to capture some of the liquid before pulling it out and releasing the sample onto the tongue.

INT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - LATER

Jaclyn sits by the right sink, the tongue sitting on a tray on the counter, a bottle of tongue gel next to it. As she tests the water temperature with her fingers and runs the tongue under the flow, Tammie pulls up a chair and sits by the left sink, setting down a well-worn wig head wearing Sera's hair.

They chat idly while Tammie runs the left sink and pulls down hair supplies from the cupboard above, placing a bottle of hair conditioner between the sinks. Jaclyn takes the bottle of tongue gel and squeezes some onto her hands before placing the bottle next to the conditioner. As Jaclyn rubs the gel on her hands, Tammie sits and reaches for the conditioner but accidentally grabs the tongue gel.

Before Tammie can squeeze the gel onto her own hands, Jaclyn notices the bottle and lunges forward, grabbing Tammie's wrist. Tammie is indignant, but as she gestures to the gel on her sleeve she notices the bottle she is holding, face dropping in shock as the relieved Jaclyn takes the bottle.

With a flustered nod and smile, the pair each take their respective products, apply them to their hands, and begin to massage them into their respective body parts.

INT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - LATER

Bianca and Delaney sit facing each other by Sera's body, the former scrubbing the bones of the right hand while the latter files the nails on the degloved skin of the same. They're sharing a pair of corded earbuds, bobbing in time to the music - Bianca more measured as she keeps her work steady, Delaney full-body bopping.

Bianca comes to a difficult spot in her work, pausing to inspect it closely. Delaney notices this and quickly pulls down the scraper she thinks Bianca needs. Bianca looks up and is surprised to find what she needs held right in front of her face, taking it and thanking Delaney with a nod as she goes right back to work. Delaney smiles proudly to herself as she switches skins.

INT. SALON BACK ROOM - LATER

The non-customer-facing back room is less decorated and more functional, the beaded curtain pulled back to let the light from the main building supplement the fluorescent bulbs.

In the background, Tammie clips Sera's washed hair to a rack and gently works through it with a wide-tooth comb.

Wanda reaches into a steaming basin and pulls out Sera's muscles from their soak. She turns and drapes them across a nearby table, its top padded and covered in a towel. Laying the muscles out carefully, adjusting them so they lay flat, she begins to massage, fingers and knuckles pressing deep into the flesh, working out all the water and tension.

When she finishes, Wanda whisks the muscles from the table -

WIPE

INT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - MIDDAY (END MONTAGE)

The ladies are once again gathered around the salon chair. By now, golden sunlight streams in through the front window.

Wanda and Bianca gently reapply the muscles to the skull, Wanda nudging them back into place where they fuse back to the body.

The ladies quietly, skillfully, almost reverently, put Sera back together. Jaclyn reinserts the eyes, Wanda assists Delaney with regloving the hands, Bianca reassembles the mouth and makes a final inspection of the teeth, and Tammie pieces together the face.

Their tasks complete, the ladies all step back, staring in hopeful anticipation. Tammie gently nudges Sera's shoulder.

Sera's eyes flutter open as she slowly sits up. She experimentally flexes her face (her expressions getting a stifled giggle out of Delaney) and stares down at her hands as she opens and closes them, processing how different they feel.

Sera lets Tammie help her up, preoccupied with touching her face and stretching her body as the ladies all look on. She turns to Tammie hovering by and, slowly, almost disbelieving, gives her a shaky, unpracticed, genuine smile. Tammie smiles back, as do the rest of the ladies - gratified, relieved, proud. They break formation, Delaney jogging to the front desk with Bianca not far behind, while Jaclyn and Wanda go for a cabinet near the sinks.

Tammie guides Sera to the front desk, guiding her in a facial stretch, while Delaney rings up the session cost and Bianca retrieves Sera's purse from behind the desk. As Sera accepts her purse and digs out her credit card for Delaney, Jaclyn jogs up and plops down a handful of hotel-sized product bottles, Wanda right behind her with a small paper bag. As Delaney is processing the transaction, Jaclyn shows each bottle to Sera, pointing to the labels and showing how to use them, as Wanda takes each one and places it in the bag as she finishes, handing it over to Sera once it's full.

Sera accepts the bag with a smile as she puts her card back in her purse and, turning to leave the store, gives all the ladies a smile and wave. All the ladies smile and wave back, then disperse to their cleanup as Sera leaves, the door swinging shut with a jingle.

EXT. SKIN DEEPER SALON - CONTINUOUS

Sera stands out on the sidewalk, the afternoon sun filtering through the clouds, and looks out onto the bustling street.

From her purse, Sera's phone buzzes, interrupting the moment. Sera's face falls as she pulls it from her bag - it's a call from "Boss". She reaches out to answer it, but pauses, looks back at the salon, and, steeling herself, rejects the call.

After a moment's pause to process what she has just done, phone still in hand, Sera unlocks her phone - facial ID works without issue. Pulling up her contacts, she takes a second to block Caleb, then shoots a text to Hannah.

SERA (TEXT)

- Want to get lunch?

Dropping the phone back in her purse, Sera straightens, breathes in deep, and finally - for the first time in the film - releases a long, calming breath.

With a slow smile, Sera turns and walks down the street, head held high.

PULL OUT, FADE OUT