

FRANK GRILLO

FIGHTER, FATHER AND FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH:
WHY THE HOLLYWOOD HEAVYWEIGHT IS JUST GETTING STARTED

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Sundown in Los Angeles. A battered maroon Buick is parked near a rocky, industrial train yard. Showing off his physique through a tight white tee and \$500 jeans, Frank Grillo emerges from a photo studio, his hair perfectly coiffed. Fake abrasions rough up the contours of his face. He's holding a pink cocktail. Everyone notices.

Hopping onto the roof of the car, Grillo thrusts himself into an action-hero pose. This comes naturally to him. For a moment it looks as though he's about to hurl a battle cry into the night sky. Instead, he launches into song: "*It's raining men!/ Hallelujah!/ It's raining men!*"

"Do it again!" a crew member encourages.

"Fuck *no!*" Grillo replies, grinning. The crew bursts into laughter.

This is my first glimpse of the martial-arts enthusiast who has become one of Hollywood's most dependable and in-demand action stars. The actor has been the muscle in such films as *Warrior*, *The Grey*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *End of Watch* and two *Purge* outings, as well as on television in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Prison Break* and *Kingdom*. He stars in the highest-grossing film ever released in China, *Wolf Warrior 2*, and this spring he'll briefly reprise his role as Crossbones in *Avengers: Endgame*, a tentpole blockbuster that, among Grillo's credits, follows the bare-knuckle-fighting indie thriller *Donnybrook*, in which he plays—in his own words—"pure fucking evil."

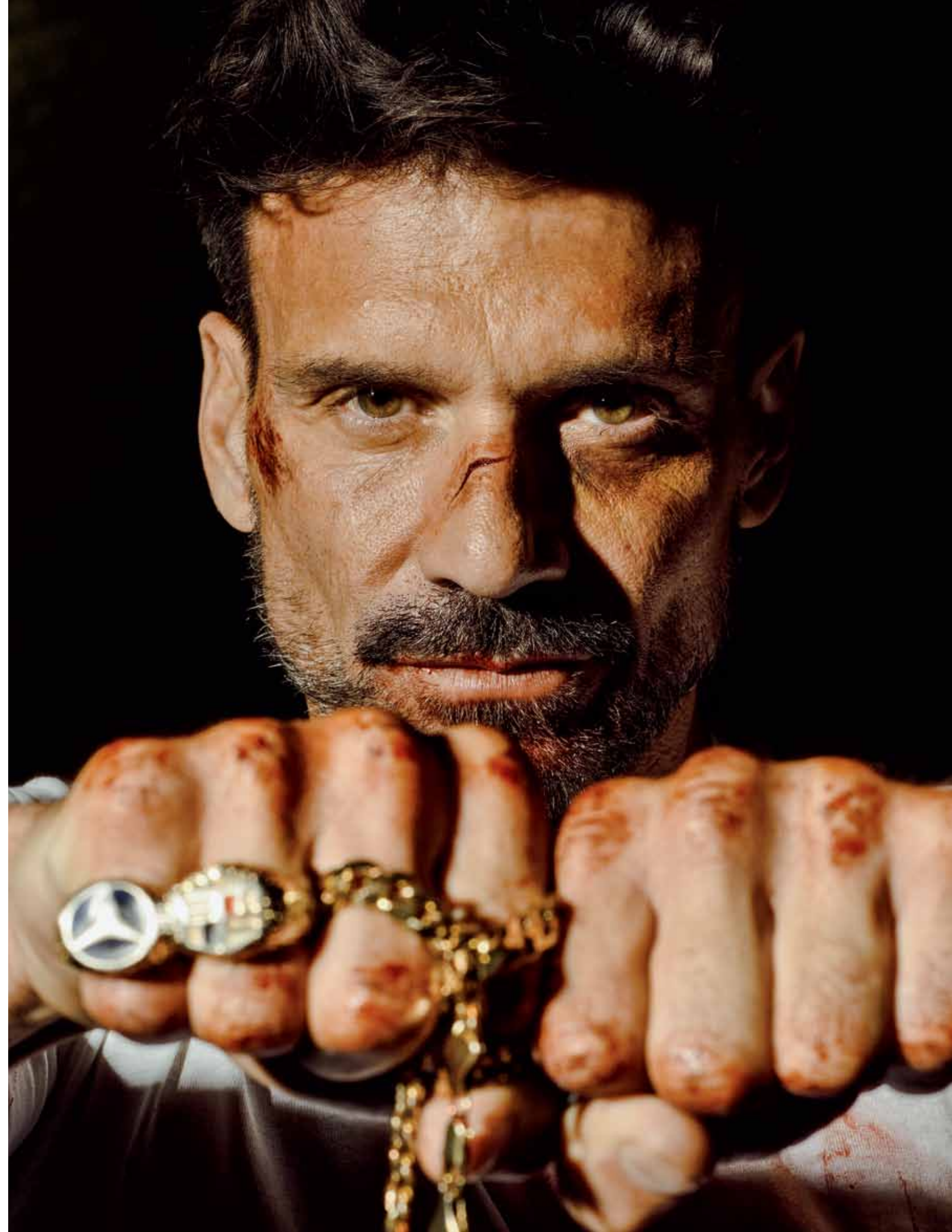
If we're to trust IMDb, Grillo is currently attached to no fewer than nine films, at least five of them expected this year. But his Netflix docuseries, *Fightworld*, released in October, may be his most compelling work to date. In the five-episode study of fighting cultures around the world, viewers see another side of Grillo, his temperament far from that of the brawny tough guy filmmakers hire him to be. Although he occasionally spars with the series' fighters to absorb their styles, Grillo spends most of his screen time observing both male and female athletes. Overall, *Fightworld* is an exploration of masculinity and strength at their most controlled and recognizable.

Over drinks in downtown Los Angeles after his shoot, the actor reflects on channeling a *Fight Club*-inspired sex symbol for PLAYBOY, of all publications. "I love going outside my comfort zone, and the shit we did today was wacky," he says. "You know, I like that. It's all good. I'll tell you what: Getting older and doing a lot of work on myself, and watching my kids grow up and becoming more well-rounded human beings, I don't judge things anymore. I don't judge myself. I don't judge other people, because everybody's on this journey."

Grillo, who turns 54 this June, says he "coasted" through the midlife crisis of entering his 50s. He gives Liam Neeson credit for "clearing the path for the older action hero," but Grillo's physicality is all his own. "Every weekend, I get on my dirt bike. I go into the mountains. I ride like I did when I was 25," he says. "I'm in the gym every fucking day. Until my body shuts down, I am what I am."

That declaration leads me to ask about his on-set drink choice. It turns out the mystery pink tippie was Whispering Angel rosé—not exactly the juice one would expect a brooding Bronx-born actor to order. But what's considered masculine these days, anyway? Grillo recognizes it as a point of contention in this cultural moment, and he doesn't shy away from addressing it. "I drink rosé all the time," he says matter-of-factly. "I get facials; I drink rosé. I need balance. What am I going to do, walk around with boxing gloves around my neck?"

A regular at L.A.'s boxing gyms, Grillo put his love for fighting to use on *Kingdom*, DirecTV's MMA series that ran from 2014 to 2017 and co-starred Nick Jonas as Grillo's closeted son. In the penultimate episode, Jonas's character comes out to his father, which leads to tragedy. Sexual orientation isn't a talking point on *Fightworld*, and in the real world openly gay male MMA fighters remain scarce. I ask Grillo whether MMA should be more welcoming of LGBTQ people and if he encountered any closeted fighters while filming *Fightworld*. "I don't think we're at that place yet, which is unfortunate," he says. "There might be a few,



WHITE T-SHIRT BY KELLY COLE. VINTAGE GOLD CHAIN, VINTAGE GOLD BRASS KNUCKLES

but it's still a hypermasculine, hyper-macho thing. I'm sure there are more than we know of. It's not something anybody walks around waving the flag for, you know?"

Grillo recognizes the necessity of visibility, however. He says he lost a friend to AIDS, and he has always been surrounded by gay men in his personal life. "My kids' godfather is gay. My favorite couples that my wife and I go out with are gay guys. They've been friends of ours forever. They have kids; we have kids. I've had friends come out early in their lives; I've had friends come out after they were married." He goes on: "I have three sons. If any one of them told me they were gay, I would be like, 'Good, that's great. Okay, you're gay. Big fucking deal.' Like that shouldn't even be an issue. That's like saying 'I'm Italian' or 'I'm Irish.' Even my *goomba* father, who's now 75 years old, loves my gay friends, and my gay friends love him, you know what I mean?"

It may be surprising to hear Grillo speak so forcefully in support of a group not his own, but should it be? The actor time and again has shown he can break out of any box his résumé may suggest. Over a two-hour conversation, he tackles more topics than I could ask for: spirituality, transgender rights, his disdain for Trump. He's intentional in every move, every utterance—perhaps a trait he learned from fighting.

Given how ingrained fight culture is in Grillo's life, I'm curious about how he approaches the sport with his children.

"I always tell my kids, 'Avoid violence, avoid confrontation,'" he says. "You don't want confrontation. What you want is the ability, if confronted with violence, to defend yourself."

Indeed, Grillo's most important role is that of father, and his three sons are no strangers to the boxing gym. During his *Fightworld* travels, he encountered many young fighters, some living in extreme poverty. The primary lesson he took from that experience was as a father. "Here's the deal about my kids," Grillo says. "They've been privileged. They've lived really good lives. It's what every parent wants to do for their kids: to make their lives better than my life was—and I had a shitty childhood. But one thing I instill in them is to understand the value of everything they have and to appreciate it."

He adds, "You must give some of what you have to other people; that's key. You must pay it forward all the time, even if you don't have a lot. If you continue to pay it forward, we raise better human beings."

Earlier, Grillo mentioned a need for balance in his life. He's an action star and a boxer, and he's raising three sons. His life seems filled with testosterone, and *rosé* only goes so far, right? Did he ever wish he'd had a daughter? He vigorously shakes his head.

"Look at me in the face," he says. "No. There's a famous saying: Have a boy, worry about one penis. Have a girl, worry about all the penises."

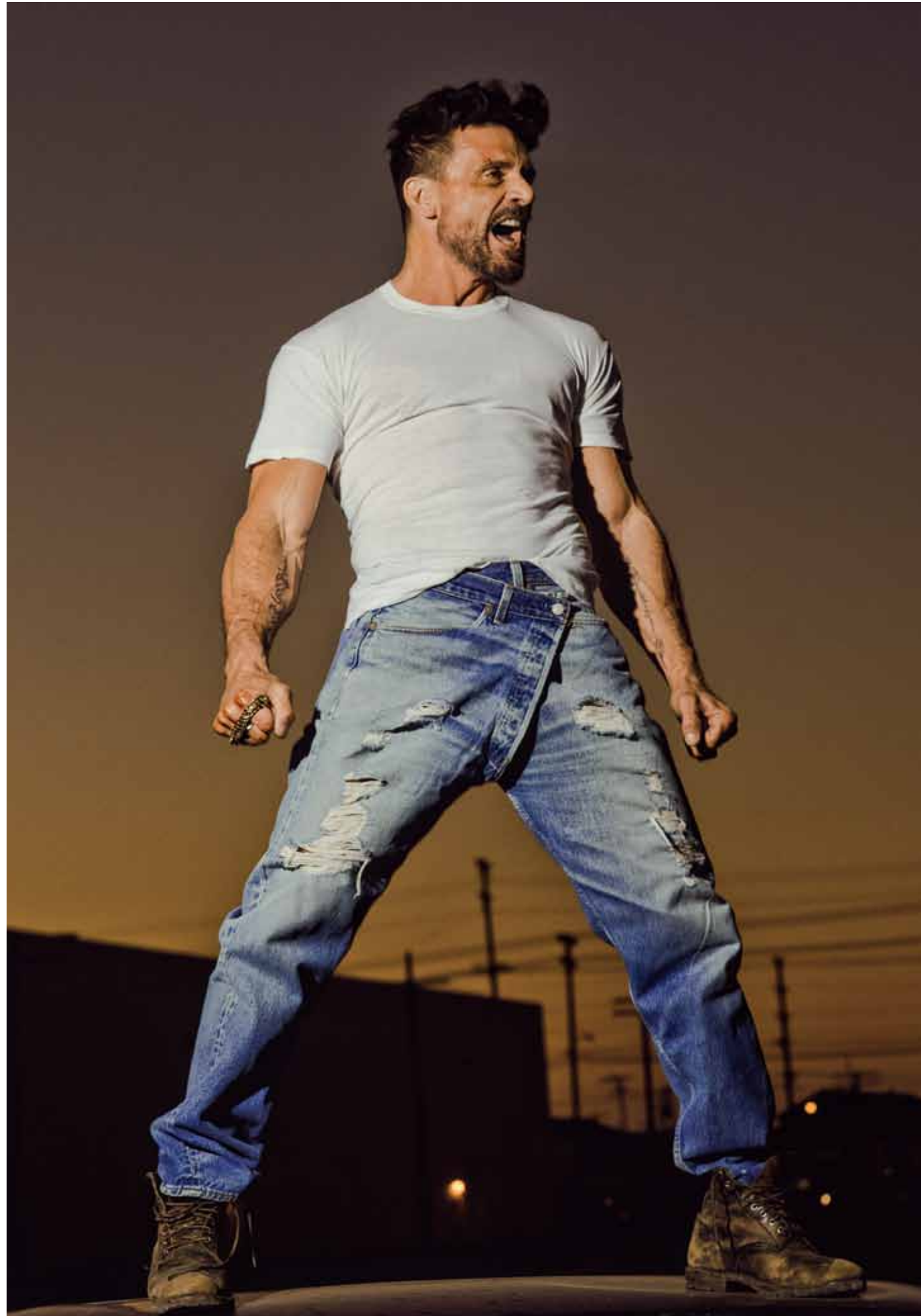
Although Netflix passed on a second season of *Fightworld*, there's no slowing down or hanging up the gloves for the actor who may yet become a Hollywood leading man in his 50s. "The martial artist Helio Gracie died at 95, rolling with his sons and his grandsons," Grillo says. "I'm not going to hang it up. I'll slow down. I'm not going to punch as fast—but it ain't happened yet."



VINTAGE LEATHER TRENCH, VINTAGE TANK TOP, NECKLACE BY GUCCI, RINGS BY MCCOEN, BELT BY SSS WORLD CORP., PANTS AND BOOTS GRILLO'S OWN







PREVIOUS SPREAD: VINTAGE BUTTON-DOWN BY PLAYBOY, VINTAGE JEANS BY JEAN PAUL GAULTER, RINGS AND BRACELET BY MCOHEN, SHOES BY SSS WORLD CORP.

THIS SPREAD: WHITE T-SHIRT BY KELLY COLE, JEANS BY R13, VINTAGE GOLD CHAIN, VINTAGE BRASS KNUCKLES, BOOTS GRILLO'S OWN

