

Excerpt from: **Hench**

"Okay, everyone," the woman with the call sheet said, clapping her hands for a moment of attention. "Remember your job is to make your boss more impressive. Loom, but don't mean-mug too hard. Try to project some intensity, but take your cues from E and don't go overboard. You're like... evil bridesmaids. You're here to make him look even better."

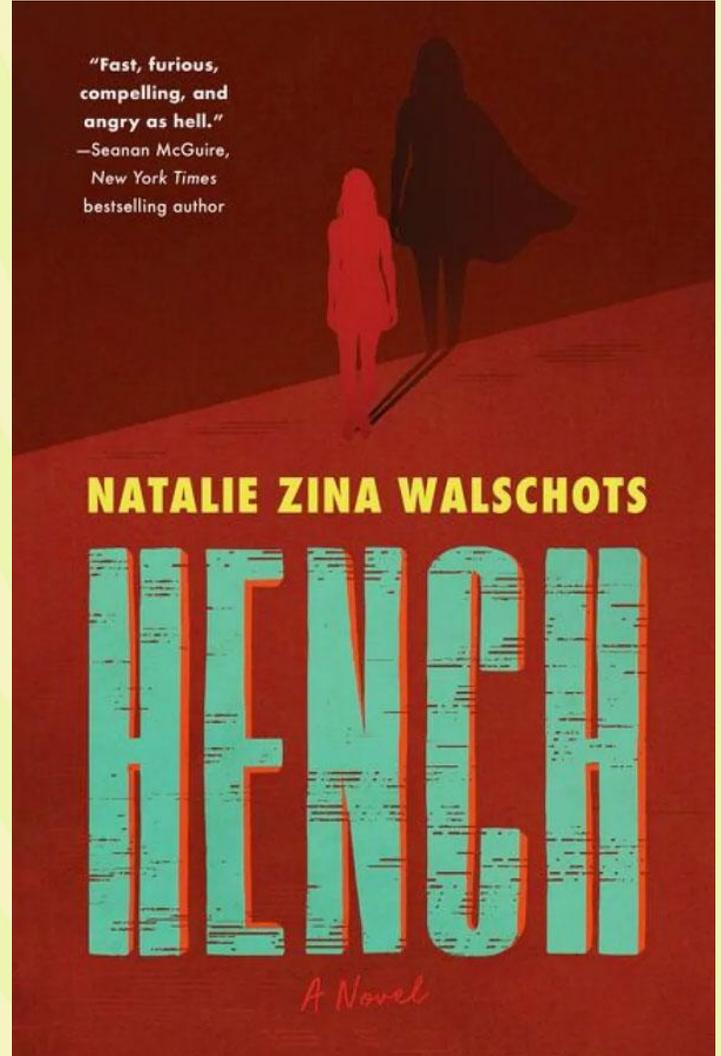
The Meat behind me grumbled at the comparison and I fought against another smile. I tried to project a sense of menace. I indulged in some revenge fantasies and hoped they carried to my face.

"We're live in 10!" the camera operator called, and then continued to count down on his fingers. E sat a little straighter on his makeshift throne. He dramatically steeped his fingers and allowed one corner of his mouth to quirk up the slightest bit. I found myself suddenly gripped by nervousness. With a final thumbs-up, we were live.

"Mr. Mayor. Councillors. Chief Danczuk. Pardon me for interrupting this municipal session on, what was it, public transit?" E paused a moment, mentally counting out a few seconds to allow for the sounds of shock and outrage he imagined had erupted on the other side of the closed-circuit channel he'd invaded.

"Please, I promise not to take up too much of your time.

"At the bottom of this screen there is a crypto-wallet address. This is a very simple dollars, delivered within the next five minutes.



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Nothing outrageous, nothing that would bankrupt the civic purse, just a little nest egg ransom demand: the equivalent of five million to get my next project off the ground."

E glanced meaningfully across the room, where two of his bodyguards had been standing by the door. One of them nodded and

touched his earpiece, barking a quick command. The other held the doors open. A third man walked in, bigger than any of the other Meat, half dragging and half carrying a long-limbed teen boy with him. The kid had grass stains on his knees and was wearing a jersey emblazoned with the logo of a doughnut shop; he must have been grabbed from soccer practice. As the thick-necked man holding him dragged the boy closer to the desk, I could smell the salt of his fresh sweat and a high note of panic. One of the kid's feet was bare and it looked like his own sock was stuffed into his mouth.

One of the Meat behind me kicked me in the back of the leg, and I realized my mouth was hanging open. I struggled to compose my face.

"Of course, I understand that you need some incentive for such a business proposition, so let me provide it, along with a demonstration of the new project I am working on," E said jovially, gesturing the Meat closer. He dragged the boy into the frame of the camera. E paused again for a reaction he couldn't see on the other end of the video feed, then plucked the sock out of the boy's mouth. The kid shook his head and spat.

"We'd like to thank Jeremy for volunteering for this demonstration." E stood. He picked up the Mood Ring and set it humming, much louder this time; I could feel it in my teeth.

"Jeremy, your dad is watching, so try to put on a good show for him. I'm very excited that you were able to help us out."

"Where is my dad?" Jeremy's voice was a lot higher than I expected.

E pointed to the camera. "Your father can see you, Jeremy, but I'm afraid that you can't see him. Now, answer me this: How do you feel, Jeremy? What would you say your emotional state is like currently?"

Jeremy attempted to kick the Meat holding him with the foot still wearing a cleat. "Let me go! Let go!"

E nodded. "Upset. Would you say that's fair?"

Jeremy's lip was trembling. He was even younger than I thought he was at first glance; what I had originally taken for a skinny 14 was probably more like a tall 12. He was close enough to me now that I could see the scabs on his knees and the dirt under his fingernails. I was struck at once by how vulnerable this poor kid was, and the fact that I was standing almost directly behind him while we were live-broadcasting his kidnapping. The room swam and I suddenly felt like I was going to barf.

"Okay, Jeremy," E was saying, his voice even and soothing, almost hypnotic. "We're going to try something together." He adjusted the settings on the Mood Ring slightly, and the vibration seemed to rattle around in my sinus cavities. E brought the Mood Ring close to Jeremy's head, and the kid yelled and struggled against the huge hands around his upper arms. "Now. Tell me how you feel."

The reverberating hum became a deep pulse. My jaw ached, but something in me relaxed. Where I had been panicking a moment before, I now felt a strange, artificial serenity.

Jeremy stopped struggling completely. His eyes had been feverish with panic but now they glazed over. He rested in the hands of the man holding him, where he had frantically resisted seconds before. A little drool pooled in one corner of his mouth and he absently wiped it away with the back of his hand.

E patted the shoulder of the Meat restraining Jeremy, and the big man slowly let go. The kid made no attempt to move or get away, just shifted his weight, looking around the room with vague curiosity.

"Feeling better?" E's voice was encouraging, almost gentle.

"Yeah. I am." Jeremy's voice was slow and wondering. His face was relaxed now; he looked almost sleepy.

"I'm glad to hear that, Jeremy." E gestured for the boy to join him behind the desk. Jeremy ambled over and stood next to E obediently.

E squeezed the kid's shoulder gently. "What do you feel like doing right now, young man?"

Jeremy's brow furrowed as he thought. "Well. That depends on what you want me to be doing, mister."

E's face split into a grin, showing white wolfish teeth. "Very good answer, Jeremy. You're a very bright boy. And please, call me E."

"Okay, E."

"That's perfect. Now, there's a small favour I want you to do for me, Jeremy. Would you like to help me out?"

At the prospect of being given something to do Jeremy's face lit up. The boy nodded, a deep swoop of his head. "Sure!"

"Wonderful." E made a demanding gesture toward one of his bodyguards, who reached into the tactical messenger bag he held and produced a long, rectangular box. It was heavy and closed with a latch, not unlike a jewel case for a necklace, but larger. E took it eagerly and laid the box on the desk between him and Jeremy, who was watching the exchange, calm and intent.

E turned to me then. "Hold this," he said, so casually, and handed the Mood Ring to me. I held up my hands to fend it off, but he calmly took my wrists and curled my fingers around the handle of the device. I could feel the weird pulse that it was emitting become dampened, like a current was passing through my body, but I was safely grounded now, letting it pass through.

"Keep it close to his head," E said conversationally. "Works better that way." My arms shook but I held it, gritting my teeth against the weird keening and wondering if this meant I was going to jail.

E rested one of his free hands gently on Jeremy's back, between his shoulder blades. He lifted his head and directly addressed the camera. "As you can all see, young Jeremy here is terribly obedient and open to suggestion." Jeremy looked at him adoringly and E smiled. "By the time we're done with this demonstration, I bet you're all going to want one yourselves." He laughed at his own joke.

He raised his other hand, as though being sworn in. "I would like to assure everyone watching that Jeremy won't be suffering any ill effects from the Mood Ring, at least not at this setting." He tilted his head to one side. "I can't say the same is true for what he might do under its influence, however."

E turned his attention back to Jeremy. "Now, are you right- or left-handed?"

"Left, E."

"A lefty! Me too. Okay, in that case, lay your right hand on the desk, nice and flat."

"Like this?"

"Move over a tiny bit, so the camera can get a better angle. Yes, perfect, great job."

Jeremy's hand looked very small and dirty on the polished surface of the desk.

E opened the long box in front of them, and I sucked in a breath sharply between my lips and teeth. "Now, take this. Be careful, it's heavier than you'd expect." He placed a cleaver in Jeremy's left hand.

The boy bobbed the blade in his hand for a moment, testing the weight. "It is heavy!" His voice was so calm and curious.

"Do you have a good grip on it?"

"Got it."

"Great. Now, I would like you to cut off the tip of the little finger on your right hand — just the tip, now — to complete the demonstration. That would be very helpful."

"Sure thing, E." Jeremy shifted his weight and planted his feet a bit more firmly, getting a slightly more secure grip on the cleaver. He spread his fingers farther apart. He raised the cleaver a little higher and wiggled back and forth, concentrating, like a cat preparing to pounce. Numbly, I kept the Mood Ring pointed at his head.

Then he paused, lowered the cleaver a fraction, and looked up at E again. I felt a wave of incredible relief. It wasn't going to work.

"I'm worried," Jeremy said. "I might not be able to do it right."

"What do you mean, kiddo?" E reached back and took my wrist, pulling the Mood Ring a little closer. His voice was still chipper but there was a hint of worry in his grip.

"I'm worried I might miss."

E grinned, relaxing. "Don't worry, Jeremy! You can always try a few times. I won't mind."

Relieved, Jeremy nodded and turned his attention back to his hand. He raised the cleaver again.

E stared directly into the camera. His eyes shone. I watched a bead of sweat trickle down his temple. "If the money arrives promptly, we'll restrict this demonstration to a single digit. Does that sound fair to you, Mr. Mayor?" He took out his phone and looked at it. "No transfer yet." He shook his head.

I closed my eyes.