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# The Last Confession

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## Introduction

Charlie Mercer didn't notice the cold coffee until it bled across the corner of a brief she hadn't read in days. The city outside her office window was a smear of neon and rain, the kind of February night that made her mid-sized practice feel smaller than its name on the door. The phone had been silent for hours. When it finally rang, the sound was loud enough to startle her hand into that spill. She wiped the page with the back of her cuff, thinking it would be another client looking for a miracle, bracing herself to say no again.

It was her mother's number. Gloria never called this late—never called at all if she could help it. Charlie let it ring twice before she answered, letting the silence measure the distance between them. "He's been arrested," Gloria said without greeting, her voice flattened by the cheap reception of a kitchen handset. "Marcus Reed. They're saying he killed Councilman Dwyer." The name fell like a gavel. Charlie could picture the courthouse rotunda and its echo, the murmurs that could turn into judgment before dawn. She swallowed the taste of old grudges. Marcus had been the reckless boy who'd pulled her out of a creek once, a laugh in his throat, mud on his face. He'd been trouble, and he'd been kind.

"Just the bail hearing," Gloria added quickly, the apology tucked inside her breath. "He asked for you." Charlie's first instinct was to refuse. She'd built a life away from that town, away from the brittle smiles and the way people said her name like a verdict. There were other defense attorneys in Hawthorne County, ones who didn't carry the weight of leaving. But the word asked held her. It suggested trust. It suggested a past that hadn't let go.

She pulled up the docket before she packed a bag. The case had been assigned to Hargrove. The name sat on the screen like a knuckle. Judge Evelyn Hargrove had taught a generation how to stand straighter in court; she'd also taught Charlie that the law could be clean even when the people wielding it were not. A bail hearing in Hargrove's courtroom would be a show of balance, of careful language balancing on the blade of public outrage. If the prosecutor pushed, Marcus would spend months behind bars before trial. If Charlie did her job, she might get him home by the weekend. She turned the phone to silent and closed up the office, leaving the lights off as if that would make it easier to return.

The highway unfurled in wet black ribbons. The farther she drove, the more the city's glow dissolved into darkness and the skeletal outlines of billboards. One loomed over the county line: KANE DEVELOPMENT. A smiling architect's rendering of future condominiums rose above a field that had once been berry brambles and kids on dirt

bikes. Silas Kane had been a rumor when Charlie was a teenager, a name whispered whenever a zoning vote went slick. Now his promise of progress was printed in clean sans serif and floodlit against the night. She tightened her grip on the wheel. Progress in Hawthorne had always cost somebody something.

The town wore familiarity like an old suit, frayed but pressed. The diner still breathed butter and coffee into the street. The courthouse dome was a pale bruise against the sky. She parked on Maple, two blocks from the little house where she'd grown up, and sat with the engine ticking as it cooled. Porch lights dotted the neighborhood like low stars. She could go to her mother's first, she told herself. She could knock and stand in that narrow entryway and tell Gloria that this was just procedure, that bail was not judgment, that they would get Marcus through the night. But the thought of their words colliding in that small, familiar space made her skin feel too tight. She took a breath, reached for the handle, and chose the courthouse instead.

Inside, the floors smelled of polish and old paper, the kind of scent that could lull you into thinking institutions were tidy. Charlie traced the brass banister with her palm as she climbed, the metal cool and honest under her skin. The clerk's window was still lit. A janitor's radio hummed through static down the hall, a song she half-recognized from a summer before everything went sideways. She scanned the bulletin board out of habit: arraignments, a fundraiser for the firefighters, a missing cat with a lopsided ear. The vacancy notices for municipal boards were pinned neatly in rows. People with power liked things tidy, she remembered. They liked them orderly and quiet.

On the docket sheet, the charge against Marcus was typed in a font that made it look less like the end of someone's life and more like a memo: homicide. Counsel: TBD. Hearing: 9 a.m. Judge: Hargrove. Charlie felt the old rhythm return—the way she organized facts, the way she could see the path from accusation to defense as if it were a trail through fog. It didn't matter that she'd left; the work didn't leave you. She set her hand flat on the marble counter and let the stone cool her skin. "Just the bail hearing," she whispered, as if saying it quietly would make it true.

When she finally turned toward the door, the lobby's glass showed her a ghosted reflection—tired eyes, rain-dark hair, a coat that had seen better battles. Beyond it, the town waited with its careful secrets and its easy smiles. Somewhere in the county lockup, Marcus was staring at a ceiling he couldn't name, deciding which truth to spend first. Somewhere else, her mother was twisting the phone cord around her fingers, waiting for footsteps on the porch. Charlie pushed into the wet night, the courthouse lights at her back, and headed toward morning.

## CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The first thing Charlie noticed when she stepped into the house was the smell. Not the pine cleaner or the lemon polish she remembered from childhood, but a layered scent of old newspapers, dust, and a lavender sachet that had long since surrendered. The second thing was the silence. It wasn't empty; it was weighted, the kind of quiet that gathers in rooms where arguments have been swallowed instead of resolved. She dropped her bag in the entryway, the sound of the canvas hitting hardwood echoing off the baseboards. Her mother stood in the kitchen doorway, holding a mug like a shield.

"You made good time," Gloria said. Her voice carried the same careful neutrality as the last time they'd spoken, which had been Thanksgiving, and before that, last spring. She looked smaller, or maybe the house had grown around her. Her hair had gone a uniform silver, cut short in a practical style that said she didn't plan to be mistaken for anyone's idea of sentimental. Charlie had seen nurses who wore exhaustion like a badge; her mother had retired, but the posture remained. The bathrobe was new, though. Faded blue terry cloth, the kind that got softer every time you washed it.

"Traffic was light once I left the city," Charlie said, moving into the kitchen. It was unchanged except for the absence of the cookie jar that used to sit on the counter, its lid chipped from a long-ago drop. "Did you see Marcus? Is he okay?"

"He's in holding. I called the jail this morning. They said he hasn't been processed into general population yet. That's probably a good thing." Gloria set the mug down without drinking from it. She didn't ask if Charlie wanted coffee. The fact that Charlie had walked in at all was already a concession, and neither of them wanted to make too much of it. "He called me from the station, just before they took his phone. He kept asking if you were coming. I told him you would. I hope that wasn't overstepping."

Charlie had a sudden memory of Marcus at sixteen, leaning against the hood of a dented Civic, laughing at some joke she'd made, one hand wiping grease from his cheek. He'd had a knack for finding trouble and a worse knack for leaving it alone. But he'd also been the one to pull her out of that creek when she'd slipped trying to retrieve a kite, his fingers like iron around her wrist, the mud so cold it had burned. "He's not guilty," Charlie said. It came out flat, a statement of fact rather than belief. She'd said it to clients in her office with the same tone, meaning only that the state had to prove it.

“He says he didn’t do it,” Gloria answered, a shade firmer. “And I believe him.” She finally picked up the mug and took a sip, her eyes watching Charlie over the rim. The space between them widened, then closed as Charlie moved to the table and pulled out a chair. The old oak had been scraped so many times that the varnish was a memory. She ran her fingertips along a groove near the edge, a scar from a science project that had gone wrong. The house remembered things she tried not to.

Charlie had left Hawthorne County with the determination of someone who believed a town could be outrun. She’d gone to law school two states away, taken the bar, and built a practice that catered to clients who needed bail arguments and plea negotiations more than they needed drama. She’d learned to make her name sound neutral on the phone, neither proud nor apologetic. In the city, there were a thousand stories a day, and nobody tracked whether you came home for the high school reunion. In Hawthorne, you were your father’s daughter, your mother’s nurse, the girl who’d once failed to show up for a memorial. Names were anchors. She had tried to cut the rope.

“Judge Hargrove is handling the arraignments this week,” Charlie said, keeping her eyes on the table. “I saw it on the docket. That could help. She’s not sentimental, but she respects procedure. If we come in with a clean bail package and a plan for supervision, she might set something reasonable.”

“Hargrove is a hard woman,” Gloria said, and there was a note in her voice that Charlie didn’t like. Not fear, exactly, but something older, like a caution learned by rote. “She remembers everything. That’s why she’s still on the bench. People around here think that’s admirable.”

“Was Councilman Dwyer well-liked?” Charlie asked. It was the question she would have to ask any client in the first five minutes, the one that set the tone for how the town would talk while the case moved through the system.

“He was on the zoning board,” Gloria said, as if that explained everything. It did, in a way. Zoning in Hawthorne was where money went to wear a respectable face. “He pushed through the extension near the old quarry last year. The Kane project. Some people were happy about jobs. Others said it was a shortcut to keep a campaign promise. No one threw parades, but no one threw rocks either. He was the kind of man you didn’t notice until you needed something from him. Or he needed something from you.”

The name hit the air with its usual weight. Silas Kane had been a rumor when Charlie was a teenager, a rich man who’d bought up parcels with an eye for what the county might approve with enough encouragement. Now he was a brand, the developer who’d convinced Hawthorne that progress could be purchased. Charlie had seen his

face on billboards on the drive in, the kind of digital smile that didn't blink. She remembered gossip about campaign donations, the kind that arrived in plain envelopes. She remembered a summer afternoon when a zoning meeting had gone long and arguments had spilled onto the courthouse steps, voices rising under the hot, still sky.

"You should eat something," Gloria said, opening the refrigerator as if to prove the house still ran on routine. Inside was a carton of eggs, a block of cheddar, and a plastic container of greens that looked like they'd been washed within an inch of their life. "You always get that look when you're thinking. Your mouth goes flat. You'll need fuel if you plan to stand up to Hargrove and whoever they're sending from the DA's office."

Charlie could have argued that she'd eaten, but it would have been a lie. She'd had coffee and a protein bar somewhere near the county line, the kind that tasted like a good intention. "Okay," she said. "Eggs are fine." It was a surrender in a small way, letting her mother cook, letting the kitchen exist for a function other than the tense space between them. Gloria cracked eggs into a bowl with practiced efficiency, the whisk scraping porcelain. The rhythm was familiar. Charlie leaned against the counter, her coat still on, and watched as if the movement might slow down the morning.

"They said on the news that it was a single gunshot," Gloria said, not looking up. "Behind the old hardware store. They found him early yesterday. The police came around asking questions by nine. Marcus was brought in by noon. It was fast. Too fast, maybe." Her hands didn't shake, but there was a tension in her shoulders that made Charlie think of the nights when the hospital had been short-staffed and Gloria had come home with eyes like burned toast. "You know what people will say. Marcus had a record. It makes them comfortable to think he's capable."

Charlie knew the record. Disorderly conduct at nineteen. A DUI at twenty-two that had been reduced to reckless driving after community service. A bad check that he'd made good two days later, but not before the charge had been filed. Nothing that suggested homicide. "Intent matters," Charlie said, more to herself than to her mother. "People don't escalate from bad decisions to execution-style shootings in a vacuum. If they think he did it because of money or resentment, we need to know what story they're telling themselves before we start telling ours."

The eggs cooked quickly. Gloria slid them onto a plate, added toast that had been warmed under the broiler, and set the plate on the table. She didn't sit. She poured water into a glass from the tap and put it by Charlie's elbow. "You never wanted to come back," she said softly, not as accusation but as observation. "Not for long, anyway. I don't blame you. But if you're here for Marcus, you'll have to be here all the way. You can't hover on the edge. People will talk. They'll say you're doing it to make a name, that you're using the town."

Charlie took a bite of toast. It tasted like the only honest thing in the room. "I'm here because he asked for me," she said. "That's all that matters today. We get him bail. We start to build a defense. The rest can wait."

Gloria nodded, but the worry didn't leave her face. She reached for the remote on the counter and turned on the small radio by the sink, set to the local station that cycled farm reports with community announcements. The announcer's voice drifted into the kitchen: "—investigation continues into the death of Councilman Tom Dwyer. A suspect is in custody. The county prosecutor has indicated that further details will be released at today's arraignment—" Gloria clicked it off with a sharp press of her thumb, as if the report itself might taint the air.

Charlie finished the eggs and carried the plate to the sink. She rinsed it, set it in the drainer. The small ritual grounded her. "I'll go to the courthouse early," she said. "I want to talk to whoever's on desk duty, see if I can get a copy of the charging documents before the hearing. If they've listed a no-bail hold, I need to be ready to argue. If they haven't, I need to know what they're going to push."

"And after?" Gloria asked. It wasn't about today. It was about whether Charlie would stay, whether she would let the town pull her back into its orbit. "Will you come back here? Or will you get a room at the inn?"

Charlie hesitated. The thought of sleeping in her childhood bedroom, with its faded band posters and a window that stuck in the rain, felt like pressing on a bruise. "I'll get a room," she said. "It's easier. For everyone." It wasn't the whole truth, but it was true enough. Gloria's expression didn't change, but she blinked once, slowly, and Charlie understood that her mother had expected this, and had prepared herself for it.

Before she left, Charlie stood in the hallway and looked at the framed photographs on the narrow table. There was one of her in a cap and gown, holding a diploma like it was a passport. Another of Gloria in her nurse's scrubs, arm around a colleague, both of them smiling at something off-camera. A third was missing. It used to show Charlie and Marcus and another boy, all sunburns and scraped knees, taken at the quarry. That frame now held only the faded felt backing. She touched the empty rectangle with the pad of her thumb. "I'll call you after," she said, without turning around.

"You'll be careful," Gloria said, not a question. "Hargrove isn't the only one who remembers. Silas Kane is not just a name on a billboard. And this town—" She stopped. "It doesn't like loose threads."

Charlie pulled on her coat. "I'm a defense attorney," she said. "Loose threads are what I do." She didn't kiss her mother goodbye. She didn't know where to aim the gesture. Instead, she stepped back out into the cold, where the sky had decided to hold its gray

all the way to morning.

The walk to the courthouse was short enough that she could have driven, but she needed to move, needed to feel the air bite at her face. Hawthorne's downtown had the same storefronts she remembered: the bakery with its chalkboard sign, the hardware store with a new coat of red paint, the diner with its neon COFFEE sign flickering like a heartbeat. She passed the old library and remembered studying on the steps with Marcus, him leaning back on his elbows, squinting at a geometry proof like it had personally offended him. She remembered the creek, the kite, the mud. She remembered the year everything had shifted and nobody had said it out loud.

The courthouse steps were crowded with early arrivals. A pair of deputies stood near the door, talking low. A woman with a microphone from the local station was checking her hair in the reflection of the glass. Charlie felt the familiar thrum of anticipation, the way a courtroom's energy leaked into the lobby before anyone even sat down. She squared her shoulders and pushed through the doors, the smell of polish and paper rising to meet her.

Inside, the clerk's window was already open. A young woman with a laminated name badge stood behind it, sorting documents into neat piles. Charlie approached and placed her ID on the counter. "I'm here for Marcus Reed," she said. "I'm counsel of record. I need a copy of the charging documents and any bail schedule they've filed."

The clerk blinked at her, then at the ID. "Mercer?" she asked, her voice carrying just enough curiosity to make it plain that the name still meant something here. "I didn't realize— Yeah, hold on." She turned to a printer and fed it a request. The machine hummed. The woman behind Charlie shifted her weight and sighed. The lobby filled with the small noises of people waiting for their turn with the law.

When the clerk returned, she slid a thin folder across the counter. "They haven't recommended a no-bail hold," she said, lowering her voice as if that made the information less public. "But the prosecutor's notes say they're going to ask for high bail. Ties to the community, they're saying. Prior record. They'll probably mention the DUI, maybe the check charge. You know how it goes."

Charlie nodded, already scanning the first page. The charge was straightforward: homicide. Time and place noted. Suspect: Marcus Reed. No mention of an accomplice, no mention of a weapon. She flipped to the bail recommendation. High, as predicted. But not astronomical. Not hold-for-the-duration high. "Who's the prosecutor?" she asked.

"Jenna Bishop," the clerk said. "She's new. Started last fall. She's eager." The word eager did a lot of work in a small office. "She's got the judge's ear, or she thinks she does. Judge Hargrove is fair, but you know how she is about appearances."

Charlie did. Hargrove had a reputation for running a tight courtroom. She tolerated no theatrics and very little latitude. You came in prepared, or you didn't come in at all. She'd once told Charlie, years ago, during a summer internship, that the law was a discipline of restraint. Charlie had thought that was a generous way of saying there was no room for imagination. She'd learned otherwise, in the city, in rooms where the stakes were lower, where clients wanted to believe that the law could be bent into a shape that fit their lives. Hargrove would not be sympathetic to Marcus as a person. She would be sympathetic to the process, if the process was impeccable.

Charlie stepped aside and let the next person approach the window. She opened the folder and took a photograph from inside, one that had been clipped to the complaint. It showed a brick wall behind a loading dock, a dark shape on the ground, a chalk outline that looked like a cruel sketch of a man lying down. There was a spray of dried blood, the kind that didn't look like blood in a photo, more like rust. The angle was from above, maybe a second-story window. It had been taken early in the morning, judging by the quality of the light. She felt the familiar mix of detachment and nausea, the way a photograph flattened tragedy into evidence. She put it back and closed the folder.

Across the lobby, a door opened and a woman in a suit stepped out. She was young, maybe thirty, with hair pulled into a knot that sat precisely at the nape of her neck. She carried a binder and a coffee that looked like it had been poured an hour ago. She scanned the room and her eyes landed on Charlie, then flicked down to the folder in her hand. Bishop. She didn't smile. She didn't need to. She was the law today, and she knew it.

Charlie nodded at her, a minimal acknowledgment that said she knew the game and wouldn't be intimidated. Bishop's mouth tightened. She turned to the deputy by the door and said something that made him glance toward Charlie and then away. The message was clear: they knew she was here, and they were prepared.

Charlie took a steadying breath and walked toward the hallway that led to the courtrooms. Her heels clicked on the marble. The sound was confident even if she wasn't. She thought about Marcus in a cell somewhere beneath their feet, the fluorescent light humming, the scrape of boots on concrete. She thought about her mother at the kitchen table, twisting the cord of the phone. She thought about the empty frame in the hallway and the photograph that had once filled it.

The courtroom door was open. Inside, the benches were half-full. Reporters, a few regulars who came to watch, a pair of women who looked like they'd been summoned for a different hearing. The prosecutor's table was neat. A legal pad, pens aligned. The defense table was bare. Charlie set her folder down and slid into the chair. She spread the documents in front of her, making sure her notepad was directly over the

complaint so the top of the page showed nothing but her own handwriting. It was a small habit, a quiet way to control the narrative before anyone else tried.

She glanced up at the bench. Judge Hargrove's nameplate was already in place, a simple brass rectangle with black letters. The chair behind it was empty, but the room felt like it was holding its breath. Charlie had the sudden, sharp sensation that she was being watched, not by the people in the pews but by the room itself. By the ghosts of verdicts and pleas, by the families who had leaned forward in these same chairs, waiting for words that would define the next year or the next decade. She forced her shoulders to drop and smoothed the page with her palm.

Bishop entered and took her place at the prosecutor's table. She didn't look at Charlie again. She opened her binder and flipped to a tab with a practiced motion. A deputy moved to the lectern near the bench. The court reporter settled her hands over the stenotype machine. The air thickened. Somewhere beyond the walls, a door scraped open and closed. Footsteps approached.

Two deputies came in, one on either side of Marcus. He was in a jumpsuit that had been washed too many times, his wrists cuffed in front of him. His hair was messy and there was a bruise on his cheek that hadn't been there before. He looked tired, but when his eyes found Charlie, his face lit with something like relief. He held her gaze for a second too long and then glanced at the prosecution table with a brief flicker of defiance. The deputy guided him to the defense chair and he sat, the cuffs clicking softly against the table.

Charlie leaned toward him. "I'm here," she said, keeping her voice low. "I've read the complaint. We're going to push for bail with conditions. I need you to keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking. Can you do that?"

He nodded. His hands were trembling, just slightly. "I didn't do it," he whispered. His eyes searched her face. "You know that, right? Charlie, I didn't—"

"I know," she said, because it was what you said to a client you believed. "We'll talk later."

The bailiff stepped forward. "All rise." The room obeyed. Judge Evelyn Hargrove entered through the side door and took the bench in a single fluid motion, her black robe settling around her like an opinion that didn't need to be argued. She surveyed the courtroom with eyes that seemed to catalog every detail, from the knot on Bishop's neck to the way Charlie had arranged her papers. Her expression was carefully neutral, but Charlie felt the weight of recognition. Hargrove remembered her. She would remember the internship, the summer she'd left, the reasons she hadn't come back for certain ceremonies. Charlie felt the sudden desire to stand straighter.

“Be seated,” Judge Hargrove said. Her voice was low and carried easily. “Counsel, state your appearances for the record.”

Bishop stood. “Jenna Bishop for the State, Your Honor.”

Charlie stood. “Charlotte Mercer for the defendant, Marcus Reed.”

Hargrove’s eyes rested on Charlie for a half-second. “Welcome back, Ms. Mercer,” she said, the politeness edged with a hint of something else. “We’ll take up bail on this matter. Ms. Bishop, does the State have a recommendation?”

Bishop stepped to the lectern. “Yes, Your Honor. Given the nature of the charge, the State’s concern for community safety, and the defendant’s prior record, the State requests bail in the amount of five hundred thousand dollars, with conditions: GPS monitoring, a no-contact order with the victim’s family, and surrender of his passport.” Her delivery was crisp, the number landed with precision. The room reacted in small ways—a rustle, a cough. Five hundred thousand wasn’t hold-forever high, but it might as well be.

Charlie had expected it, but hearing it made the air thinner. Marcus’s breath hitched. He looked at Charlie, panic edging into his face. Charlie kept her eyes on the judge. She placed her hand flat on the table, a physical anchor. “Your Honor,” she said, stepping to the lectern. “The defense requests bail at a level that reflects both the presumption of innocence and Mr. Reed’s ties to this community. Marcus Reed has lived in Hawthorne County his entire life. He has steady employment as a foreman at the quarry. He has a residence and family in the area. He is not a flight risk, and he poses no danger to the community. The State’s suggestion is punitive, not proportional.”

“The defendant has prior convictions, Counselor,” Bishop interjected, not waiting for the judge to invite her. “Disorderly conduct. A DUI. A fraudulent instrument charge.”

“Those are not crimes of violence,” Charlie countered, turning slightly to address Bishop directly, but keeping her primary focus on Hargrove. “And they are old. The State is asking this court to treat a man with ties and responsibilities as if he is a danger based on a few mistakes he has already paid for. We propose a modest bail, release to his mother’s supervision, weekly check-ins, and the same no-contact and monitoring conditions the State requests. That balances safety with rights.”

Hargrove tapped a pen against the desk, a quiet rhythm. “Ms. Bishop, do you have any evidence beyond the charge itself that suggests Mr. Reed is a danger at this moment?”

Bishop hesitated. It was almost imperceptible, a tightening of her jaw. "Your Honor, the investigation is ongoing. We have witness statements placing Mr. Reed near the scene at the relevant time. We have forensic evidence that we are still analyzing. What I can say is that the nature of this offense suggests a level of premeditation that gives the State pause."

"Then you don't yet have a bail argument rooted in current risk," Hargrove said. She didn't raise her voice, but the words landed with authority. "Bail is not punishment. It is assurance of appearance. The court will set bail at two hundred thousand dollars, with conditions as proposed by the defense. Monitoring, check-ins, no contact. If the State has evidence of flight risk or danger at a later date, it may move to reconsider. We are not holding people on suspicion alone."

Bishop's face tightened further. She didn't argue, but Charlie saw the calculation behind her eyes. Two hundred thousand was still high enough to be difficult, but it was reachable with collateral. It was a win, though not a clean one. "Thank you, Your Honor," Charlie said, keeping her voice even.

Hargrove nodded. "We'll address the next matter. Ms. Bishop, you may call your first witness if you wish to put something on the record regarding the preliminary hearing schedule."

Bishop flipped a page in her binder. "Your Honor, the State will request four weeks for discovery and to file a motion for a preliminary hearing. We anticipate needing forensics from the state lab, and—" She stopped, because Marcus had stood.

The deputy reached for his arm, but Marcus shook him off, just for a second. He looked at Charlie, then at Hargrove, and his voice was louder than it should have been in the quiet room. "I didn't do it," he said. "I was there, I won't lie. But I didn't kill him. I heard him. I heard him confess." The courtroom went still, the way a room does when a lie or a truth lands at the same time as a shock. Charlie's heart hammered. She reached for Marcus's arm, her fingers closing around the thin fabric of the jumpsuit. "Marcus, stop," she hissed. "We'll talk later."

But he looked at her with a kind of desperate intensity. "It wasn't about the money," he said, his voice dropping, but not enough. "It's about the ledger."

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