

LOVER BE MINE
by Nicole Jordan

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE:

London, June 1816

Her beauty held an uncommon allure, much to his regret.

Swearing an amused oath at himself, Lord Jack Wilde surveyed his quarry from across the dimly-lit garden. Despite his better judgment and his instincts for self-preservation, he'd walked headlong into the matchmaking trap laid by his female relatives. He'd planned to inspect the young lady in question and then leave without a backward glance, but Sophie Fortin had thoroughly captured his interest.

Jack let out a slow breath as he watched the captivating Miss Fortin execute the lively movements of a contra dance. There was considerably more lurking under her surface than mere beauty. She had an enchanting smile, an intensely feminine grace, and a delectable body that set all his primal male urges on full alert.

He wanted her, without question. Even worse, he was seized by a need to know much more about her.

Schooling his lustful thoughts, Jack pondered his options while recalling his cousin Skye's ardent prediction:

"Miss Fortin is not the grasping husband-hunter you seem to think her, Jack. And she certainly is no spineless ninny either—which you will discover for yourself if you ever deign to meet her. You will like her prodigiously, I swear it."

He had yet to contrive an introduction to Sophie Fortin tonight, or even approach her. Indeed, because of the long-standing feud between their families, he'd had to employ subterfuge simply to attend the masquerade ball hosted by her great-aunt.

Sneaking behind enemy lines in disguise seemed a craven way of investigating a prospective mate, Jack reflected with dark humor. Yet here he stood, garbed as a swashbuckling pirate, contemplating a path that could seriously endanger his bachelorhood.

Clearly he'd been struck by a brain fever. Or bewitched by a spell.

The current setting argued for bewitchment. The gardens of her aunt's London residence had been converted to an open-air ballroom, faintly illuminated by colored lanterns. Undeniably, Sophie Fortin stood out among the crowd of costumed dancers like a diamond among lumps of coal.

Jack couldn't keep his eyes off her, in no small part because she seemed a profusion of contradictions.

For her costume, she wore a glittering tiara and the gossamer, flowing gown of a royal princess, yet her grace and loveliness had little to do with her attire. Her hair was an ordinary shade of dark brown, but the lustrous, curling tendrils piled high on her head had a life all their own. A demi-mask concealed her eyes but not the delicacy of her face or the sensuality of her mouth.

Miss Fortin was just as comely as advertised, but with none of the cold remoteness he'd expected. Instead, she had life, vitality, warmth.

That, and a generous, kind smile.

He hadn't anticipated the vibrancy, much less the kindness or warmth. From what he knew about her, he'd imagined either a submissive young miss or a calculating social climber. Why else would she allow herself to be sold to a widower more than twice her age for the price of a dukedom?

Observing her, Jack wondered how he had possibly overlooked her among this season's insipid crop of debutantes. And why the devil did she have such a powerful effect on his senses? He'd known a number of striking beauties in his time, and bedded more than a few of them. It was rare that a woman could attract him so strongly at first glance, certainly not a green girl only a few years out of the schoolroom.

And he most definitely was not in the market for a wife of any age. But he'd agreed under duress to arrange a meeting with Miss Fortin.

For that he could only blame the tenacity of his adopted sister, Katharine, and his youngest cousin, Skye. Kate's romantic schemes would put Napoleon Bonaparte to shame, Jack suspected. Her campaign to marry him off had begun in earnest last week, the morning after their brother Ashton's wedding, which she had also plotted.

When Kate was younger, the family had generally indulged her idealistic machinations with raillery and good humor. But her latest flight of fancy was patently absurd. Kate theorized that the five Wilde cousins—Ashton, Quinn, Jack, Skye, and Kate herself—could find true love by emulating legendary lovers throughout history.

Beyond all expectations, Ash had recently succeeded in falling in love with his "Cinderella," Miss Maura Collyer of Suffolk. Jack's supposed legend was not a fairy tale but one of the Bard's most famous tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet*—with him cast in the leading role of Romeo and Miss Fortin as his Juliet.

"Have your wits gone addled, Kate?" was his first reaction after a bark of laughter. "You can't honestly expect me to play the pathetic hero who dies."

He put little credence in his sister's unshaken belief in romantic destiny. And even though he was usually ripe for a challenge, he had adamantly refused even to meet Miss Fortin.

In response, Kate and Skye had endlessly sung her praises in an effort to rouse his interest.

"Sophie Fortin has beauty in abundance," Kate professed.

"She is clever and kind," Skye added.

"It is not *her* fault that her parents are determined to land a high-ranking title for her," his

sister repeated for the umpteenth time.

Jack's scoffing amusement remained the same. The Fortin chit had to be a timid dormouse, allowing herself to be married off to an older nobleman who had already buried one wife.

"There is no official betrothal yet," Skye countered. "You must act now, Jack, and rescue Miss Fortin from a loveless union before it is too late. Once she is affianced to the duke, she cannot honorably fall in love with *you*."

"Her honor or lack of it is hardly my concern," Jack replied, unswayed.

"Just say you will meet her," Kate begged.

He'd held out until two days ago, when Skye cornered him as he left his house just after dawn. He was late for a curricule race, his head aching from an overindulgence of brandy the previous evening.

Completely ignoring his professed desire to be rid of her, Skye had refused to leave until she'd wrung a promise from him to meet Miss Fortin. "You know I won't give up, Jack," she said sweetly, "so you might as well surrender."

For his own peace and self-preservation, he'd yielded, knowing his female relatives would hound him relentlessly otherwise.

The masquerade had seemed the ideal opportunity to conduct his surveillance, since he could employ anonymity to contrive an encounter with Miss Fortin and judge her for himself. The unmasking was not scheduled until midnight, and by then he would be long gone.

He'd come tonight intending to prove Kate's ludicrous theory wrong. Regrettably, however, his plan had been hurled off course by the beauty herself, particularly her lovely smile. There was a radiance about her that captivated and drew Jack in wholly against his wishes.

At least he now understood why a wealthy widowed duke could be smitten enough to consider offering matrimony to a much younger commoner with no fortune.

Her skin was flawless ivory, her lips full and ripe, Jack noted. He would relish kissing those luscious lips; indeed, he would relish doing much more than simply kiss Miss Fortin.

For a moment he let his imagination run riot. He could well envision the pleasure of bedding her, feeling her go wild beneath him, matching her in the throes of passion. . . .

But *matrimony*? Jack curbed the urge to shudder. *God forbid*.

The notion that Sophie Fortin, or any woman, might be his potential soul mate was laughable. He had no intention of being ensnared in a courtship, let alone marriage. And yet she was definitely too tantalizing to resist pursuing.

The dance ended just then, and Miss Fortin's partner of the moment bowed and took his leave of her. Alone, she glanced over her shoulder and caught Jack watching her from a corner of the gardens.

Her gaze stayed on him for a long heartbeat. Then, instead of turning away out of shyness or embarrassment, she surprised him by suddenly moving his way.

Upon reaching him, she peered up into his mask, trying to see his eyes. "Do I know you, sir? I penned the invitations for my Aunt Eunice, and I don't recall anyone of your description on the guest list."

Although his pirate costume couldn't disguise his height or athletic build, Jack suspected his identity was safe, since his mask covered the better part of his face and his headscarf mostly concealed his mane of black hair.

"No, we have not met before, Miss Fortin," he answered, amused by her directness. Baldly confronting a stranger was something only the females in his family would do.

"Then would you care to explain why you have been watching me these past twenty minutes or more?"

Her boldness impressed him, but he parried her question with his habitual facile charm. "Is it unreasonable for a man to enjoy watching a beautiful young lady?"

In response to his flattery, she gave a light, skeptical laugh and glanced down at the cutlass he wore sashed at his waist. "Am I in any danger? Pirates are known to take hostages for ransom and carry away maidens for their own wicked purposes."

"If memory serves, I haven't ravished any fair maidens since Tuesday last."

Her enchanting smile reappeared, much to his pleasure, although whatever reply she would have made was interrupted by her unlikely suitor, the Duke of Dunmore.

"There you are, my dear," Dunmore said in a fond tone. "You promised me your hand for the next set of dances, remember?"

Her purported suitor, Jack observed, had fairly handsome features but thinning hair that was graying at the temples. In his mid-forties, the duke was also taller than average, but his aristocratic bearing was marred by his slight paunch.

After a brief hesitation, Miss Fortin answered with a gracious smile. "Yes, of course I remember, your grace."

Seeing that entrancing smile bestowed on the nobleman, Jack felt an inexplicable pang of jealousy. Absurd, since he had no claim to Miss Fortin's affections whatsoever.

The duke might have felt a touch of jealousy as well, for he cast Jack a sharp look before offering the lady his arm.

"Who was that pirate fellow?" Dunmore asked as he led her away.

"I am not certain," Jack heard her say as they took their positions on the grass dance floor.

When the music began for a waltz, Jack watched their progress with bemusement, wondering what Miss Fortin saw in the Duke of Dunmore other than his illustrious title and fortune.

They did not appear to be well-matched as dance partners, for Dunmore was remarkably

uncoordinated and kept treading upon her toes. Her expression remained serene until the third time he ground down on her foot, and then she couldn't conceal a grimace.

Dunmore seemed to realize he had hurt her, for he halted in his tracks and began apologizing profusely. "My dear, pray forgive my clumsiness. I fear I cannot keep up with these younger chaps."

Miss Fortin forced a smile. "It is no matter, your grace. There are all manner of people who find the waltz difficult to negotiate since it is so new. But perhaps we should not attempt it any longer?"

When Dunmore readily agreed, they moved back to the sidelines and stood conversing until the dance ended. A short while later, she excused herself.

When she turned toward the house, Jack could see her struggling to hide her limp. She was putting on a game face but was clearly in real pain.

With some thought of helping her, he followed her inside in time to see her hobble down a corridor and slip through a doorway. Curious as to what she was about, he pursued her.

She had taken refuge in the library, of all places, Jack realized upon pausing at the threshold. A table lamp had been lit, no doubt for the convenience of the ball guests, and Jack watched as Miss Fortin sank gratefully onto the sofa nearest the lamp.

Bending down, she raised her skirts to her knees, then removed her left dancing slipper and stocking. She muttered something inaudible before taking off her mask, perhaps the better to see as she examined her aching toes.

When she grimaced again, Jack stepped forward. "May I be of assistance, Miss Fortin?"

She gave a start of surprise and eyed him warily as he crossed the room to her. Without waiting for her agreement, Jack knelt before her and took her bare foot in his hands.

"Allow me," he said, ignoring her sharply indrawn breath at his boldness.

Her smallest toe was bleeding, he could see. "Does it hurt to bend it?" he asked, gently prodding.

"Yes, but not excruciatingly so."

"Then it is only bruised, not broken," he pronounced. "It should heal in a week or so. Trust me, I speak from experience, having been injured by many an iron-shod hoof in my youth."

Finding the end of his waist sash, he tore off a strip of fabric and used the makeshift handkerchief to blot the blood on her toe.

"You can wrap this piece of cloth around your wound until you are able to fashion a proper bandage."

"Thank you," she murmured.

At her genuine expression of appreciation, Jack made the mistake of looking up.

She had stunning eyes, he realized. Luminous and thickly lashed. A dark shade of blue

that was almost violet.

Who had violet eyes? Jack thought irritably, struggling to resist her allure. This near, she was even more of an enchantress than he first realized, and his body reacted accordingly. The stab of desire that shot through him was as powerful as any he could remember.

In self-defense, he summoned a gruff voice. "Why did you allow Dunmore to trample your feet and half cripple you?" he demanded.

She had frozen at his nearness, but she looked taken aback by his inquiry. "I was being courteous, if you must know. It would have been unkind to point out his shortcomings. Dunmore cannot help it if he is a terrible dancer. Some people are cursed with two left feet."

"I suppose his rank and fortune can excuse myriad deficiencies," Jack said sardonically, intent on exposing her true motivation. "Isn't that the chief reason for your compassion? And why you wish to marry him?"

She stared at him. "Not at all. The duke is actually a very kind man. I didn't wish to hurt his feelings."

At Jack's skeptical silence, her gaze narrowed. "Why is it any of your concern?" When he didn't answer, she made a demand of her own. "Who *are* you?"

Jack reached up to remove his own mask.

"*You*," she exclaimed, obviously recognizing him. Oddly enough, she seemed relieved to learn his identity, rather than apprehensive as he'd expected. She settled back on the sofa and regarded him thoughtfully.

"I gather you know me?" he asked.

"Everyone knows of the scandalous Lord Jack Wilde."

"But we have never met? I think I would remember you, Miss Fortin."

"No, we have never met directly. I saw you at the Perrys' ball earlier in the season, but you never noticed me."

"I cannot imagine why," he said honestly.

"Perhaps because I was dressed in white. You avoid debutantes like the plague."

He grinned at that. "Ordinarily, yes."

"I avoided you that particular night as well, since I had been warned about you." When his eyebrow lifted, she expounded. "Our families have been locked in a blood feud for three generations, remember?"

"Ah, yes, the feud," Jack said. His great-uncle had killed her great-grandfather in a duel over a woman, and then fled to the American Colonies with the prize.

"I always regretted that prohibition," Miss Fortin said wistfully. "I would have enjoyed knowing Lady Katharine and Lady Skye, but I was forbidden to associate with them."

His mouth curved. "Do you always do as you are bid?"

She sidestepped the question. "Do you *never* do as you are bid? No, you needn't answer. From all reports, you live to break rules."

"What reports have you been heeding?"

"Oh, the gossip about you is universal. You are said to be an outrageously irreverent rakehell who can charm the birds from the trees—at least female birds. If only half the stories are true, I should fear for my virtue." As if suddenly becoming aware of the impropriety of the situation, she smoothed her skirts down over her knees. "I should not even be speaking to you now."

"So do you mean to run away screaming?"

Her luminous eyes sparked with an appealing levity. "No. I have been a dutiful daughter all evening. And I am curious to know why you are speaking to *me*. Why are you here at my aunt's ball, my lord? What do you want?"

I want you, lovely lady, came the unbidden thought.

His fierce attraction boded ill for his plan to dislike her, Jack acknowledged, laughing inwardly at the irony, but all his possessive male instincts were now keenly awake.

Deciding the truth was his best defense, he fixed his gaze on her luscious mouth. "I am here because I promised my cousin I would kiss you."

Several heartbeats passed before she blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Did you not hear me?"

"Oh, I heard you. I just could not believe you were serious." Her head tilted to one side. "Why would you promise such a thing? Was it a dare?"

"No."

"Then are you trying to win a wager? Did you bet that you could seduce me?"

If he'd had some thought of discomposing her with his bald declaration, it wasn't working, Jack noted. Sophie Fortin wasn't at all intimidated by him. "My promise has nothing to do with any wager."

"I confess skepticism," she remarked, still amused. "You are said to wager on almost anything."

Wanting to regain the upper hand in their conversation, Jack parried her comment. "Should I be flattered that you know so much about me?"

"Probably not, since much of my knowledge is not good. You are nearly thirty years old but still act the reckless young buck half the time. You scandalize the ton monthly, if not more often."

He gave a mock wince. "It pains me to agree."

“Which of your cousins secured your promise to try and kiss me?”

“Skye, but Katharine had a part in it also.”

“Indeed? Why ever would they wish you to attempt it?”

Jack’s lips twitched at her inquisitiveness. “They are both bent on matchmaking.”

Her blue eyes widened at that. “Do tell.”

“It is a long story.”

Miss Fortin glanced at the ormolu clock on the mantel. “I fear I don’t have time for a long story. Perhaps you could just summarize the plot for me?”

“Do you mind if I get off my knees?” Without waiting for her permission, Jack rose and settled on the sofa beside her, then reluctantly offered his explanation. “Kate has a theory about the Wilde cousins needing to imitate the world’s greatest lovers in order to find our one true mates. You are supposed to be Juliet to my Romeo.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “This grows more intriguing by the moment.”

Jack made a face. “I don’t consider it ‘intriguing’ that she thinks you and I might suit.”

She stared at him. “Suit—as in matrimony? Surely she is jesting.”

“If you think that, you don’t know Kate,” he said dryly.

“Then she is daft.”

“My sentiments exactly. Her premise is utterly demented.”

“So you came to inspect me this evening?”

“You could put it that way.”

“What role did Lady Skye play in your decision?”

Jack answered that question with even less enthusiasm. “I was heading to an early-morning curricl race recently when she planted herself in my vehicle and commandeered the reins. Short of removing her bodily or forfeiting the race, I had no choice but to promise to investigate you.”

A soft spurt of laughter escaped Miss Fortin. “Oh, no, you would not want to miss a race,” she murmured. “Not a premiere member of the Four-in-Hand Club who is infamous for his neck-or-nothing carriage races.”

The chit was teasing him, if not outright laughing at him, he decided. She continued before he could respond in kind. “Lady Skye is known to be exceptionally persuasive, but you surprise me, Lord Jack, allowing your cousin and your sister to browbeat you.”

“I was hardly browbeaten.”

“No? You barged your way into a private ball uninvited and stalked me here to my aunt’s

library because you wouldn't stand up to them."

"You do have a point," he said in a wry drawl. "It is distinctly lowering. No self-respecting chap allows his female relatives to orchestrate his amorous affairs."

Her musical laughter rippled again, a sound so infectious that Jack chuckled himself. "I admit, you are not what I expected, Miss Fortin."

"What did you expect?"

"To be frank? A jellyfish with no spine."

"Why?"

"Because *you* are letting yourself be browbeaten into an unwanted marriage to Dunmore."

"Simply because I choose to honor my parents' wishes, you think I have no spine?"

"You are set on marrying the duke, are you not? You are far too willing to do as your parents tell you."

She didn't seem offended by his critique of her, however. Instead, she just smiled that serene, faintly enigmatic smile of hers. "How can you make such judgments when you know very little about me?"

He couldn't dispute her on that question. And strangely he didn't want to. In truth, he wanted to know Sophie Fortin a great deal better.

"Perhaps you aren't such a milksop after all," he conceded.

Her eyes gleamed with humor. "I suppose I should thank you for the backhanded compliment."

Such intelligent eyes, such warmth in them, Jack thought.

"I confess," she admitted, "you are not what I expected either. At least you make a habit of appearing in unexpected places."

"What places?"

"Besides my aunt's masquerade tonight? The Arundel Home for Unwed Mothers, for one."

It was his turn to be taken aback, although he kept his expression carefully neutral. "What makes you think I appeared there?"

She hesitated. "Last winter, one of the maids in our employ fell in love with a scoundrel. When she became *enceinte*, my parents dismissed her from our household without a character reference. I gave Martha the funds to live at the Arundel Home until her baby was born. I was visiting her one day this past April when I saw you there, meeting with the board of administrators. Your presence was such a curious phenomenon, I made it my business to ask about you. To my vast surprise, I learned you were a trustee and that you have contributed large sums for the home's operation."

"I think you must have been misinformed," Jack replied, fighting the urge to shift

uncomfortably in his seat.

She searched his face. "I don't believe so. But I never did discover how you came to be involved. What kind of rake supports a home for unwed mothers? Unless . . ."

Suddenly breaking off, she colored in evident embarrassment.

"Unless what?" he prodded, not unhappy to see her rendered speechless.

"Unless you fathered a child on one of those poor women," she finished candidly.

"I did not father any of their children, I assure you. I am very careful in that regard."

His own mother had borne him out of wedlock, although she hailed from a much different class than the Arundel Home's occupants. As a former bastard himself, Jack hadn't wanted to sire any by-blows, so he took precautions in all his love affairs.

"Then why would you become a trustee?" Miss Fortin asked.

Because it was a personal mission for him, supporting unwed mothers. Perhaps irrationally, he had a deep-seated, quixotic need to aid women like his mother, who might find themselves alone and helpless.

Yet he had no desire to make his personal crusade common knowledge. He'd never told anyone about his commitment to the Arundel Home—not his relatives, not even Skye, whom he was closest to among his family members.

Still, he had to tell Sophie Fortin something to satisfy her curiosity. "Like you, I once knew someone who could have benefited from an institution like Arundel."

She studied him for another long moment, then nodded as if coming to a conclusion about him. When she next spoke, her tone had softened. "I think your generosity is admirable."

Jack shrugged. "It is nothing. I merely donate my race winnings to the Home."

"Winnings that are undoubtedly significant, given your success at carriage racing. And I suspect the women you help there do not consider your contributions 'nothing.'"

"Well, pray keep your observations to yourself. No one outside of Arundel knows of my involvement."

Her quizzical look suggested she was trying to understand him. "You are a definitely a puzzle, Lord Jack. Why don't you want anyone to know about your altruism?"

Because he kept his personal feelings private, even from his family. He didn't open up easily, especially not to sheltered young ladies who were practically strangers, as Miss Fortin was.

But he deflected her question with a sardonic grin and an exaggeration. "Growing up as the youngest male Wilde cousin, I had the devil of a time holding my own with my brother and my cousin Quinn. They would have roasted me alive for such softness."

In their youth, his adopted brother Ash and his cousin Quinn would have ragged him mercilessly for any tender feelings toward the fair sex, although that was certainly not the

case now.

“Philanthropy is not considered a manly pursuit,” Jack added jokingly with a silent apology to them both.

“I doubt anyone would ever think of you as a man-milliner, my lord. But your secret is safe with me.”

The glimmer of laughter was back in her eyes, and Jack found himself caught again by her spell as he studied his would-be Juliet.

She was a puzzle herself. At twenty years of age, Miss Fortin was supposed to be young, naive, innocent. Instead, she seemed astute, clever, and perceptive. She was definitely not spineless or docile as he'd anticipated. And her frankness made him like her even more.

Which only compounded his dilemma. He'd planned to get her alone, then satisfy himself that there was nothing to Kate's mad theory and go on his way.

The trouble was, Sophie Fortin thoroughly and utterly intrigued him. Too damned much, devil take her.

As the silence between them drew out, she suddenly seemed to grow aware of how intently they were staring at each other.

Tearing her gaze from his, she bent and demurely donned her stocking, garter, and slipper, then returned her attention to him.

“Thank you for your gallantry in tending to my wound, Lord Jack, but I must go.”

“Not so quickly, Miss Fortin. I mean to claim my kiss now.”

Her laughter faded, to be replaced by uncertainty.

“I need to be able to tell Skye and Kate that I succeeded,” he explained.

“I cannot kiss you.”

“You are not engaged to Dunmore yet, are you?”

“No.”

“Then what is the impediment?”

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, then lifted again, but she offered no reply.

“Think of it as an experiment,” Jack urged when she kept silent. “I simply want to test my sister's hypothesis.”

A true statement, he rationalized. If Sophie Fortin was easily frightened by kissing him, then she couldn't possibly be his ideal mate.

When she remained unmoving, he leaned forward until her lips were close enough to capture. He breathed in her sweet, feminine scent, then let his mouth caress hers with a featherlight pressure.

She gave a soft gasp at that mere contact, while he turned instantly hard at her delectable taste.

Jack drew back sharply. He'd known very few females who could arouse him so quickly, which in itself was an ominous sign. The stark attraction was there between them, without question.

Sophie had felt the same intense spark, too, he could tell, for she raised her fingers to her lips, eyeing him in wonder.

After a long moment of silence, she cleared her throat. "Did you learn what you wished to know?"

"Not in the least," Jack replied, cursing mentally. Kissing her had left him even more conflicted. There might be something to Kate's bloody theory after all.

Sophie let out her breath slowly. "It makes no difference. There could never be a match between us." She sounded rather wistful.

"Why not?"

"The feud, for one thing."

"I've always thought the feud to be rather silly."

Sophie frowned at that. "My father certainly doesn't consider it silly. It affected his entire life in a most detrimental way."

"In what way?"

"When his grandfather died, Papa's line lost the barony. The terms of the letters patent were peculiar. Inheritance went through the baron's younger brothers instead of his sons. Therefore, both the title and accompanying fortune passed to Papa's great-uncle rather than his father."

"So he still holds a grudge after all this time? For a quarrel that dates back more than half a century?"

"I fear so. He will never forgive your relatives for depriving him of his birthright. And even if he could, he would never countenance a marital union between us when he has his sights set on my marrying a duke." She sighed. "I should return to the masquerade. My family will wonder what has become of me."

She rose from the couch, intent on leaving, but Jack stopped her by catching her hand.

"Don't go yet." The intensity in his tone surprised even him.

"I must."

"At least allow me a better kiss."

When she hesitated, he rose to his feet.

As he gazed down at her, those lovely blue eyes locked with his again and something

primitive arced between them.

Something heated and alive.

Shivering, she took a step backward, but Jack tightened his fingers around hers, his resolve renewed.

If this one kiss would determine his fate, he intended to make it unforgettable.

Excerpt from *Lover Be Mine* by Nicole Jordan
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