

THE YEAR OF LIVING

Shamelessly



Susanna Carr



A SIGNET ECLIPSE BOOK

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SIGNET ECLIPSE

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To my editor, Becky Vinter, with thanks.

PROLOGUE



December 31

“Grab hold of your dates, ladies and gentlemen,” the bandleader announced. “The countdown to the New Year will start in one minute.”

It was time. Katie fluffed out her long black hair and smoothed her hands over her little black dress before pressing her palm over her nervous stomach. She was going to start her wild affair with Ryder Scott. Tonight.

Her skin stung with awareness at what she was about to do. She had never had the courage to really go after him until now. Well, what she currently had wasn't so much courage as it was imagining her regret if she never let him know how she felt. This unrequited crush was entering its eleventh year and no one was getting any younger. Katie gave a little sigh and fought her way through the crowd of shimmering dresses and ill-fitting suits as she searched for Ryder.

Unfortunately, Ryder was best friends with her brother, Jake, and he still saw her as Jake's little sister. That was the downside of always having him around the house when they were growing up. Ryder's family life was sad and neglectful, but the Kramers had been happy to open their home to him.

In return, he was protective toward the family, Katie in particular, which was great when he wanted to check that her car had enough oil, but not so great when she wanted him to sweep her off her feet and make mad, passionate love to her.

Katie thought back to the one moment during the summer when she'd thought he might feel the same way. She had been hot and sweaty, wearing a threadbare tank top and Daisy Duke shorts while gardening. When Ryder had walked into the yard, he had folded his arms across his chest and run his eyes over her, giving her a certain look that suggested he was seriously considering pouncing and ripping her clothes off. But instead of pressing her against the dirt and doing some wicked and wonderful things, Ryder had clenched his fists, pivoted on his heel and walked away without looking back.

If he hadn't gotten the hint by now that she was a sensual woman ready for the taking, then it was time for her to make the first move.

“Ten . . .,” the crowd started to chant.

New Year’s Eve was the perfect, symbolic night, Katie decided as she stood on the tips of her toes and looked over people’s shoulders for Ryder. She thought she could see him in the far corner of the Women’s Auxiliary Hall.

“Nine . . .”

Katie hurried toward him, her progress slow as she dodged and swerved around people. It was just her luck that she was on the other side of the hall for the countdown. She had to get to Ryder in time for her New Year’s kiss!

“Eight . . .”

The specially ordered black velvet dress hadn’t quite turned her into Cinderella for the night. She glanced down at it with a frown. It was certainly feminine and elegant—but utterly the wrong choice for a seduction. The dress said sweet and demure when she needed naughty and sexy.

“Seven . . .”

The fitted bodice and full skirt didn’t compete with the slinky dresses worn by Tatum and Sasha, Ryder’s ex-girlfriends. Those two grabbed every man’s attention with their scandalously short dresses in bold jeweled colors while Katie felt invisible. As usual.

“Six . . .”

It didn’t help that Tatum had been all over Ryder all night like a leech, while Sasha had flitted around him, constantly readjusting her bra to draw his attention to her chest.

“Five . . .”

All night, Katie couldn’t figure out how she was going to pry Tatum and Sasha off Ryder before the countdown. Ryder usually kept an eye on her, especially when the men were drunk and rowdy, but tonight he had only nodded and smiled at her once from across the room and that was it. Hilary and Melissa had kept nudging her to tell her he was looking at her, but every time she glanced his way, he was engaged in a new conversation.

“Four . . .”

The moment everyone shouted “Happy New Year,” she was going to plant a long, wet and thorough kiss on Ryder Scott.

“Three . . .”

Then suddenly, she was in front of him. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw his dark brown eyes, high cheekbones and molded biceps. But it appeared that if she wanted her New Year’s kiss, she was going to have to stand in line. Tatum wasn’t waiting for any countdown.

“Two . . .”

The platinum blonde was kissing Ryder so deeply, she was probably tickling his spleen with her tongue. And Ryder certainly wasn’t doing anything to stop her.

“One!”

Sasha stood on the other side of Ryder and grasped his chin with her hand. She determinedly pulled

Ryder's face toward her and kissed him with enthusiasm.

“Happy New Year!”

Katie stood right in front of Ryder as everyone rang in the New Year. A shower of confetti drifted in front of her eyes, but she didn't blink. She wanted to yank Tatum away from Ryder and push Sasha aside. Then she would wipe the smears of red and pink lipstick from his mouth and claim him with a kiss that would make him forget everyone else in the room.

But she didn't make a move toward him. She felt her shoulders slump. Ryder could have his pick and if the rumors were true, he might go home with both of them and enjoy a *ménage à trois* to start off the New Year. There just didn't seem to be any reason why Ryder would choose her.

Katie took a few steps back, turned and melded into the crowd. But something in her told her she couldn't let this setback get her down. She *would* have an affair with Ryder. She just needed to figure out a way to make him see her as someone other than meek and mild Katie. The girl he would rather undress than shove aside to get to the fridge.

It was time for a makeover. One just like in the movies. She had to become totally irresistible. A vixen. No one would dare give a noogie to a vixen. It would probably require some professional advice, and there was only one place in town where she could get it.

Katie squared her shoulders back and thrust her chin out. The journey to a new and improved Katie was going to start right this second.

Sex Goddess Secrets!

Katie wanted to know every one of them. She grabbed for the magazine, tucked it under her arm and kept searching.

21 Bad Girl Sex Tips!

And here she thought that sex was sex. She added the magazine to her pile.

10 Things That Will Make Him Beg for You!

Oh, yeah. She needed that one, too.

“Do we have to do this now?” Hilary complained. Melissa nodded in agreement.

Katie glanced at her friends, who were leaning tiredly on the magazine stand. Their party clothes were as limp as their hair, and the harsh fluorescent lights revealed that their makeup had melted off hours ago. Hilary shifted from one aching foot to the next while Melissa's eyes drifted shut.

“I need this stuff,” Katie insisted, returning her attention to the magazine covers. She hoped there was something about seducing a sex god, because Ryder Scott was not just any man.

“It's two o'clock in the morning,” Melissa complained with a whimper.

“And I don’t want to start the year in a convenience store!” Hilary declared.

“Fine.” Katie scanned the magazines and scooped up any that showed cleavage or used the word “sex” with a bunch of exclamation points on the cover. “I’ll just take them all.”

That jerked Melissa awake. “All of them? Why?”

“Because I totally blew my New Year’s resolution one minute into the New Year!” Katie explained as she marched over to the counter.

“It’s not the end of the world. You can kiss Ryder anytime you want,” Hilary said as she trailed after Katie. “Start a hot and heavy affair tomorrow. You know, right after a good night’s sleep.”

“I wanted to kiss him at the stroke of midnight. But I couldn’t. Why?” Katie dumped the magazine on the counter. “Because he was already being kissed. Not by one woman, but by two!” Ryder hadn’t even noticed she was there. “I didn’t stand a chance.”

“And these magazines are going to push the women aside for you next time?” Hilary asked.

“It’s time to show Ryder my wild side, and these magazines are going to help me unleash it. This year I’m going to be the sexiest woman Crystal Bend has ever seen.” She caught the look of disbelief from the guy at the cash register. “I will!”

The cashier looked away and scanned the magazines as quickly as he could.

“I’m going to be a sex goddess that Ryder can’t resist,” she told her friends.

“Katie, have you been drinking?” Melissa asked, watching her with suspicion. “You’re supposed to be the designated driver.”

“I’m sober and I’m serious. This time next year I will be knee-deep in a wild affair with Ryder Scott.”

CHAPTER ONE



December 24
ONE YEAR LATER

She was here.

Ryder couldn't stop the tension from entering his body. He was surrounded by coworkers, who thankfully, hadn't noticed his spine growing rigid. They were too busy singing along to "Santa Baby" so loudly that he bet the music pulsed through the walls of the Student Union Building. He was on the other side of the ballroom, far away from the entrance, with a sea of reindeer antlers, elves caps and Santa hats between them, but he still knew exactly where Katie Kramer stood.

He didn't like this sixth sense he had when it came to his best friend's little sister. It was probably developed from years of keeping his eye on her. Even when she was young, he'd wanted to protect her from the ugliness of the world, like when she was being bullied at school. He'd put a quick stop to that.

But now things were different from when they were younger. Now, he was painfully aware of her. He wanted to claim her body, her heart, and make her his in every way, but he knew it would be a huge mistake to act on his desires.

Ryder cautiously looked over his shoulder and instantly spotted her at the door. Tonight, Katie looked aggressively sexy. Dressed in all black from her figure-hugging turtleneck sweater to her black leather skirt and dominatrix boots, she stood out in a crowd of red, green and gold.

She teetered slightly on those five-inch stilettos. Ryder automatically took a step in her direction, ready to catch her. He stopped just as she regained her balance. He watched as she flipped her long black hair over her shoulders and confidently strode into the crowd as if she owned the place.

He had hoped she wouldn't show up at the Christmas party. Yes, she worked as an administrative assistant for the college, but was a small reprieve too much to hope for?

Eight days, he reminded himself. He only had to be strong for eight more days.

He wasn't sure he would make it. He wanted her so much that it was turning him inside out. It didn't help that he was supposed to look out for her this year while she was house-sitting for her parents. They were very academic, but they were stupid not to realize how he felt about their daughter.

Ryder watched Katie greet some men from the biology department. Ryder gripped his drink tightly as he watched one of the men get overly familiar with a hug, his hands too close to Katie's pert ass. He wanted to go over there and break it up, but Katie skillfully disentangled herself. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

The sad thing was, he would like to hold Katie close, but he didn't trust himself. He was on guard every time she was near. It didn't used to be that way. When she was in high school, Katie was his favorite person to ski with. When she got older, they enjoyed playing pool together at the hall late in the night. He liked how things were before she changed, when she was sassy but never crossed the line. He remembered how much fun it had been teasing her. She gave as good as she got, but he stopped the minute the teasing held a sexual undertone.

Now she seemed to delight in provoking him by flaunting her confidence and independence. Not to mention her skimpy outfits. And just last week she'd informed him that she was going to use the small inheritance she'd received from her grandmother to buy the Merrill house. She was foolish to even consider it, as she well knew—that house was a death trap; it should have been condemned years ago. He wondered if she was trying to get a rise out of him with that outrageous plan, but he wasn't sure.

When it came to Katie, it was best not to get involved. He'd tried to follow that strategy for the past couple of months. He wanted to keep his distance, but it was difficult. As a carpenter for the college's Building Services, he had too many opportunities to drop by her office and see how she was doing. She was always around when he was hanging out with her brother, Jake. And no matter where he was after work, whether playing pool with friends or out on a date, he would see Katie strutting around in her cute little skirt and flirting with other guys. She had men drooling over her wherever she went and he couldn't take any more. His restraint was slipping.

Eight more days, he reminded himself again.

Katie turned her head and their gazes collided.

Shit. His heart began to gallop. She was going to come over. He might as well get this over with. He could handle this. He would just greet her as he always did, like old family friends, nothing more. . . . As long as Katie never realized how dangerous she was to his self-control, he could get through it.

Katie knew it was time to strut her stuff. She had been practicing all afternoon. She moved toward him, praying that she wouldn't trip. She enjoyed the aggressive feel of her new boots as she strode through the crowd, her hips swaying with every step.

She kept eye contact with Ryder, noticing not for the first time that he was all harsh lines and sharp angles. He watched her in tense silence, his brown eyes narrowing warily. She expected nothing from him. One could tell by the crooked nose and the small white scars on his high cheekbones that he was familiar with the rough side of life.

Ryder was taller than most of the men at the party, but that wasn't what gave him a commanding presence. Tonight he wore a pair of snug faded jeans and a dark charcoal cashmere sweater, the sleeves casually pushed up. He was the kind of man who stood out in a crowd. He didn't have to do anything to garner attention, it was simply granted to him.

Katie was suddenly finding it difficult to keep her balance, especially with the way Ryder was looking at her. She had felt the same way when he helped her with her Christmas decorations earlier in the week. And there was an odd smirk on his face. That didn't bode well. She was almost breathless by the time she reached him. She gave him a slow smile, ready to toss some amazing pickup line when he gave her the look.

No, not the I'm-going-to-do-you-right-this-minute look. Wouldn't that have been nice? It was more like the you-have-to-be-kidding-me expression, complete with arched eyebrows and condescending amusement.

"Isn't it way past your bedtime?"

Her mouth dropped open. She felt the blush zooming up her neck. Her first instinct was to fold her arms and growl out *It's freaking ten o'clock*, but she knew, of course, no sexy siren would act that way. She might have been flaunting her newfound confidence for almost a year now, but it still didn't come naturally—at least not where Ryder was concerned. He knew how to hit all of her buttons.

Instead she tilted her head to one side and fluttered her eyelashes. "Is that an invitation to tuck me in?" she purred.

Ryder scowled, but she saw the hot flare in his eyes before he banked it. She couldn't tell if he was taken aback by her answer. Or did her suggestion tantalize some forbidden fantasy of his? That was probably wishful thinking.

"You better watch that mouth," he ordered in a brusque tone. "It's going to get you in trouble someday."

"Promise?" she asked, pursing her lips.

"Give it a rest, Katie." His voice was dangerously soft.

Unfazed by his warnings, she decided to throw caution to the wind and go after what she really wanted. Leaning forward, inhaling his delicious scent, Katie reached for the glass in his hand, making sure her breasts were visible as she moved toward him. "I thought you *liked* trouble," she said, with what she hoped was a sexy smile.

His jaw clenched and a ruddy color stained his cheekbones.

Feeling like she just scored a major point, Katie brazenly took his drink and gave a hefty swallow.

Oh, God. The man drank liquid fire. She braced herself as the alcohol melted her esophagus and made a hole in her stomach. It took superhuman effort not to cough, wheeze or keel over.

Catching a drop at the corner of her mouth with the tip of her tongue, and ignoring the fact that

tasted worse than cold medicine, she returned the glass to him. "Here, Ryder," she said hoarsely, hoping it came across as husky, "you might need this tonight."

She wanted to stay with him, but the magazine articles she'd glanced over during the day warned her about crowding her man. The "Give Him Space" article promised that if she was the first to leave, he would follow.

Reluctantly, Katie started to move away, letting her hips roll as much as her precarious balance allowed. She sensed Ryder behind her and she hoped he was watching her sexy walk. She felt the tension radiating from him. *Follow me*, she silently urged. *Chase after me. You know you want to...*

She counted to one hundred, probably quicker than she should have, and paused, pretending to look for someone. Ryder didn't collide into her. Then again, his reflexes were superior. Katie looked over her shoulder, her come-hither look withering to nothing.

Ryder was nowhere to be found. He wasn't behind her, and he wasn't watching her, stunned and gawking. He wasn't even where she had left him.

Damn, that "Give Him Space" writer had some explaining to do. She may have missed a golden opportunity by taking that advice. She looked around, not caring if she was obvious, but she couldn't find Ryder. Knowing her luck, he'd probably left. Double damn.

Craning her neck, she caught a glimpse of frizzy red hair. That had to be Hilary. Peering into the shadowy corner, she saw her friend sitting at a table wearing a beige thermal shirt and a light green cardigan sweater that dwarfed her petite frame. Next to Hilary was her other friend, Melissa. Melissa's long brown hair was pulled back into the usual ponytail and she wore a college football jersey over a white long-sleeved T-shirt.

Dressed casually, Melissa and Hilary could easily be overlooked among their festive and boisterous coworkers. Katie frowned when she realized they were huddled around a forgotten table, people watching. She hurried over, as quickly as her heels would allow, determined to get her friends in party mood.

"Wow!" Melissa's eyes widened when she noticed the knee-high, laced-up black leather boots. "Do you get those boots around here?"

"No, I borrowed these from Winter." The goth student worker in her office had loaned Katie a couple of items that promised to make grown men weep. Winter forgot to mention that they would cause some weeping on Katie's part, too. She sat down gratefully next to her friends and gave a sigh of relief. "Why are you guys hiding in the corner?"

Hilary popped a Christmas cookie into her mouth. "Hiding is such a loaded word."

Katie wasn't deterred by Hilary's comment. Her friend was all about details, proof and rationalizing. "Remember why we're here?"

"Because you forced us to come?" Hilary responded.

"And you promised to be my designated driver for New Year's Eve if I came to this party." Melissa turned to Hilary. "Do you know how hard it is to find one for that night?"

"We are here," Katie replied, "because you, Hilary, want to make your move on Jake, remember? Katie couldn't fathom why someone with a high IQ would want to date her brother, but there was no

accounting for taste.

“I can make a move on Jake anytime, anywhere,” Hilary said as she washed down the sugar cookies with a frothy, peppermint pink drink. “I don’t need to do it today.”

“But you do need to make the attempt someday, so why not tonight?” Katie argued. “And, Melissa, you wanted to meet someone special. You can’t do that waiting in the shadows. No one will see you!”

“I know,” Melissa said with a sigh and propped her chin on her hand. “It’s just that . . . if he were Mr. Right, he would find me no matter what.”

“Nice fairy tale,” Hilary said, “but anecdotally speaking, it’s not going to happen.”

“I hate to say it, but I agree,” Katie said. Although she would never use the word “anecdotally” like her research librarian friend. “Why else would I wear stiletto boots?” She lifted her leg to show off the five-inch heel. “It’s to be seen, to be noticed. No, it’s to make Ryder’s head snap back and his tongue hang out.”

“How’s that working out for you?” Hilary asked as she brushed the cookie crumbs from her mouth with a napkin.

“Not well.” Katie gave a huff of frustration and leaned back in her chair. “For the past year I have followed every article from every sexy magazine, and what do I have to show for it? Nothing.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Hilary said. “You have a new attitude, a killer wardrobe and plenty of dates.”

“But I don’t have Ryder,” Katie pointed out. That was her mission. Anyone else was a distraction from her main goal.

“Don’t give up,” Melissa insisted, patting Katie’s hand. “You and Ryder were made for each other. He’s always been there for you. Nothing will ever change that.”

“As much as I would like to believe that,” Hilary said, crumpling her napkin, “Katie has basically served herself up on a silver platter and Ryder hasn’t taken a nibble. I think we should take that as a sign and move on.”

Katie shook her head. “No way. I’m not giving up yet. Just wait and see.” She tapped her finger on the table. “This time next year I will be knee-deep in a wild affair with Ryder Scott.”

Melissa and Hilary exchanged glances.

“What?” Katie asked.

“You have made Ryder Scott your New Year’s resolution for the past two years,” Hilary pointed out.

It was true. Two years in a row and she hadn’t even had a kiss from the guy. . . . Ouch. “And I can’t make it for next year.” She tilted her chin up defiantly. “Who am I to break tradition?”

“Katie, maybe you need to cast your net a little wider,” Melissa suggested.

Katie couldn’t believe that Melissa, her love-will-conquer-all friend, had just said that to her. “You just told me that Ryder and I were destined for each other.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean you need to wait around until he wises up,” Melissa said. “Even since your makeover, the men in town have been falling all over you. Why not go for one of them?”

“I’ve tried.” She had purposely dated guys who didn’t remind her of Ryder. That may have been her first mistake. Like Jason, the sexy banker who was the complete opposite of Ryder. Unfortunately, he was more interested in her credit rating than her body. Then there was Brian, the hot young history professor. Brian’s idea of a good time was touring through cemeteries and making tombstone rubbings. “They bored me. But it wasn’t all bad. Those guys must have gotten into a bragging contest because now they all want to date me. I seem to have gotten myself quite the reputation.”

“Deservedly or undeservedly?” Hilary asked with a smile.

“Let’s just say that reports of my bedroom activities were greatly exaggerated.” There had been a couple of times this year when she’d thought she would never achieve her goal of getting Ryder in bed. She decided to “move on” with a man who knew how to treat and please a woman, but in the end, the men she’d dated were just pale imitations of Ryder. “But I’m not wasting my time on those guys. I’m not going to settle for second best.”

“Then you need to be aware of your competition,” Hilary decided. “Take a look over there.”

Katie turned around to where Hilary indicated with the tilt of her head. Her heart lurched with excitement tingling in her blood when she saw Ryder. He was talking to someone she couldn’t see when he leaned back and laughed.

She had to smile in return. Katie loved watching Ryder, especially when his face lit up with pleasure. Who was he talking to? Most likely Jake. She shifted in her seat and her smile dimmed. Ryder was leaning in very closely to a stunning woman of Amazonian proportions.

A dull ache radiated from Katie’s chest as the night’s sparkle suddenly went out. Ryder was with Tatum, his ex, and they were so absorbed in each other they looked as if they existed in an intimate bubble that shielded them from the rest of the world. “That dress Tatum is wearing is very . . .”

“Nonexistent?” Hilary supplied the word. “If you want Ryder, go get him before he gets lost in the cleavage.”

Katie took one look at Tatum’s plunging neckline and regretted wearing a turtleneck sweater. She was writing a letter of complaint to that fashion magazine as soon as she got home. “I can’t compete with that.”

“Yes, you can,” Melissa said fervently. But then, Melissa would say that. Not only did she work with the coaches in the athletic department, but she was a very loyal, and very blind to reality, friend.

“Oh, yeah, right,” Katie said, letting the sarcasm seep into her voice. “After all, what does she have that I don’t?”

“Besides an audacious body and vast sexual experience?” Hilary asked in her no-nonsense way.

Katie sighed. “Thanks.” Hilary could never identify sarcasm. At least Katie could count on her friend to break it down in percentages and PowerPoint presentations, and without a hint of delicacy.

“There has to be something else,” Hilary said, watching Ryder through a narrow gaze. “Those two qualities couldn’t hold Ryder’s interest for long. I could find out if there’s a pattern in his mating habits.”

“Mating?” Melissa groaned. “Please, Hilary, can you just call it dating like everyone else?”

“I could, but it would be inaccurate.”

Katie tuned her friends out as she watched Tatum flirt with Ryder. The woman's sexy look was effortless. It just wasn't fair, Katie decided as she folded her arms across her chest. Compared to Tatum, Katie felt kind of stupid strutting around in an outfit that probably wasn't so sexy after all.

So what if most of the men at this party found Katie attractive? If there ever was a *Who Would You Rather Do?* contest, Tatum would win in a landslide. Why did Katie think she could catch Ryder's attention when he was used to dating the sexiest women around? It didn't matter if she had reinvented herself into the woman she needed to be; she still wasn't in the same league as Tatum.

Katie stared at Ryder and Tatum, hating how the woman could flirt as if she was born to do it. She bet Tatum never had to consult a magazine or expert for tips or tricks. Katie wanted to intervene, but why give Ryder side-by-side comparisons? She longed to escape and head home, but she was driven to watch. What should her next move be?

"Let's go," Hilary said, pushing her chair back.

"No, not yet," Katie said, still watching Ryder. She wasn't going to give up at the first sign of difficulty. "You just have to be patient. Something might happen tonight."

"Katie, have you made a move on him since you walked in?" Hilary asked. "Did you say anything suggestive? Flash a little skin?"

Flash Ryder? Katie smiled. Oh, yeah, that would get a response, but not the kind she would be hoping for. He'd probably throw a blanket over her and tell her she was going to catch a cold.

"There is a time for patience, and there's a time for action," Hilary said. "If you aren't ready to make a move, then why are we here?"

Katie was reluctant to inform Hilary that she had already made her move and it hadn't gone as planned. But that was just a warm-up and not her master stroke. Now all she had to do was work up the nerve to try again. If she really had transformed, she would stop being the mousy, invisible girl in the corner and instead be the brazen woman who went after her fantasies.

But her secret fantasy had Ryder going after *her*. Like a man possessed, a man unable to fight the desire she created in him. She would have to do nothing and he would break into a sweat simply thinking of her.

Men never acted like that with her. They wanted her, but they weren't going to be her sex slave. These days the men noticed and flirted with her, but they were never going to make fools of themselves or make grand, expensive gestures or ruin their lives like they would for Tatum. Maybe Katie should just accept that her dreams about Ryder were too far out of reach.

She should, but she couldn't, Katie realized as she watched Tatum sit her perky little butt on the bar. Ryder wasn't looking too pleased with her. As he stood, hands on hips, glaring at Tatum, several men rushed to help her stand on the bar. It was quite a feat since she was wearing a skintight minidress and strappy heels.

Great, Katie thought with a groan as the rest of the guests turned to see what caused the commotion. Tatum was going to be the center of attention tonight. Was everyone going to be honored by a lame attempt at *Coyote Ugly*? Hilary's idea of leaving was sounding better and better.

"Okay, everyone," Tatum called out, motioning for them to quiet down, "as some of you already

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