



# *Behind Lace Curtains*

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Behind

Lace

Curtains

A Novel

“Thus he will come to see with his spiritual eyes a number of sparks shining through day by day and more and more and growing into such a great light that thereafter all things needful to him will be made known.”

Gerhard Dorn, “*De Speculative Philosophia*,” in Theatrum Chemicum .(Ursek, 1602), Vol. I, p. 275.



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## BEHIND LACE CURTAINS

Of all things real  
    or not,  
of all things that hide  
    behind brick walls,  
or leer at us  
    from behind lace curtains,

the soul is the ultimate hostage.

Walls of substance  
    separate minds  
condemning souls  
    to screaming solitude,  
entombed  
    in prisons  
    of flesh.

Dance.

Dance alone.

# Chapter 1

NEW YORK CITY LOOMED in shades of grey. Across the street, shadow forms hidden under dark coats hustled along the sidewalk, back and forth, like phantoms in a carnival shooting gallery. Sometimes a colorful scarf or hat caught Jacoby Preston's eye, breaking the monochromatic display. But only for a moment. He kept his focus on their eyes, searched for a look of recognition just in case one of *them* had finally come for him.

It was time.

Trudging toward his favorite Chinese restaurant, he hid behind the coarse black wool of his turned-up collar. A bitter wind flashed down the street, scattered discarded handbills and empty cigarette packs. Jake tightened his grip on the envelope of photographs tucked under his arm.

A taxi rocketed around the corner, forcing a crescent of dirty water from a puddle. It lashed Jake's legs and coat, leaving behind a sooty trail. He frowned, kept his head down, and continued toward his meeting with Fred.

The neon glow from the sign above the China Flower Restaurant crept into Jake's line of vision and lured him into a haven of red and black. A blood-red smile painted across the ashen face of an Asian waitress greeted him. She bowed and led him to a black-lacquered table in a far corner of the dining room. Fred waited for him behind an undulating whisper of steam that snaked out of a pot of green tea.

"Jake, been playing in the street?" Fred forced a stilted laugh and poured two cups of tea.

Jake placed the envelope on the table and removed his coat. He shook some of the splatters of soot from his coat, then carefully

draped it over the back of his chair and sat. The two parallel lines between Fred's olive green eyes drew together as he pulled at his wiry mustache. Something was wrong. Jake held the hot cup of tea in his hands and savored its warmth.

"So, what's up, Fred? What do you have for me?" He tasted his tea.

"The job in Louisiana—the wildlife assignment. They still want you. Big bucks."

"The answer is still no."

"But they upped the ante again."

"Forget it. Just the thought of it gives me the creeps." He shuddered, finished his tea, and poured himself another cup. "Mud and swamps and snakes. I'd probably end up as alligator bait."

He heard a whisper of silk behind him. The waitress appeared, a long scarlet tassel hanging from her raven hair gently teased the side of her face and trickled down her neck. Meandering with every subtle movement of her head, the red silken streams mesmerized Jake.

"Jake!" Fred tore Jake's attention from the animated slash of red. "Let's order."

As they waited for their food, Fred examined the photos. "Great vision. Your work is better than ever."

"Thanks. So why the hell are we here on a day like this, anyway? I could have had the photos delivered."

Fred fussed with his silverware, scattering tinkling, metallic notes into the half-lit atmosphere.

"Okay. Spit it out," Jake said.

"What the hell is going on with you, Jake? The way you have been acting lately. No, since you came back from that trip upstate."

It was all Jake could do to draw a breath. Relax. Fred has no idea what happened upstate. Relax.

"Hey. I've been working my ass off," Jake said. "Are you trying to tell me I'm losing my edge or something?"

"Don't get me wrong, Jake. It's not your work. It's your attitude. You've become so remote. You're missing deadlines. You don't even answer your messages."

## *Behind Lace Curtains*

"I told you. I've been working my ass off. Isn't that good enough anymore?"

"I spend half my time doing damage control for your screw-ups. Damn it, Jake." Fred slammed his palm on the table, evoking jingle-jangle sounds from the silverware and glasses. He cast furtive glances at couples dining nearby. Two women at the next table stared at him. His face reddened. With a lowered voice he said, "You wouldn't even leave your darkroom to speak with me when I brought a client over last week. What's wrong?"

"Don't worry about it."

"What the hell do you mean? Your career is on the line here!"

Jake rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry. I know I'm acting like a jerk. But there is nothing you can do. He fingered the envelope of photos. It's personal."

A waiter brought their orders. Jake tried to avoid conversation by focusing on his plate.

"Rachel?" Fred's voice softened. "Is it Rachel? I figured you had it made when she moved in. I thought, this time, you two would be able to make it. Is she—?"

"No. She's perfect. We never argue. She's always there for me, but...it's like there's something missing."

"But—"

Jake rubbed his forehead in despair. "Didn't you ever wake in the night, hungry, not to fill your stomach, but to feed your heart, or your brain...no, your soul?"

Fred stopped blotting his lips with his napkin and shrugged.

"There's more."

"More? More what?" Fred threw down his napkin. "This is bullshit. You're forty years old. Did you ever stop to think that's all there is? That maybe it just doesn't get any better?"

"After what happened upstate, I know. It's—"

"How can I understand when you won't tell me what happened?"

How could he tell Fred about something he wanted to forget? He had to get Fred off that subject.

"It's my photography, too." Jake leaned forward and lowered his voice. "When I'm in the darkroom developing a print, I stand there and watch the images appear. I wait for something

more than trees, birds, or people.” Jake knew it was useless, but he would try to explain, one more time. “It’s like the camera should be able to capture some sort of magic I can’t quite see, something—”

“Everyone who sees your photography sees magic. Why can’t you?” Fred sighed and shook his head.

“I don’t know. It was always this way.” He shrugged. “But it, the magic, is calling to me.” Jake’s voice went hoarse. “Right now. I can almost hear the whispers. I have to be free to go after the secret.”

“It? Secret?” Fred stared at Jake as if he were trying to read his mind. “What are you going to do?”

“New York isn’t cutting it for me anymore.” He forced himself to sound firm, so Fred would know he was serious. “Maybe I’ll go back to Alaska. I felt something there.”

“Did you tell Rachel?”

Jake looked down at his empty cup. “I don’t have to. She already knows. I can see it in her eyes.”

“You’re not thinking of leaving Rachel behind. Not again.”

“I love her to death. But I have to figure this out alone. Besides, she deserves better than me. I’m only hurting her.”

“You need to talk to her about all this. She loves you.”

“There is nothing left to talk about.”

The diminutive waitress placed a bowl of fortune cookies on the table. Fred reached for one, cracked it open. “I’m going to meet a mysterious stranger. That’s a pretty safe bet.” He tossed the strip of paper in an ashtray. “What’s yours say?”

“I’ll pass. I already know what has to happen tonight. I have to get things straight with Rachel.”

They rose and grabbed their coats.

Fred placed his hand on Jake’s shoulder. “I’m really sorry. Call if you need me.”

Jake felt a tickling at the back of his neck. He looked over his shoulder to see the waitress smiling at him from across the room. Her tiny hand slowly waved good-by, fingers fanned wide apart and punctuated by long, red-lacquered nails. Jake turned away and pushed himself through the door.

Fred looked up at the sky, swore, and hurried down the street. Jake watched him fade into the darkness.

## *Behind Lace Curtains*

Falling snow sparkled in the air like scattered shards of broken mirrors. They looked alive. Trembling, they fell gently to the ground and left a clean, white shroud. The neon lights above Jake's head cast mottled patterns on the glimmering flakes that tumbled down from the sky. He reached to grab a few of the kaleidoscopic bits, but when he examined what he had captured, he closed his eyes and bowed his head. Instead of multicolored segments of broken butterflies, he held only melting winter.

He had to get it over with.

The walk home was long, but Jake did not mind. He was not ready to see Rachel yet. He sat on a bench at the bus stop across the street from his building and stared at the weathered brick structures that flanked his home. They grew straight up out of the sidewalk, dull, gray, like the winter sky had been that day, every day. His feet tingled with cold. His hair was wet. Pale flakes littered his lap.

It was time.

Jake rose from the bench and slowly wove his way across the street. He fumbled with the lock on the iron gate between the pavement and his private world. The key would not turn. He struggled until his fingers were numb, but the lock was jammed. He grabbed the black bars, rattled them. The gate squealed open and hit his chest. Jake stumbled backward.

It was not locked.

He turned the knob on the inner door. The second barrier opened effortlessly. He would have to warn Rachel again about locking up.

Jake climbed the flight of stairs to the landing, his soaked shoes exuding squishy sounds, his sodden coat slapping against his trembling legs. He turned the corner and continued up the last of the stairs to his loft, then stopped outside his office. A frail keening sound called to him through the space under the door. He strained to hear it. What could make that sound?

He pushed on the door. It was not locked. It should have been. It swung slowly open into his office, the hinges imitating the wailing sound that trailed from within. His heart hitched between beats.

Why was it so dark?

Even if Rachel had gone to bed, she would have left a light on for him. Jake reached for the wall switch, hesitated, and let his hand fall, deciding on darkness, on silence. He was good in the dark. He could find his way past his darkrooms without bumping into anything. He was used to operating in the dark. Color printing had taught him that, but this was somehow different. He held his breath and shuffled down the ebony hall to the bedroom.

A screech escaped from under his right foot. He gasped and jerked. A damn dog toy. When his heart stopped jumping, he swore silently and resumed his furtive journey, following the muffled, hollow wailing until he could tell it was coming from the bathroom on the other side of the bedroom. A jagged slit of light crawled out from under the bathroom door along with the pathetic lamentation. He could put it off no longer. Sliding his hand along the wall, Jake searched for the light switch.

Click.

An automatic reflex slammed his eyes shut. On his inner lids he saw a repeating image, like a red Jackson Pollock fan. He blinked. There it was, on the wall over the headboard of his disheveled bed. The fan painting. No canvas. No frame. Just a red splatter design. The lustrous red paint trickled down the wall.

Jake hurled himself into the white-tiled bathroom. More scarlet fans adorned the walls. Nikki, Rachel's little Yorkshire Terrier huddled next to a crumpled form on the red and white floor. Her golden head thrown back, Nikki howled to the ceiling light.

"Rachel!"

Jake dropped to the floor and wrapped his arms around his lover. No heartbeat answered his as he held her against his chest.

## Chapter 2

JAKE COMPOSED HIMSELF enough to call the police; then he stood in his office, with his face against the cold glass of the front window. He trembled in the darkness and waited for sirens to shriek up at him from the street, for flashing lights to send colored beacons cutting through the falling snow. He listened to the footsteps echo in the outer hall and cringed as flashlights raked lightning across his face. The officers found the light switch and drowned the room in reality.

Jake raised one arm and pointed to the back of his flat. A big man in a black coat ordered one of the uniformed men to stay with Jake as he led the other two toward the back of the apartment. No sooner had their footsteps stopped, when the sound of snarling and barking was followed by a baritone curse. Jake wiped tears from his face and tried to get to Nikki before she could be charged with assaulting an officer, but his guard kept him confined to his spot by the window. The big man in the black coat returned to the front office, holding Nikki by the scruff of her neck. He looked Jake up and down, his eyes lingering on the bloodstains that covered his jacket and said, "Is this yours?"

Jake nodded. The big man handed the dangling dog to him. Barely noticing the crimson flecks that infested her golden hair, Jake cuddled Nikki and sat down on the black leather couch by the door. "I'm sorry I forgot you, Nikki...I'm sorry."

Jake and Nikki sat quietly and waited as men in white wheeled a stretcher into the bathroom. The next hour was a blur of flashbulbs, phone calls, and guarded looks. When the action died down, the tall man returned. A wreath of frizzy black hair encircled his head. He patted his right coat pocket and let his hand linger on a rectangular object. Then he reached into his

left pocket and pulled out a crumpled handkerchief. He wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead, and then blew his bulbous nose.

“You Jacoby Preston?”

“Jake—Jake Preston.

“Whatever. I’m Detective Rosselli. I know you’ve been through a rough time here, but it would be a good idea if you would come to the station with me. We need to talk about what happened. Besides, my men have more work to do here. We’d only be in the way. But before we leave, my men are gonna need that coat you’re wearing.”

Jake looked down at the coat—it was embellished with blood. His stomach turned. It was covered with blood—Rachel’s blood. He put Nikki down on the couch and removed his coat. The detective grabbed a long jacket from the tree stand next to the door and handed it to Jake. As he slipped on the clean jacket, an officer inserted the bloody coat into a bag, then bent to snip hairs off Nikki’s muzzle and topknot.

“What the—”

Detective Rosselli held up a hand to Jake. “Just doing his job.”

Rosselli led Jake down to the street. Once outside, Jake tucked Nikki beneath his jacket, ducked under the flashing lights, and stumbled into the waiting black-and-white.

\* \* \*

The squad car fishtailed to a shaky stop in front of the police station. Jake slipped on the ice as he climbed the glazed steps leading up to the double doors that concealed the inner workings of that particular outpost of the New York City Police Department from the darkness of the city streets. Two uniformed men, who had followed in a second car, flung the doors open and stood aside as Rosselli ushered Jake into to the building.

A harsh flash of fluorescent light rebuked Jake as he crossed the threshold. He wiped away more tears and squinted until his eyes became accustomed to the invasive glare. Ringing phones, garbled voices, clacking heels, and the ever-present boom box melded together to form an aural tableau of New York City life, a jangling symphony of extremes.

## *Behind Lace Curtains*

Jake's eyes adjusted to the overexposed scenario just in time to see a shouting match between a Latin couple erupt into violence when the wife, or girlfriend, whacked her partner's head with her purse, sending the contents of the satchel clattering across the polished floor. Rosselli motioned for Jake to stay put and rushed across the room to join the efforts to separate the sparring couple.

Through the din, Jake became aware of muffled sobbing. He dried his eyes and turned toward the sound that echoed his own feelings. On a nearby wooden bench sat a young boy dressed in ragged, oversized clothing. In between sniffs, the child wiped his nose with the back of a tattered sleeve. His immense, brown eyes looked up at Jake. With a wiggle and a woof, Nikki woke and stuck her head out from her hiding place near Jake's heart. Instantly, the boy's expression brightened, and he giggled. Jake walked over to the boy and sat next to him.

Jake said, "Want to say hello to the puppy?"

The boy reached out a mittened hand and patted Nikki's head, flattening her already disheveled, red bow.

"Hey, kid, didn't your mama never tell you not to talk to strangers?"

Jake turned toward the source of the wisecrack. Smiling at him from a corner of the room, sat a garishly made-up woman in a mini skirt and black fishnet stockings. As she swung her crossed leg lazily, a hole in the netting over her knee opened and closed like a sleepy eye. Before Jake could counter her remark, Detective Rosselli motioned for him to follow. As he left the room, Jake glanced back at the woman. She licked her ruby lips and winked at him. Jake shivered.

Jake followed Rosselli to the end of a long hallway lined with closed doors that muffled mumbles, yells, and laughter. The detective opened the door to his office, stood aside, and motioned for Jake to enter. Rosselli followed Jake into the dark room and pulled a cord attached to a hanging light. The bulb flashed on and swung back and forth, sending beams of light to search out every corner of the small, dreary room. The detective sat behind his desk and lit a cigarette.

Jake sat on a wooden chair in front of the desk and placed Nikki on the chair next to him. Before he could unbutton his

jacket, Nikki jumped the gap between the two chairs and plopped onto Jake's lap, then shivered until he took her into his arms.

"So, J—Mr. Preston, why don't you tell me what happened at your place tonight. How you got all that blood on you."

Rosselli took a long drag on his cigarette and slowly blew the smoke straight in Jake's direction. Jake waited for the grey mist to clear before he answered.

"Aren't you supposed to read me my rights?"

"Mr. Preston, you're confused. That's only if we're taking information that might be used against someone. Right now, I'm just trying to get a picture of what happened. You're not a suspect or anything." He took another long drag. Letting the smoke escape in spurts as he spoke, Rosselli continued. "You don't have anything to hide, do you?"

"No! Of course not." Jake pulled his coat tighter around Nikki—around himself.

"So, what happened?"

"How should I know? I wasn't there—I spent the evening dining with my agent, Fred Adams. Then I went home and found...I saw just what you saw. I—I held her for a while. That's how the blood—"

"What time did you get home?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I don't know—that's all! Time was the last thing on my mind when I got home!" As Jake's voice rose with anger, his body followed. He stood, leaning over Rosselli's desk and yelled, "I just found my girlfriend with her throat cut! What does time have to do with anything?"

Unruffled by Jake's loss of control, Rosselli took a drag from his cigarette and continued. "How long were you home before you decided to call us?"

"I don't know—a few minutes—I guess. I told you, I held her for a while." Jake returned to his chair, slouched down, and rubbed Nikki's ears. "Five or ten minutes."

"I see." Rosselli reached over his belly, picked up a pencil and scratched a few notes on a yellow pad. He looked back up at Jake. "How many people do you let use your bathroom? Clients? Strangers?"

## *Behind Lace Curtains*

“I don’t see what—nobody. Myself, my assistant, Jerry. Fred, once in a while...and Rachel.”

“If you think of anyone else who may have been in there, let me know.”

“Why?”

“Make it easier for us to sort prints.”

“Sure.”

“And we’ll need to print you.”

“Sure. Of course. Whatever you need to catch—”

“Can you think of anyone who could’ve wanted to hurt Miss Foster?”

Jake’s heart skipped a beat, then tried to make up for it by thumping a little harder for the next few seconds. He forced himself to speak. “No, nobody. She never hurt a fly. Never hurt a fly.” Jake closed his eyes.

“Are you okay, Mr. Preston?” Rosselli scrutinized Jake. “You look a little—queasy.”

“I’m fine.”

“How were you two getting along, you and Miss Foster?”

“Fine...I thought you said I wasn’t a suspect.”

“Right.” Rosselli groaned as he leaned down to pull a Manhattan directory out of a cardboard box on the floor. “Why don’t you go across the hall and wait while I contact your agent, have him come in just to confirm your whereabouts this evening. After that,” he shrugged, “you’ll be free to go.”

Rosselli led Jake across the hall to another small, colorless room with one rectangular table in the center of the scuffed tile floor and a large mirror on the wall.

“Mind if I send one of my men in to fingerprint you, just to speed things up?”

“Do what you have to do.”

\* \* \*

After the officer collected his print kit and left, Jake walked over to a smudged mirror and wondered what hid behind it. Was it backed by a blank wall, or a silent watcher who waited patiently for Jake to perform some act guaranteed to finger him as guilty of murder? Only his own reflection peered back at him from the filthy glass. His thick black hair was still wet and plastered to his head.

He wiped his tainted fingertips on his coat. Seeing no answers in his red-rimmed eyes, he turned away from the suspicious mirror and moved to stand in front of the room's only window.

The light escaping through the window barely illuminated the narrow, dead-end airshaft that loomed outside. He pressed his face against the glass and strained to see if he could spot any stars in the sky above, but the height of the shaft blocked any possible visions other than those of crumbling bricks and his own distorted reflections bouncing back from other windows. Not a single snowflake dared travel the long shaft on a quest to bring him a spark of color. His black-brown eyes seemed sunken, giving his likeness a skull-like appearance.

Nikki shuddered in Jake's arms. He looked down and cuddled her closer. As he smoothed her tangled hair, he realized the scarlet specks on the side of her golden head were blood. Rachel's blood. He dropped into a chair, leaned his head on the table and closed his eyes, tried to erase memories of Rachel in her favorite pink nightie—on the bathroom floor—blood everywhere.

\* \* \*

Rosselli burst into the room, and Jake jerked awake. His face creased from resting on his arm, Jake turned to Rosselli.

"Mr. Preston, I'm a little confused here. Your agent says you left the restaurant at approximately nine o'clock. You called us at exactly eleven fifty-six. I seem to remember you saying you called us five or ten minutes after you got home."

"Right. Whatever you say," Jake said.

"Well, what went on in those almost three hours between when you left the restaurant—and when you called us?"

"Nothing. I walked home and sat outside on a bench for awhile."

"Explain to me why I should believe you walked home in this kinda' weather when you could've caught a cab?" Rosselli raised one bushy eyebrow. "And then, you sat on a bench. In the rain?"

"I don't have to explain anything to you. I'm not a suspect, remember?"

"Hey, it would be real good if you would cooperate here. I'm just doin' my job. Adams mentioned something about you and Miss Foster breaking up. Sound familiar to you?"

## *Behind Lace Curtains*

“I don’t think I’ll be answering any more questions tonight, at least not until I speak with my attorney.”

“Okay, Mr. Preston. Have it your way, but I suggest you don’t make any plans to leave the city without checking with me first.”

“Can I go now?”

Rosselli nodded. Jake brushed past him and left the room.

“Preston!”

Halfway down the hall, Jake heard the detective call to him. “By the way, where did you learn to speak French?”

“French?” Jake turned in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about now? I don’t know any French.”

“Never mind,” Rosselli said. Jake continued his determined departure without looking back.

\* \* \*

When Jake left the station, he spotted Fred standing out front, trying to attract the attention of a cab. He walked up behind his friend and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You know they never stop when it’s raining or snowing.” Fred whirled around.

“Jake, you’re out. I thought they were keeping you.” Fred wrapped Jake in his arms. They held each other tightly and wept.

“I’m so sorry about Rachel. I don’t know what else to say. Besides, I’m afraid I’ve already said too much. They kept at me and—”

“It’s okay.”

“I didn’t know what was going on. I thought something had happened to *you*. They didn’t tell me about Rachel until I started freaking out.”

“Fred, it’s okay. I do not have anything to hide. I wouldn’t ask you to lie for me anyway.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“No. I just want to go home.”

“Jake, don’t do that. Come stay at my place. I know Wendy would love it. You shouldn’t be alone tonight.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t be alone. I have Nikki. I need to go home. I’m beat. Besides, Nikki has to have her regular chow. Thanks anyway.”

“Okay, Jake, but if you change your mind, or need anything, just call or come over. We’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Fred. But I really need to be alone. I have some things I need to work out.”

A cab stopped in front of them. Fred opened the door and climbed in. “Jake, c’mon, get in. Come with me.”

“No, I’ll walk over to the corner and flag another. After all, we *are* going in different directions.”

Fred shook his head and slammed the door as his cab splashed off into the night.

Jake waded through the slush as he made his way to the corner where he was lucky to flag down a cab. It was late and traffic was sparse, so the ride to his loft was far too quick. He dreaded the thought of going home, but he had to find out. The police wouldn’t know what to look for. They wouldn’t know about *them*—wouldn’t believe if he told them. Nobody who hadn’t experienced what he did, upstate, right after Keith’s death, could possibly understand. Jake paid the driver and started to climb out. With his hands still on the door handle, he noticed the yellow plastic ribbon draped across his iron gate—the yellow ribbon that announced, “POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS.” A policeman stood nearby, shivering in the cold.

“Hey, Rockefeller,” the cabby shouted, “you gonna close the fuck’n door? We gotta pay to heat this thing.”

Jake climbed back into the cab. “Take me to a hotel.”

“Which one?”

“Any one. The closest one.”

“Okay, I don’t give a shit. It’s your money.”

The cab pulled away from the curb and splashed back into traffic.

“She never hurt a fly,” Jake whispered.



Jake Preston, successful New York photographer, had spent his life searching for something more, a magic he could never quite perceive—yet he always hid behind his camera, always let the lens see for him. Like so many of us, he hungered for a revelation, an epiphany, but was terrified at the prospect of finding one . . . until he returned home to discover his lover's body, dead on his blood-spattered bathroom floor, and on a mirror, a Cajun French message scrawled in fresh blood, the words merging with his reflection like sordid war paint.

Even though he cannot translate the scarlet message, he is sure he knows what it means. The murder is his fault—blood for blood.

With unblinking eyes, Jake smears the haunting words into a meaningless blur of red, and then with scarlet-stained fingers transcribes the message onto his flesh, transferring the bloodguilt onto his soul, completing the ritual by painting his face with a glistening mask of red. He knows what he has to do.

Believing he is on a quest for revenge, Jake rushes to New Orleans, a maelstrom of color, disguise, and depravity. Stranded alone in a city where nothing is as it appears, Jake's quest manifests into a supernatural battle between good and evil that leads him across Louisiana, spellbound by the magic and mystery of one of the most unique and mysterious cultural regions in existence.

**Be there for the unmasking.**

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