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THE RAWHIDE MAN

DIANA PALMER

THE MEN OF MEDICINE RIDGE



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THE WEDDING IN WHITE

Chapter 1

“I’ll never get married!” Vivian wailed. “He won’t let me have Whit here at all. I only wanted him to come for supper, and now I have to call him and say it’s off! Mack’s just hateful!”

“There, there,” Natalie Brock soothed, hugging the younger girl. “He’s not hateful. He just doesn’t understand how you feel about Whit. And you have to remember, he’s been totally responsible for you since you were fifteen.”

“But he’s my brother, not my father,” came the sniffling reply. Vivian dashed tears off on the back of her hand. “I’m twenty-two,” she added in a plaintive tone. “He can’t tell me what to do anymore, anyway!”

“He can, on Medicine Ridge Ranch,” Natalie reminded her wryly. Medicine Ridge Ranch was the largest spread in this part of Montana—even the town was named after it. “He’s the big boss.”

“Humph!” Vivian dabbed at her red eyes with a handkerchief. “Only because Daddy left it to him.”

“That isn’t quite true,” came the amused rejoinder. “Your father left him a ranch that was almost bankrupt, on land the bank was trying to repossess.” She waved her hand around the expensive Victorian furnishings of the living room. “All this came from his hard work, not a will.”

“And so whatever McKinzey Donald Killain wants, he gets,” Vivian raged.

It was odd to hear him called by his complete name. For years, everyone around Medicine Ridge, Montana, which had grown up around the Killain ranch, had called him Mack. It was an abbreviation of his first name, which few of his childhood friends could pronounce.

“He only wants you to be happy,” Natalie said softly, kissing the flushed cheek of the blond girl. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“Would you?” Bright blue eyes looked up hopefully.

“I will.”

“You’re just the nicest friend anybody ever had, Nat,” Vivian said fervently. “Nobody else around here has the guts to say anything to him,” she added.

“Bob and Charles don’t feel comfortable telling him what to do.” Natalie defended the younger brothers of the household. Mack had been responsible for all three of his siblings from his early twenties. He was twenty-eight now, crusty and impatient, a real hell-raiser whom most people found intimidating. Natalie had teased him and picked at him from her teens, and she still did. She adored him, despite his fiery temper and legendary impatience. A lot of that ill humor came from having one eye, and she knew it.

Soon after the accident that could as easily have killed him as blinded him, she told him that the rakish patch over his left eye made him look like a sexy pirate. He'd told her to go home and mind her own damned business. She ignored him and continued to help Vivian nurse him, even when he'd come home from the hospital. That hadn't been easy. Natalie was a senior in high school at the time. She'd just gone from the orphanage where she'd spent most of her life to her maiden aunt's house the year before the accident occurred. Her aunt, old Mrs. Barnes, didn't approve of Mack Killain, although she respected him. Natalie had had to beg to get her aunt to drive her first to the hospital and then to the Killain ranch every day to look after Mack. Her aunt had felt it was Vivian's job—not Natalie's—but Vivian couldn't do a thing with her elder brother. Left alone, Mack would have been out on the northern border with his men helping to brand calves.

At first, the doctors feared that he'd lost the sight in both eyes. But later, it had become evident that the right one still functioned. During that time of uncertainty, Natalie had attached herself to him and refused to go away, teasing him when he became despondent, cheering him up when he wanted to quit. She wouldn't let him give up, and soon there had been visible progress in his recovery.

Of course, he'd tossed her out the minute he was back on his feet, and she hadn't protested. She knew him right down to his bones, and he realized it and resented it. He didn't want her for a friend and made it obvious. She didn't push. As an orphan, she was used to rejection. Her aunt hadn't taken her in until the dignified lady was diagnosed with heart failure and needed someone to take care of her. Natalie had gone willingly, not only because she was tired of the orphanage, but also because her aunt lived on Killain's southern border. Natalie visited her new friend Vivian most every day after that. It wasn't until her aunt had died unexpectedly and left her a sizeable nest egg that she'd been able to put herself through college and keep up the payments on the little house she and her aunt had occupied together.

She lived frugally, and she'd managed all by herself. The money was almost gone now, but she'd made good grades and she had the promise of a teaching position at the local elementary school when she graduated. Life at the age of twenty-two looked much better than life at age six, when a grieving child had been taken from her family home and placed in the orphanage after a fire had killed both her parents. Like Mack, she'd had her share of tragedy and grief.

But teaching was wonderful. She loved first graders, so open and loving and curious. That was going to be her future. She and Dave Markham, a sixth-grade teacher at the school, had been dating for several weeks. No one knew that they were more friends than a romantic couple. Dave was sweet on the clerk at the local insurance agency, who was mooning over one of the men she worked with. Natalie wasn't interested in marriage anytime soon. Her only taste of love had been a crush on an older teenager when she was in her senior year. He'd just started noticing her when he was killed in a wreck while driving home from an out-of-town weekend fishing trip with his cousin. Losing her parents, then the one love of her short life, had taught her the danger of loving. She wanted to be safe. She wanted to be alone.

Besides that, she was far too fastidious for the impulsive leap-into-bed relationships that seemed the goal of many modern young women. She had no interest in falling in love, or in a purely physical affair. So until Dave came along, she hadn't dated at all. Well, that wasn't quite true, she conceded.

There was the dance she'd coaxed Mack into taking her to, but he'd been far older than the boys at the local community college who had attended. Nevertheless, he'd made Natalie the belle of the ball.

just by escorting her. Mack was a dish, by anybody's standards, even if he did lack social graces. By the time they left, he'd put more backs up than a debating team. She hadn't asked him to take her anywhere else, though. He seemed to dislike everybody these days. Especially Natalie.

Natalie hadn't really minded his abrasive company. She admired his penchant for telling the truth even when it wasn't welcome, and for saying what he thought, not what was socially acceptable. She tended to speak her own mind, too. She'd learned that from Mack. He'd forced her to fight back soon after she became friends with his sister. He put her back up and kept it up, refusing to let her rush off and cry. He taught her to stand her ground, to have the courage of her convictions. He made her strong enough to bear up under almost anything.

She remembered that they had an argument the night she'd coaxed him to the dance. He'd left her at her front door with one poisonous remark too many, his black eye narrow and no smile to ease the hard, lean contours of his face. There was too much between them to let a disagreement keep them apart, though.

Mack looked much older than twenty-eight. He'd had so much responsibility on his broad shoulders that he'd been robbed of a real childhood. His mother had died young, and his father had succumbed to drink, and then became abusive to the kids. Mack had stood up to him, many times taking blows meant for the other three. In the end, their father had suffered a stroke and been placed in a nursing home while Mack kept the younger Killains together and supported them by working as a mechanic in town. When Mack was twenty-one, his father had died, leaving Mack with three teenagers to raise.

Meanwhile, he'd invested carefully, bought good stock and started breeding his own strain of Red Angus. He was successful at everything he touched. His only run of real bad luck had been when he'd been thrown from his horse in the pasture with a big Angus bull. When the bull had charged him and he'd tried to catch it by the horns to save himself, he'd been gored in the face. He'd lost his sight, but fortunately only in one eye. The rest of him was still pure, splendid male, and women found him very appealing physically. He was every woman's secret desire, until he opened his mouth. His lack of diplomacy kept him single.

Natalie left Vivian crying in the living room and went to find Mack. He was on one knee in a stall on the cobblestones of the spacious, clean barn, ruffling the fur of one of his border collies. He was a kind man, for the most part, and he did love animals. Every stray in Baker County made a beeline for the Killain place, and there were always furry friends around to pet. The border collies were working dogs, of course, and used to help herd cattle on the vast plains. But Mack adored them, and it was mutual.

Natalie leaned against the doorway of the barn with her arms folded and smiled at the picture he'd made with the pup.

As if he sensed her presence, his head rose. She couldn't see his eyes under the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat, but she knew he was probably glaring at her. He didn't like letting people see how very human he was.

"Slumming, Miss Educator?" he drawled, rising gracefully to his feet.

She only smiled, used to his remarks. "Seeing how the other half lives, Mr. Cattle Rancher," she shot back. "~~Vivian says you won't let the love of her life through the front door.~~"

"So what are you, a virgin sacrifice to appease me?" he asked, approaching her with that quick, menacing stride that made her heart jump.

"You aren't supposed to know that I'm a virgin," she pointed out when he stopped just an arm's length away.

He let out a nasty word and smiled mockingly, waiting to see what she'd say.

She ignored the bad language, refusing to rise to the bait. She grinned at him instead.

That disconcerted him, apparently. He pushed his hat over his jet black hair and stared at her. He had Lakota blood two generations back. He could speak that language as fluently as French and German. He took classes from far-flung colleges on the Internet. He was a great student; everything fascinated him.

His bold gaze roamed down her slender body in the neat, fairly loose jeans and soft yellow V-neck sweater she wore. She had short dark hair, very wavy, and emerald green eyes. She wasn't pretty but her eyes and her soft bow mouth were. Her figure drew far more attention than she was comfortable with, especially from Mack.

"Viv's would-be boyfriend got the Henry girl pregnant last year," he said abruptly.

Her gasp made his eye narrow.

"You didn't have a clue, did you?" he mused. "You and Viv are just alike."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Pitiful taste in men," he added.

She gave him a look of mock indignation. "And I was just going to say how very sexy you were."

"Pull the other one," he said with amazing coldness.

Her eyebrows arched. "My, we're touchy today!"

He glared at her. "What do you want? If it's an invitation to supper for Viv's heartthrob, he can't come unless you do."

That surprised her. He usually couldn't wait to shoo her off the place. "Three's a crowd?" she murmured dryly.

"Four. I live here," he pointed out. He frowned. "More than four," he continued. "Vivian, Bob and Charles and me. You and the would-be Romeo make six."

"That's splitting hairs," she pointed out. "You're suggesting that I come over to make the

numbers even, of course,” she chided.

His face didn't betray any emotion at all. “Wear a dress.”

That really surprised her. “Listen, you aren't planning any pagan sacrificial rites at a volcano?” she asked, rubbing in the virgin sacrifice notion.

“Something low-cut,” he persisted, his gaze narrow and faintly sensual on her pert breasts under the sweater.

“Stop staring at my breasts!” she burst out indignantly, crossing her arms over them.

“Wear a bra,” he returned imperturbably.

Her face flamed. “I am wearing a bra!”

His black eye twinkled. “Wear a thicker bra.”

She glared at him. “I don't know what's gotten into you!”

He lifted an eyebrow and his eye slid down her body appraisingly. “Lust,” he said matter-of-factly. “I haven't had sex for so long, I'm not even sure I remember how.”

She couldn't handle a remark like that. They shared such intimate memories for two old sparring partners. She couldn't fence with him verbally when he let his voice drop like that, an octave lower than normal. It was so sensuous that it made her knees weak. So was the memory of that one unforgettable night they'd shared. Warning signals shot to her brain.

He sighed theatrically when her cheeks turned pink. “So much for all that sophistication you pretend to have,” he mused.

She cleared her throat. “I wish you wouldn't say things like that to me,” she said worriedly.

“Maybe I shouldn't,” he conceded. His hand went out and pushed a strand of hair behind her small ear. She jerked at his touch, and he moved a step closer. “I'd never hurt you, Natalie,” he said quietly.

She managed a nervous smile. “I'd like that in writing,” she said, trying to move away without making it look as if she was intimidated, even though she was.

The barn door was at her back, though, and there was no way to escape. He knew that. She could see it on his face as he slid one long arm beside her head and rested his hand by her ear.

Her heart jumped into her throat. She looked at him with all her darkest fears reflecting in her emerald eyes.

He searched them without speaking for a long moment. “Carl would never have made you happy,” he said suddenly. “His people had money. They wouldn't have let him marry an orphan with no assets.”

Her eyes darkened with pain. “You don’t know that.”

“I *do* know that,” he returned sharply. “They said as much at the funeral, when someone mentioned how devastated you were. You couldn’t even go to the funeral.”

She remembered that. She remembered, too, that Mack had come looking for her in her aunt’s home the night Carl had died. Her aunt was out of town shopping over the weekend, and she’d been alone. Mack found her in a very sexy pink satin gown and robe, crying her eyes out. He’d picked her up, carried her to the old easy chair by the bed, and he’d held her in his lap until she couldn’t cry anymore. After a close call that still made her knees weak, even in memory, he’d stayed with her that whole long, anguished night, sitting in the chair beside the bed, watching her sleep. It was a mark of the respect he commanded in the community that even Natalie’s aunt hadn’t said a word about his presence there when she found out about it on her return. Natalie inspired defense in the strangest quarters. Her tenderness made even the toughest people oddly vulnerable around her.

“You held me,” she recalled softly.

“Yes.” His face seemed to tauten as he looked at her. “I held you.”

She felt him so close that it was like being lifted and carried away. Little twinges of pleasure shined through her when she met his searching gaze. The sensation was so intense as they looked at each other, she could almost feel his bare chest against hers. Five years had passed since that night, but it seemed like yesterday. It was like stepping into space.

“And when I lost my sight,” he continued, “you held me.”

She bit her lower lip hard to stop it from trembling. “I wasn’t the only one who tried to nurse you,” she recalled.

“Vivian cried when I snapped at her, and the boys hid under their beds. You didn’t. You snapped right back. You made me want to go on living.”

She lowered her eyes to his chest. He had the build of a rodeo cowboy, broad-shouldered and lean-hipped. His checked shirt was open at the neck, and she saw the thick, curling hair that covered him from his chest to his belt. He wasn’t a hairy man, but he was devastating without a shirt. She’d seen him like that more often than she was comfortable remembering. He was beautiful under his clothing, like a sculpture she’d seen in pictures of museum exhibits. She even knew how he felt, there where the hair was thick over his breastbone....

“You were kind to me when Carl died,” she returned.

There was a new tension between them after she spoke. She sensed a steely anger in him.

“Since we’re on the subject of your poor taste in men, what do you see in that Markham man?” he asked curtly. “He’s as prissy as someone’s maiden aunt, and in a stand-up fight, he’d go out in seconds.”

She lifted her face. “Dave’s my friend,” she said shortly. “And certainly he’s no worse than that refugee from the witch trials that you go around with!”

~~His firm lips pursed. “Glenna’s not a witch.”~~

“She’s not a saint, either,” she assured him. “And if you’re going without sex, I can guarantee it’s not *her* fault!” she added without thinking. But once the words left her stupid mouth, and she saw the unholy light in the eye that wasn’t covered by the black eye patch, she could have bitten her tongue in two.

“Will you two keep your voices down?” young Bob Killain groaned, as he peered around the barn door to stare at them. “If Sadie Marshall hears you all the way in the kitchen, she’ll tell everybody in her Sunday school class that you two are living in sin out here!” he exclaimed, naming the Killain housekeeper.

Natalie looked at him indignantly, both hands on her slender hips. “It’s Glenna you’d better worry about, if he gets involved with her!” she assured Mack’s youngest brother, a redhead. “Her name is written in so many phone booths, she could qualify as a tourist attraction!”

Mack tried not to laugh, but he couldn’t help himself. He pulled his hat across his eyes at a slam and turned into the barn. “Oh, hell, I’m going to work. Haven’t you got something to do?” he asked his brother.

Bob cleared his throat and tried desperately not to laugh, either. “I’m just going over to Mary Burns’s house to help her with her trigonometry.”

“Carry protection,” Mack’s droll voice came back to him.

Bob turned as red as his hair. “Well, we don’t all stand around talking about sex all day!” he muttered.

“No,” Natalie agreed facetiously. She looked at Mack deliberately. “Some of us go looking for names in phone booths and call them up for dates!”

“Can it, Nat,” Mack said as he opened a stall and led a horse out. He proceeded to saddle it, ignoring Natalie and Bob.

“I’ll be back by midnight!” Bob called, seeing an opportunity to escape.

“You heard what I said,” Mack called after him.

Bob made an indignant sound and stomped out of the barn.

“He’s just sixteen, Mack,” she said, regaining her composure enough to join him as he fastened the cinch tight.

He glanced at her. “You were just seventeen when you were dating the football hero,” he reminded her.

She stared at him curiously. “Yes, but except for a few very chaste kisses, there wasn’t much going on.”

He gave her an amused glance before he went back to his chore. He tested the cinch, found it properly tight and adjusted the stirrups.

“What does that look mean?” Natalie asked curiously.

“I had a long talk with him when I found out you’d accepted a date for the Christmas dance from him.”

Her lips fell open. “You what?”

He slid a booted foot into the stirrup and vaulted into the saddle with easy grace. He leaned over the pommel and looked at Natalie. “I told him that if he seduced you, he’d have me to contend with. I told his parents the same thing.”

She was horrified. She could hardly breathe. “Of all the interfering, presumptuous—”

“You were raised in an orphanage by spinster women, and then you lived with your aunt, who couldn’t even talk about kissing without going into a swoon,” he said, and he didn’t smile. “You knew nothing about men or sex or hormones. Someone had to protect you, and there wasn’t anybody else to do it.”

“You had no right!”

His dark eye slid over her with something like possession.

“I had more right than I’ll ever tell you,” he said quietly. “And that’s all I’ll say on the subject.”

He turned the horse, deaf to her fury.

“Mack!” she raged.

He paused and looked at her. “Tell Viv she can have her friend over for supper Saturday night, on the condition that you come, too.”

“I don’t want to come!”

He hesitated for a minute, then turned the horse and came back to her. “You and I will always disagree on some things,” he said. “But we’re closer than you realize. I know you,” he added in a tone that made her knees wobble. “And you know me.”

She couldn’t fight the emotions that made her more confused, more stirred, than she’d ever been before. She looked at him with eyes that betrayed her longing for him.

He drew in a long, slow breath, and his face seemed to lose its rigor. “I won’t apologize for looking out for you.”

“I’m not part of your family, Mack,” she said huskily. “You can tell Viv and Bob and Charles what to do, but you can’t tell me!”

He studied her angry face and smiled gently, in a way that he rarely smiled at anyone. "Oh, I'm not telling, baby," he replied softly.

"And don't call me baby, either!"

"All that fire and fury," he mused, watching her. "What a waste."

She was so confused that she could hardly think. "I don't understand you at all today!"

"No," he agreed, the smile fading. He looked straight into her eyes, unblinking. "You work hard at it, too."

He turned the horse, and this time he kept riding.

She wanted to throw things. She couldn't believe that he'd said such things to her, that he'd come so close in the barn that for an instant she'd thought that he meant to kiss her. And not a chaste brush on the cheek, like at Christmas parties under the mistletoe, either. But a kiss like ones she'd seen in movies, where the hero crushed the heroine against the length of his body and put his mouth so hard against hers that she couldn't breathe at all.

She tried to picture Mack's hard, beautiful mouth on her lips, and she shivered. It was bad enough remembering how it had been that rainy night that Carl had died, when one thin strap on her nightgown had slid down her arm and...

Oh, no, she told herself firmly. Oh, no, none of that! She wasn't going to start daydreaming about Mack again. She'd gone down that road once already, and the consequences had been horrible.

She went back into the house to tell Viv the bad news.

"But that's wonderful!" her friend exclaimed, all smiles instead of tears. "You'll come, won't you?"

"He's trying to manipulate me," Natalie said irritably. "I won't let him do that!"

"But if you don't come, Whit can't come," came the miserable reply. "You just have to, Nat, if I'm your friend at all."

Natalie grumbled, but in the end, she gave in.

Vivian hugged her tight. "I knew you would," she said happily. "I can hardly wait until Saturday. You'll like him, and so will Mack. He's such a sweet guy."

Natalie hesitated, but if she didn't tell her friend, Mack certainly would, and less kindly. "Viv, did you know that he got a girl in trouble?"

"Well, yes," she said. "But it was her fault," she pointed out. "She chased him and then when they did it, she wouldn't let him use anything. He told me."

Natalie blushed for the second time that day, terribly uncomfortable around people who seemed

content to speak about the most embarrassing things openly.

“Sorry,” Viv said with a kind smile. “You’re very unworldly, you know.”

“That’s just what your brother said,” Natalie muttered.

Vivian studied her curiously for a long time. “He may not like the idea of Whit, but he likes the idea of your friend Dave Markham even less,” she confided.

“He’s one to criticize *my* social life, while he runs around with the likes of Glenna the Bimbo. Stop laughing, it isn’t funny!”

Vivian cleared her throat. “Sorry. But she’s really very nice,” she told her friend. “She just likes men.”

“One after the other,” Natalie agreed, “and even simultaneously, from what people say. Your brother is going to catch some god-awful disease and it will be his own fault. Why are you still laughing?”

“You’re jealous,” Vivian said.

“That’ll be the day!” Natalie said harshly. “I’m going home.”

“He’s only gone out with her twice,” her best friend continued, unabashed, “and he didn’t even have lipstick on his shirt when he came home. They just went to a movie together.”

“I’m sure your brother didn’t get to his present age without learning how to get around lipstick stains,” she said belligerently.

“The ladies seem to like him,” Vivian said.

“Until he speaks and ruins his image,” Natalie added. “His idea of diplomacy is a gun and a smile. If Glenna likes him, it’s only because she’s taped his mouth shut!”

Vivian laughed helplessly. “I guess that could be true,” she confessed. “But he is a refreshing change from all the politically correct people who are afraid to open their mouths at all.”

“I suppose so.”

Vivian stood up. “Natalie?”

“What?”

She stared at her friend quietly. “You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?”

Natalie turned quickly toward the door. She wasn’t going to answer. “I really have got to go. I have exams next week, and I’d better hit the books hard. It wouldn’t do to flub my exams and not graduate,” she added.

Vivian wanted to tell Natalie that she had a pretty good idea of what had happened between her and Mack so long ago, but it would embarrass Natalie if she came right out with it. Her friend was so repressed.

“I don’t know what happened,” she lied, “but you have to remember, you were just seventeen. He was twenty-three.”

Natalie turned, her face pale and shocked. “He...told you?”

“He didn’t tell me anything,” Vivian said softly and honestly. She hadn’t needed to be told. Her brother and her best friend had given it away themselves without a word. She smiled. “But you walked around in a constant state of misery and wouldn’t come near the place when he was home. He wouldn’t be at home if he knew you were coming over to see me. I figured he’d probably said something really harsh and you’d had a terrible fight.”

Natalie’s face closed up. “The past is best left buried,” she said curtly.

“I’m not prying. I’m just making an observation.”

“I’ll come Saturday night, but only because he won’t let Whit come if I don’t,” Natalie said a little stiffly.

“I’ll never mention it again,” Vivian said, and Natalie knew what she meant. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to dredge up something painful.”

“No harm done. I’d long since forgotten.” The lie slid glibly from her tongue, and she smiled one last time at Vivian before she went out the door. Pretending it didn’t matter was the hardest thing she’d done in years.

Chapter 2

Natalie sat in the elementary school classroom the next morning, bleary-eyed from having been up so late the night before studying for her final exams. It was imperative that she read over her notes in all her classes every night so that when the exam schedule was posted, she'd be ready. She'd barely had time to think, and she didn't want to. She never wanted to remember again how it had been that night when she was seventeen and Mack had held her in the darkness.

Mrs. Ringgold's gentle voice, reminding her that it was time to start handwriting practice, brought her to the present. She apologized and organized the class into small groups around the two large class tables. Mrs. Ringgold took one and she the other as they guided the children through the cursive alphabet, taking time to study each effort and offer praise and corrections where they were necessary.

It was during lunch that she met Dave Markham in the line.

"You look smug today," he said with a smile. He was tall and slender, but not in the same way that Mack was. Dave was an intellectual who liked classical music and literature. He couldn't ride or rope and he knew next to nothing about agriculture. But he was sweet, and at least he was someone Natalie could date without having to worry about fighting him off after dessert.

"Mrs. Ringgold says I'm doing great in the classroom," she advised. "Professor Bailey comes to observe me tomorrow. Then, next week, finals." She made a mock shiver.

"You'll pass," he said, smiling. "Everybody's terrified of exams, but if you read your notes once a day, you won't have any trouble with them."

"I wish I *could* read my notes," she confided in a low tone. "If Professor Bailey could flunk me on handwriting, I'd already be out on my ear."

"And you're teaching children how to write?" Dave asked in mock horror.

She glared at him. "Listen, I can tell people how to do things I can't do. It's all a matter of using authority in your voice."

"You do that pretty well," he had to admit. "I hear you had a good tutor."

"What?"

"McKinzey Killain," he offered.

"Mack," she corrected. "Nobody calls him McKinzey."

"Everybody calls him Mr. Killain, except you," he corrected. "And from what I hear, most people around here try not to call him at all."

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