

# CINDY WOODSMALL

*New York Times* and CBA Best-Selling Author



## *Gathering the Threads*

THE AMISH *of* SUMMER GROVE, BOOK THREE

# *Gathering <sup>the</sup> Threads*

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*Fraying at the Edge*  
*Gathering the Threads*

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*To Carol Bartley  
with extreme gratitude,  
fervent trust,  
deep honor,  
and an abiding hope for our future.  
I'm indebted to you for editing every book I've written.*



## *The Amish of Summer Grove series*

The story so far . . .

*Ties That Bind* begins at an Amish birthing center, where a single, *Englisch* college student, Brandi Nash, gives birth to her daughter as a fire engulfs the building. A few minutes later an Amish woman, Lovina Brenneman, gives birth to twins, a girl and a boy. The midwife and Lovina's husband, Isaac, struggle to get the women and three babies to safety.

Chapter 2 moves forward twenty years, and Ariana Brenneman is trying to buy an abandoned café so she can help support her parents and siblings. She and her twin brother, Abram, have been working and saving for years to purchase it. As time is running out, Ariana's one-time friend Quill Schlabach offers to help her raise money by holding a benefit, but Ariana wants nothing to do with him. Five years ago he broke her heart when he left Summer Grove in the middle of the night, taking with him Frieda, Ariana's closest friend. Although Ariana has moved on and is seeing Rudy, a young man she cares for deeply, she resents how Quill and Frieda deceived and betrayed her.

Quill tries to win Ariana's trust, knowing that if she will act on his ideas, she will raise the money she needs. Although Quill continues to conceal why he left with Frieda, he longs for healing between Ariana and himself. But his main purpose for being in Summer Grove is to help an unhappy, disillusioned family—Ariana's eldest sister, Salome, and her family—leave the Amish.

Ariana lets down her guard and trusts Quill's guidance. Although Rudy has reservations, he backs her as she, Quill, and Abram hold a benefit, which raises the needed money.

While Ariana and Abram are focused on the café, their brother Mark sees a musical production in a nearby city and is struck by how much one

performer looks like Salome. When Mark tells their *Mamm*, she seems concerned.

Lovina and Isaac ask Quill to investigate the background of this young woman, Skylar Nash. Quill obtains enough information to validate that she is probably Isaac and Lovina's biological daughter, which would mean Ariana is Brandi's daughter. Quill contacts Skylar's parents, Brandi Nash and Nicholas Jenkins, and a DNA test confirms that Skylar is not related to Brandi or Nicholas, and it also reveals that Skylar has drugs in her system.

Lovina struggles with the knowledge that her biological daughter seems so lost, and Nicholas, an atheist, is appalled that his daughter has been raised in an insulated religious society. When he learns that the midwife suspected the two girls might have been accidentally switched at birth and never did anything about it, he threatens to sue her unless Ariana spends a year with him and Brandi, cut off from the Amish community. And Nicholas gives Skylar a choice—time in rehab or time with her biological family—or he will cut off all financial support.

When Ariana learns that she's not a Brenneman and that Quill helped uncover the truth, she once again feels betrayed by him and asks him never to contact her again. Ariana leaves Summer Grove with Brandi and Nicholas to spend a year with them. And Quill picks up Skylar, confiscates the drugs she tries to hide, and drives her to the Brennemens' home.

*Fraying at the Edge* begins one day after Ariana meets her biological parents and leaves with them to live in their English world. Brandi and Nicholas are married to other people, and the story opens with Ariana at Nicholas's home as her parents argue bitterly. She has three stepsiblings—two teen boys, who live with her dad, and one teen girl, who lives with her mom, Brandi.

Before she can adjust to the outside world and the loneliness of leaving her family and boyfriend, Rudy, behind, Nicholas gives her lists of things she *must* accomplish. His list includes removing her prayer *Kapp*, getting



a new hairstyle, dressing English, learning to drive, and being tutored in college-type courses on religion, history, and science. Nicholas appears determined to scrub the Amish ways from her mind and heart before she returns to Summer Grove.

Ariana's mom, Brandi, seems free spirited and easygoing, but despite that, she staunchly and loudly stands up to Nicholas. Ariana's parents' anger and contradictory expectations drain and confuse her in ways she's never experienced, and she feels herself coming undone.

During Ariana's time of exile from Summer Grove, Nicholas allows her to have contact with only one person from her past: Quill Schlabach. Since Quill left the Amish as a teen and never returned to join the faith, Nicholas believes he could be a helpful influence in opening Ariana's mind and heart to better ways of living than in the Amish society.

But Quill's singular desire is to help Ariana navigate this temporary upheaval and return to her beloved people and the Old Ways. Unfortunately, even though Ariana needs a friend in this strange setting, she refuses to reach out to Quill because twice he's hidden the truth from her and ripped her life apart.

Nicholas's expectations of Ariana and the pressure to adjust increase, and then Ariana learns that she is the result of an adulterous affair and that her parents were never married to each other. Desperate to talk to someone who understands her and the Old Ways, she finally calls Quill. Their encounter, which takes place at a bar, is far from smooth, but he gets her back to Nicholas's home safely.

Quill talks to Nicholas privately and makes him see that in his efforts to strip Ariana's mind of the Old Ways and religion, he is ripping *her* apart. Nicholas's viewpoint begins to change. His goal is still to broaden Ariana's mind, but his methods become gentler, and he begins to see the true Ariana—not a brainwashed girl, but a unique, fascinating, strong woman who is trying to do right by everyone.

After much angst and a few heated arguments, Ariana forms a bond

with Nicholas, Brandi, her husband, Gabe, and his daughter, Cameron. Ariana develops a real thirst for knowledge because of Nicholas's influence. And her time with Quill becomes healing, helpful, and sometimes fun. He helps her get her feet under her, view God as bigger than she'd ever imagined possible, and learn when and how to stand up for herself.

With Ariana gone, her Mamm and *Daed* are struggling with guilt and fear for both girls—Ariana and Skylar—and all the changes to the family dynamics are taking a toll.

Abram, Susie, and Martha—three of the Brenneman siblings—work hard to get Ariana's new café on its feet. They want it to be a success when she returns, but they know nothing about running a café, and none of them can cook the items Ariana listed on the menu before she left.

Skylar is used to a comfy English lifestyle, and her Amish dad, Isaac, quickly confronts her idle ways with the Amish work ethic and the need for accountability and contributing to the family. When pushed to help the family, she chooses to work at the café, knowing that is her best opportunity to see her forbidden boyfriend and get drugs from him.

Because Skylar knows a lot more about how to make a café appealing than Ariana's siblings do, she talks them into spending money Ariana set aside to pay the mortgage on the café in order to buy expensive coffee machines and a generator. But inside the Brenneman home, Skylar struggles with the endless lack of money and creature comforts. Without warning, Skylar's boyfriend stops bringing drugs to the café for her, and she has a physical and emotional crisis.

The Brennemens meet the challenges with Skylar, and she gets clean. Because of her Amish parents' tough love, she begins to bond with them and her siblings. But at the same time, she and Jax, a friend of Abram's and a former marine, have trouble navigating their emotions for each other. They are drawn to each other but are also distrustful of each other. Jax has good cause to hate drug use and distrust users, but he and Skylar manage a truce for the sake of the café and its workers.

Cilla Yoder, a friend of Abram's who works at the café, has dealt with cystic fibrosis throughout her life. When he witnesses one of her spells, he realizes she needs a better doctor. Jax, Skylar, Susie, and Martha work together to help Abram find one and pay for the medical expenses by dipping into the café's money.

Gradually Ariana develops a new understanding of God and every adult's right to stand against authority, including a father's. She uses this knowledge to talk Nicholas into letting her return to Summer Grove early.

Nicholas and Brandi set up a meeting with Skylar. They come to the café after hours and invite her to return home. Now that she's clean, they're willing to pay for her tuition and other perks again. Skylar shares her hurt and anger that they dumped her on the Brennemans and took off with Ariana without even looking back, and she refuses to leave Summer Grove.

Ariana has longed to return to her faith, family, and her cherished Rudy, but after she's pulled her hair into a bun and put on her Amish clothing, she stares into the mirror and feels unsure about who she really is. When Nicholas drives her home and she gets out of his car, she's thrilled to embrace her Amish family, but before the evening is finished, she feels a strong need to get away for several days to think.

**For a list of main characters in the Amish of Summer Grove series,  
see the Main Characters list at the end of the book.**

# One

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## *Summer Grove, Pennsylvania*

Ariana's head roared with voices, those in the kitchen around her and others from far away, even from hundreds of years in the past. Voices of real people she'd talked to or had heard preach or teach, as well as the voices from the many books Nicholas had asked her to read. The voices grouped in clans, their murmurings growing fervent, insisting precisely what she needed to believe, who she needed to be, and why she needed to march to the beat of their drum.

Ariana needed to know herself well enough to pick a tribe she agreed with and shut down the rest with her own reasoning. But she couldn't parse what she believed, and they hounded without mercy.

Marred flatware jangled endlessly as her nine siblings, five of her fourteen nieces and nephews, her Mamm and Daed, and Skylar sat around the table in rickety chairs. The mid-January wind pushed against the house and seemed to come right through the walls.

An old galvanized bucket sat in the sink because the water pipe to the kitchen was broken again. If the pipes to the sink in the mudroom hadn't been working, getting breakfast on the table would've been a lot more work.

Rickety furniture, cold winds seeping in, and broken pipes didn't bother her. Money and work could easily fix those things. What nagged at her was much deeper. She was finally in the very home she'd pined for while away, and yet only a fragment of herself seemed to be here.

Her Daed worked really hard, but his income was too small for a

family this size. Ariana couldn't remember a time when she didn't long to make life better for them. That was why she and Abram had spent years working to buy the café. She had been convinced it would bring in enough money to make life easier for Mamm and Daed.

The voices in her head grew louder. One group said money was evil and poverty was God's will, that it made people rely on Him more. Another group shouted louder than the first, saying that lack was from the Enemy. Still more voices said that being poor was due to a lack of education. A dozen more camps vied to be heard, and Ariana was powerless to sort them out.

"Ariana." Mamm pointed at her plate, sounding baffled, maybe even alarmed. "Is this not your favorite breakfast anymore?"

A stack of pancakes stared back at Ariana. Her stomach churned. "It is. *Denki*, Mamm." She used the edge of her fork to cut into the pancakes.

"You're not yourself." Susie passed her a plate of bacon. "That's more plain to see than your poorly pinned-up hair under your lopsided prayer Kapp."

Her bun was messy and her head covering was pinned askew? She should at least adjust the Kapp, but she simply nodded. "I'm a little out of sorts. That's all."

She didn't feel just a little out of sorts. She longed to scream at the voices in her head to shut up.

Salome smiled. "Anyone who'd been through what you have would be feeling strange. I imagine you feel as if you've been through the blades of a hay baler."

That depiction had a decent amount of accuracy, but to be more precise, her brain felt as if it had been rubbed with poison oak, and it screamed in discomfort, begging to be soothed with a poultice of clay, apple cider vinegar, and peppermint.

"A hay baler?" Daed smiled at her. "You'll be right as rain soon enough. A little time here at home with us and your Rudy, and you'll feel like your-

self again. I guarantee it.” He took a bite of food. “Forget what’s behind you. Only look ahead.”

“He’s right.” Mamm drew her mug toward her lips. “There’s much to look forward to.” She peered over her mug, smiling. “Your wedding for one.”

Rudy must’ve told them they’d decided to marry. What else had he told them? When she’d arrived home last night, Rudy had seemed unusually connected to her parents, even asking Ariana to wait while he spoke privately to her Mamm. Ariana had been so involved in her own thoughts that the incident hadn’t meant anything to her, but today it seemed a little curious.

Right now she didn’t want to talk about a wedding, and she was pretty sure her parents knew it. She wanted to discuss her immediate future. Ariana forked a bite of pancakes, hoping she looked calm and natural. “Rather than my wedding, I’d like to discuss moving in with Berta.”

When she’d mentioned the idea the night before, the reaction had been swift and negative. She’d defended Berta, leading to a respectful, soft-spoken disagreement with her parents as they tried to stuff her into the same thinking, the same role, the same box she’d been in before she left. It no longer fit. This morning as Ariana looked from her Daed to her Mamm, their facial expressions hadn’t altered one bit. It was as if they hadn’t heard her.

“A wedding and then”—Daed swept his arms open as if gesturing to a large crowd—“you’ll be expecting your first little one by winter for sure. That’s what you need to focus on, Ariana. It’s what all our attention needs to be on.”

“Okay,” Skylar said, sounding offended, “the marrying-young part I get. They’re in love, and they want to get busy.”

“Skylar,” Mamm chided, “we don’t talk that way.”

Mark chuckled. “What was the rest of your thought, Sky Blue?”

“Planning to have a baby that quickly after getting married is crazy. Completely crazy, especially in this day and age. If I understand right,

they'll marry this fall. She'll barely be twenty-one. What about a little time for just her and Rudy?"

"That's not God's way, Skylar." Daed took a bite of bacon. "If people are mature enough to marry, they are ready to have children. Waiting is the English way. Birth control and wanting the babies to come at a convenient time are worldly. God said that children are a blessing, and He commanded us to be fruitful and multiply."

Heat skittered across Ariana's skin. "He didn't *command* it," she mumbled.

"What?" Daed's voice deepened, and his brows furrowed.

She should've kept her mouth shut. "I just meant that we don't know it was a command."

"Of course we do." Daed's hands fisted as they rested on the table. "What are you saying, Ariana?"

Memories of living in the English world and crying out to God to help her return home circled in her mind. She'd wanted to get back to her Amish roots as quickly as possible. She hadn't wanted to leave here in the first place, but she'd had no choice, and while she was on the outside, a different kind of life, a different way of thinking had been poured into her, purposefully and with diligence, for three months. Now it felt strange to sit at this table with her hair pinned up again and her Amish clothes on while science and philosophy books and Bible passages translated from the Hebrew text danced in her head.

She knew her Daed was waiting on an apology and a confession of belief that lined up with the church's teachings. But when she tried to say what was expected, the words disappeared. All eyes were on her, and every adult seemed unable to move. She had to respond.

"Daed, with respect, it seems we've been taught that God commanded things that aren't actually commands." She'd said enough, so she bit her tongue, but the rest of what came to mind shocked even her. *Even if God commanded people to multiply, that was thousands of years ago, long be-*

*fore the planet had seven billion people.* Is that what she believed, or were Nicholas's thoughts simply filling her head?

Daed seemed dumbfounded, but then anger grew hard in his eyes. He set his napkin on the table and pushed back. "If we're to be at church on time, we better get moving." He stood. "It seems one of us needs every moment of it she can get."

Ariana watched as he went into the living room. Her brothers walked toward the back door, and she knew they would put on their coats and go to the barn to hitch horses to enough carriages to get the throng to church.

Her sisters started clearing the table.

"Ari." Her youngest sister put her hands on her hips. "It's Daed's house, and you are his child. What are you thinking?"

"She's not property, Martha," Skylar corrected. "She has a right to think her own thoughts, speak them, and act on them."

Ariana had no idea what to say, so she stood and began stacking plates, wishing she didn't have to go to the Sunday meeting. It would mean listening to yet another voice telling her what she needed to think and who she needed to be.

"The Word says children are to obey," Mamm said. "And God didn't put an expiration date on that, although once she's married, her Daed will keep his opinions to himself."

"Well." Susie unloaded an armful of dirty glasses onto the counter near the sink. "Maybe God didn't give a cutoff date because He expected people to use common sense."

The voices of Mamm, her sisters, and Skylar moved inside Ariana's head to their respective tribes—the very conservative, the rational conservative, and the feminist—and joined the other chorus of voices.

Ariana longed for a moment of silence, where all voices let her think in peace. Maybe then she'd know who she was and what *she* thought.

Salome put her arm around Ariana's shoulders. "I'm glad you're home."



“Denki,” Ariana mumbled.

Salome squeezed her. “We need time to talk, just sisters catching up, *ya?*”

“We do.” But right now Ariana was busy thinking about a different woman in this room, the one she was watching. Skylar had on jeans and a tunic sweater. Since the three-hour service of songs, messages, and prayer would be in a language she didn’t know, she wasn’t required to go. Because she hadn’t been born into this home, she wasn’t required to wear the cape dress, apron, or prayer Kapp.

What about Ariana’s rights?

“Salome”—Ariana held out the stack of dishes—“I need to talk to Daed. It might be a good idea to pray for me . . . or him.”

Salome took the dishes, and Ariana went into the living room. Daed had a poker in his hand, banking the fire before they left the house for the next seven hours of travel, the service, a small meal, and expected fellowship.

“Daed, I . . . I know you won’t understand this or agree with it, and I’m sorry about that, but I need a few days away to think. Out of town, at a hotel probably.”

He stood. “Have you lost your mind, child?”

“Not yet, no.”

He crouched again, shaking burning logs until hunks of embers fell into the heap. “We’re so glad you’re back. We’ve missed you, Ari.” He remained crouched as he turned to look at her. “You really don’t want to be here?”

He sounded so hurt.

“I do, Daed. Please trust me on that. I just need a few days away to think.”

He focused on the fireplace again. “What you need is to be here, with us. To renew your mind to Christ’s ways.”

Christ renewing her mind would be lovely, but Christians wouldn’t

agree on exactly what that would mean or what she should think as proof that her mind had indeed been renewed by Christ and not by the world or heresy.

Sparks flew upward as Daed prodded the fiery embers. “Trust me to guide you, Ariana, and you’ll be fine. You’re feeling the pangs of transition, nothing more.” He stood. “Transitions are always hard, but you just need to trust God.”

“I do trust Him. But—”

“That’s *gut*. We don’t need to discuss anything else right now.” He set the poker in its stand and picked up the shovel.

“*Nee*, Daed. I’m telling you that I need this.”

He pushed ashes in a circle, making a crater of embers. “You’re fine.” His voice was calm, as if she were a five-year-old saying she wanted another ice cream.

She couldn’t stand it. Of course he didn’t understand. She didn’t either, but it was every bit as unbearable as her first days adjusting to Englisch life, only then she believed it was her place to submit and obey. She needed to understand who she was so that no matter what happened in life, whether she was fully Amish or was stripped of it, poor or wealthy, single or married, she would know *this is who I am*—whatever *this* was.

Her thoughts meandered to her Englisch family. Her mom, Gabe, and Cameron were probably returning to their fancy home after a morning run. They would be dressed totally inappropriately, and without her there it might be a coin toss as to whether they went to church or not. Yet Ariana had come to love them and their unconventional ways of looking at faith. But learning to respect her Englisch mom, stepdad, and stepsister hadn’t helped her know who she was and what she thought.

Her dad was probably in his recliner, reading some hard-to-understand book by a learned philosopher, cognitive scientist, or historian. She’d started out hating it when he’d shoved his beloved facts at her. A few weeks in, she began to find the knowledge fascinating. Part of her wished she

could sit down with her English dad and discuss the deep matters that were taboo in this home.

“Daed.” Her voice sounded firm, but her insides were trembling. Was she really going to go against him?

He turned to face her.

“Out of respect for you and Mamm and a desire not to cause trouble with the preachers, I’ll go to the Sunday meeting and stay with the family until we return midafternoon. But then I’ll hire a driver to pick me up, and I’m going away for a few days.”

His face mirrored disbelief, then fear, which quickly turned to anger. He walked over to her, his shoulders filling her view. “You came home only yesterday, and today you doubt whether you want to join the Amish or not?”

“What? No. That’s not it at all, Daed. I suddenly have two million opinions zipping and zooming inside my head, and I need time to silence them. Time to sort them out. But most of all I need to understand who I am. I don’t think I’ve ever really been clear on that.”

“You’re a child of God.”

“I am.”

“And you’re Amish, today and always.”

“Daed, *kumm* on, of course.”

He relaxed a bit. “Then what else is there to figure out?”

“I don’t know.” Did she sound as torn and scattered as she felt? “Everything. Nothing. But at least something.”

“That makes no sense.”

“If you think that makes no sense, you should spend one minute inside my head. I need this, Daed. Please.”

“Nee. A young Amish woman alone at a hotel? I can’t allow that.”

She had no desire to disrespect his needs while trying to address her own. “Then let Salome go with me.”

The ministers and community were likely to discover she’d left for a

few days. There wasn't really a way to hide something like that, but if Salome went with her, it would ease everyone's minds and keep it from sounding completely unbefitting. The community wouldn't have any trouble believing that after being in the world, she needed a few days with a good Amish woman, someone older and wiser, to help talk her through all she saw and experienced while *draus in da Welt*. Since no one outside the family, other than Quill, knew that Salome had planned to leave the Amish, her reputation was fully intact.

Fortunately for Ariana, Salome had good reason to understand Ariana's feelings of confusion and the opposing views being shoved at her. But how would Ariana pay for it?

Abram tapped on the door frame. "The carriages are ready, and the rest of the family is getting in them now."

She turned to the man she'd grown up believing was her twin. He looked so different, mature and more confident. What had happened to him these past three months?

"Abram, I'm sorry to ask this, but I could use a bit of money. Does the café have any discretionary cash left?"

Daed's face was pale now, and his shoulders seemed to quake. "I'm not agreeing to you going away."

She faced him, an eyebrow raised. "I understand, but I am going away."

Abram shrugged. "Maybe." He walked to a bookshelf and picked up three ledgers and an overstuffed manila envelope.

He'd said *maybe*. Her blood ran cold. "I . . . I thought the café was doing well."

"It is, and if you need a reasonable amount of cash, it's there. But be aware that no one has received a full paycheck yet."

"What?" Her head spun, and her knees suddenly felt like gelatin. "But when I closed on the café, there was enough money left over from the benefit to pay the bills on the café, so the day-to-day income should've

covered paychecks, plus income for Mamm and Daed.” The whole purpose of her years of trying to get the café was to make money so Mamm and Daed didn’t live in poverty.

“I know that was the plan, but it hasn’t worked out that way exactly. The largest portion of the money was used to help Cilla Yoder get a better doctor, new medical tests, and much better medication.”

“Oh.” Relief ran warm through Ariana, but just what kind of financial shape was the café in?

He passed her the books. “Everything you need to know is in there. I was going to wait until tomorrow to give them to you.”

“But you’ve paid the mortgage each month, right?”

Abram looked at the ledgers. Was that doubt concerning what had and hadn’t been paid?

Ariana’s heart pounded. He and the others had sacrificed months of their lives to keep the café running until she returned, and here she stood, not only asking for money, but also planning to take a few days off when she had yet to work one! What was she thinking?

She set the ledgers back on the bookshelf. Right now she needed to put on her coat and go to church. Surely when the time came to focus on the ledgers, she could get the café finances straight. At least she hoped she could.

“Denki.” She hugged Abram. “You did the right thing for Cilla and her family. That was the best possible way to use the money.”

Daed dusted ashes off his hands. “The lack of money settles it, as it often does.”

“Not this time, Daed.”

He angled his head, looking at her as if she were an outsider. The issue was, she felt like a stranger even to herself. But a little time away would help that. She knew that as much as she knew her own name. A sense of peace rolled over her as she settled into the plan.

The need for money was only a speed bump. Nothing more.

Daed's eyes reflected confusion, and she felt sorry for him. She wished she could give him what he needed—the same obedient, naive Amish daughter who'd left here.

He pointed at her. "I forbid you to ask your siblings or brothers-in-law for money to do such a thing as this. While we're on the topic, that includes any other Amish person or someone related to the Amish, namely Quill. Do you understand?"

From the corner of her eye, Ariana saw someone enter the room. Based on the color scheme, she knew it had to be Skylar. It was a reminder that both of Ariana's Englisch parents had money. Nicholas could be a real pain about some things, but it would actually make him happy to give her money. Of course she would pay him back once she got the finances squared away on the café.

She glanced at Skylar.

"I'll be sure it doesn't come from anyone Amish."

Daed looked in the same direction Ariana had a moment earlier. His expression changed, as if he'd just remembered that Ariana had other resources.

What unfair challenges was she heaping on the man who'd raised her?

"Daed, I didn't do well during the transition from here to the Englisch world. I ended up in a bar, unknowingly drinking alcohol while some man who resembled Jesus tried to take advantage of me."

Daed fell backward into the closest chair. Concern etched deep within the wrinkles on his face. "Child . . ."

"Quill arrived, and he got me home safely. But I landed in that bar because I kept ignoring how splintered and confused I felt while I did what was expected of me." At least this time she knew herself well enough to realize she had to get away and think.

Daed nodded, but the grief in his eyes broke her heart.

Could she figure out anything within a few days that would make what she was doing to Daed and her family worthwhile?

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