

# DEATH ON THE RUN

An Ardis Jensen Mystery

JOAN BLACHER



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DEATH ON THE RUN

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*To my dear husband Norm*

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## CHAPTER 1

**A**rdis Jensen's heart skipped a beat as she read the *Daily Record* headline: Wednesday morning.

### **Woman's Body Found On Back Country Road**

***Police suspect homicide.***

Scanning the article, she was relieved to learn the slaying hadn't occurred in her rural neighborhood. She took a sip of coffee, munched on her bagel and read more.

Police say nearby resident Richard Erb discovered the body at 5 p.m. Tuesday while walking in the lemon orchard on Los Arboles Road next to Vista Park.

The victim, estimated to be in her late twenties or early thirties, carried no identification. Police believe she may have been the victim of a hit-and-run driver at least three days ago.

Police request that anyone having information about either the young woman

or the accident call the police department hotline at 1-800-555-TIPS.

*How tragic*, Ardis thought. Had the hit-and-run driver stripped any identifying information and hidden her from view so she wouldn't be easy to find and recognize? Her family must be frantic.

Pulling her robe tighter, she thought back to the brutal murder cases she had worked on as a forensic psychologist with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. A murder with similar circumstances had been assigned to her just before she resigned. A twelve-year-old girl had been accosted on her way home from school, raped in the killer's van then tossed out and repeatedly run over.

Then, other victims were discovered, and she had been instrumental in the murderer's arrest. Ardis had considered him a psychopathic serial killer. She was glad he had been found guilty and sentenced to death.

Her stomach tightened. That case had been the start of her downward spiral into a depression that began affecting her professional and personal life. After months of fighting it through therapy, she had finally submitted her resignation. That was an unhappy and disappointing ending to a career she had undertaken to help her atone for the guilt she'd felt about her little sister Ginny's still-unsolved murder.

Ardis shook her head to try to clear her mind of the past. Although she felt compassion for the family of this newly found victim, she was glad she wouldn't be involved in the murder investigation. The closest she got to violence these days was teaching about it in her criminal psychology class.

She drank the last drop of coffee, stuck the mug in the dishwasher and went upstairs. After her shower, she opened her closet to choose something warm to wear. The whir-

ring of the wind machines in the nearby avocado groves signified that the temperature remained freezing.

She donned a wool pantsuit and nylon parka, headed downstairs to pick up her briefcase then out to the garage. As she drove down Granville Road, she looked at the house across from hers. It had previously been owned by her best friend Jan Friel, who had moved away after she and her husband divorced. She still missed Jan but admired the Dillmans' improved landscaping. Even in the chill January weather, roses bloomed, and the lawn remained a lush green. She wished she could say the same for her own sparsely planted yard.

She turned onto Linda Verde Road and sped toward campus. Thinking about the young woman's death, a dreadful thought crept into her brain. Could the girl have been a Clarion student? Many students lived in Vista Park, the site of the homicide. She couldn't bear it if one of hers had been the victim of a vicious killer. That, sadly, had happened three years ago, and she still hadn't quite gotten over it.

When she reached campus and parked in her spot, she rushed to the Humanities building and strode into a classroom filled with chatting jeans-clad students. Feeling the usual rush of adrenalin, she pulled her lecture notes out of her briefcase and put them on the lectern, gazing around the room as they sat down. Today, she would talk about victimization theory—why some individuals are more likely to become victims than others.

"Have any of you known a murder victim or the family of a murder victim?"

Several hands went up.

"Anyone want to tell the class about the crime and the victim?"

"I would," said a dark-haired girl in the middle of the room. "She was in my eighth-grade class and was shot by another student who wanted to be her boyfriend. Super-

weird guy, like, a total Goth. Everyone made fun of him, including, like, the girl he killed. One morning, he waited in front of the school, and when she came up the sidewalk, he pulled a gun out of his backpack and shot her. Then he killed himself.”

“Oohs” and “yucks” burst out of the others.

“Tragic. Did the shooter leave a note, or tell anyone why he killed her?”

The girl shook her head.

“No, but she used to, like, totally diss him in front of all her mean, malicious friends.”

“She was the victim of a heinous crime. Do you think she contributed to her own death?”

Ardis looked around the room as they pondered her questions. When several hands went up, she called on Danny Liston, who had not yet participated in any class discussions.

He nodded.

“I didn’t know her, but I believe she definitely egged the guy on. Thought she was the school princess, better than anybody else. Probably was nasty to him all the time. So, I do think she contributed to her own death.”

His hands had become fists and, hearing his emotion-filled tone, Ardis wondered if he had been treated the same way. She noticed several others looking at him in disbelief.

“Danny believes she deserved what she got, and her killer wanted everyone to see that he’d gotten his revenge. Although there is never an excuse for a murder, Danny is probably right that she became a victim through her own behavior.”

He leaned back in his chair so far he looked in danger of tipping over.

Ardis watched him as she gave the class an example of a twelve-year old girl on her way home from school who did nothing to provoke her death but was killed by a men-

tally disturbed adult man who had lurked around the school and selected his victim at random. When she finished the lecture, she asked the class to discuss case studies in groups of four, assigning Danny's group a case involving a jilted lover. As she moved around the room listening to each discussion, she observed that his usually pale complexion had reddened, and his forehead glistened with tiny beads of sweat. Again she wondered if the subject matter had hit him a little close to home.

After class, she talked to a few lingering students as she stuffed papers into her briefcase and before going upstairs to pick up her mail and take it to her office. She dropped her purse and briefcase on the desk, turned on the lamp and plopped down on the sofa. She needed a break before preparing for her eleven o'clock psych theory class, which she found more difficult to teach than the criminal psychology course.

As she rifled through her mail, she saw a brown in-house envelope with Dr. Phil Martin's name as the sender. Since he was the Psychology Department's Chair, she thought she'd better open it. She pulled out a memo that was stapled to her request for \$500 in faculty development funds for traveling expenses to Baltimore; she was scheduled to present a paper at the National Forensic Psychology Conference next May.

His response was brief and to the point. He was sorry, but he had to turn her down; the department was facing budget cuts, and he just couldn't spare the money. She frowned. Other Clarion faculty had told her \$500 was the customary amount when one was a conference presenter. She wondered if she should confront him about it.

She bit her lip. It was probably a lost cause, because Phil always found ways to make things difficult for her. He was unhappy that she had gotten the assistant professor's position he had wanted for his former Purdue colleague—and alleged lover.

At three that afternoon, she stepped into the Vista Park Center to meet with her clients, most of them women struggling with domestic violence issues. Often, their husbands were mandated participants in an anger-management program she directed for the district attorney's office. She took the client appointment list from Sally, the center's administrative assistant, and noted that Jill Abbott was first.

In her office, Ardis scanned her notes of Jill's last visit. The thirty-year-old had been referred for counseling because of her husband Sam's constant physical abuse during their eight years of marriage. Six months ago, after a particularly vicious attack, she had finally had enough and called the police. Sam was sentenced to three months' incarceration and, upon his release, was ordered to attend the anger management program.

Jill had started seeing Ardis before Sam's release a month ago and continued coming in while he participated in anger management. Ardis had sat in on a few sessions but stopped after a new center volunteer, Lori Powell, began attending and, as part of her training, submitted reports about Sam's minimal progress.

Sally buzzed.

"Jill's on her way."

Ardis closed the folder and opened the door.

Jill wore black jeans and a black nubby pullover sweater that heightened her pallor; she looked like a woman so beaten down that nothing would lift her out of the hole she had fallen into. She sank into the couch, gave a deep sigh and turned a dejected face toward Ardis.

"I'm not sure I have much energy for you today, Ardis."

"Are you sick?" She certainly looked it.

Jill plucked at her pants seam.

“Last night, around six-thirty, I thought I heard someone prowling around outside the house. I was too afraid to go look, but I think it was Sam.”

Ardis leaned forward.

“Don’t you have a restraining order?”

“He ignores stuff like that.” Jill shuddered. “I was so worried, I couldn’t sleep all night.”

“Jill, at six-thirty, Sam should have been in the anger management class. I’ll call Dr. Oberman to see if he showed up.” Ardis picked up the phone and punched in the number. “Niles, was Sam in your group last night?”

“Another lively evening, so let me think. Yep, he was. Wait a minute. He didn’t come back after the break. I’ll call his probation officer.”

“Tell him Sam’s wife thinks he was lurking around her house.”

“Will do. Say, now when I think of it, another odd thing happened last night. Lori Powell didn’t show up.”

“That’s strange, because she loves facilitating the group.”

“I’ll let you know what the probation officer says about what Sam was up to.”

Ardis put down the phone. Now she had two problems to worry about—Jill Abbott’s safety and the whereabouts of Lori Powell, who hadn’t missed a group session in six months of volunteering.

## CHAPTER 2

**A**rdis drove home after her last client had gone. Still brooding about Jill Abbott and Lori Powell, she pulled into the garage, glad to see her husband's gleaming silver Porsche already there.

As she stepped out of the car, a blast of icy wind assaulted her face. She hated January, when she always felt cold and rarely saw the sun. Living in the country was wonderful in the spring and summer but not in the winter, when it grew dark and dreary.

Her mood plunged, and she pulled her jacket tighter around her neck as she closed the garage door and hurried into the house.

"Hey, Jim," she called as she stepped into the kitchen.

"Hi, sweetheart. Let's have dinner in the den. I've got a fire going."

"Great idea." She dropped her purse and briefcase on the chopping block and opened the fridge. The almost-empty shelves made her wonder why they had opted for such a huge side-by-side when they made so little use of it.

Although they made it a point to eat dinner together as much as possible, their schedules were so hectic that it didn't often happen. Tonight would be a treat, but dinner

might not be, since all she could find were a package of frozen mini-pizzas, lettuce and tomatoes for a salad, and some grapes for dessert.

She filled two glasses with chilled chardonnay and joined Jim in the den, where he knelt on the hearth throwing another log on the fire.

"I hope your day went better than mine," she said as she set the glasses down on the coffee table.

He shrugged as he picked up his wine and took a big swallow.

"What happened?"

She plopped down in the flowered burgundy wing chair next to the fire.

"Phil did another number on me—won't cough up faculty development money for my forensic conference. And I learned Lori Powell didn't show up for the anger management group on Monday. She wasn't home when I called, and I'm worried about where she might be and with whom."

"Why's that?" Jim settled into the chair across from her.

"Niles told me he saw her talking to a sleazy guy from the group a couple of times after the meetings. The guy had just been released from jail, and he left early Monday night." She grimaced and took a sip of wine. "I hope she isn't with him."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Doesn't sound good. Are there penalties for leaving early?"

"Absolutely. Niles will tell his probation officer, and I'll try to reach Lori at work tomorrow. You ready for dinner?" She stood up and headed back to the kitchen.



Thursday morning, Ardis called Lori's number at Biogram, but after four rings, voice mail kicked in. She sighed and left her name and number, hoping Lori was simply on a break or in a meeting. Since Niles didn't usually make it to the

Center until eleven, she'd have to wait to find out about Sam Abbott.

She scanned her lecture notes for next Monday's forensic psych class and remembered she'd asked Vista Park Police Detective Larry Hopkins to be a guest speaker and talk about investigative psychology. Since that had been months ago, she dialed his number to jog his memory.

"Hopkins," his husky voice announced.

"Are you munching on a doughnut?" She liked to tease him, and he usually laughed. This time he didn't.

"I've lost my appetite after what I stepped into yesterday."

"What was that?"

Hopkins served as the Vista Park Police Department's major crimes detective, which included homicide and illegal drug use. His small-town police department was part of the Ventura County Sheriff's Department, and he'd worked in other areas of the county, including the main jail. Because he'd been involved in resolving many ugly crimes, his comment surprised her.

"We found a woman's body some maniac ran his car over out on Toyon Road. Judging by the condition of the corpse, she's been there awhile."

"I read about it in the paper. You know who she is yet?"

"Nope. No missing person report. Our telephone number was in the paper, and the chief gave it out at his press conference, but nobody's called."

Ardis gritted her teeth, worrying again that the victim might be a Clarion student.

"That'll make the investigation tough."

"Speaking of that..."

"Yes?"

She was all but positive he was going to ask her to work on the case. She hadn't done any forensic consulting since joining Clarion's psych department faculty and didn't want

to work on a homicide case again. She wanted to focus on her teaching and her students. And, given Phil Martin's continual negativity toward her, she didn't want to give him anything else to hassle her about. He only agreed to her doing therapy at the Counseling Center because she saw students as well as people from the community.

"How about helping out with this latest victim?" Hopkins's voice sounded tentative.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Think about it."

"I've got too much going on at Clarion, Larry. But I'll see you Monday morning in my class."

"Oh, yeah. What do you want me to talk about," he asked without enthusiasm.

"Crime scene analysis. I'd like you to use a case you've worked on and tell them all the stuff you do from start to finish. I'll use it to demonstrate my profiling process."



She knew tonight would be a long evening at the Center, so after finishing her class prep, Ardis decided to get some exercise. She pulled on her heavy parka and walked outside into the chill air. As she strode along Granville Road, she tried to clear her mind of work and Hopkin's proposition.

She passed the Stanleys', the first of the five homes on their small country road, and gazed at their gray clapboard house, luxuriant lawn and drought-tolerant plants. The Stanleys had lived in this neighborhood of large citrus and avocado ranches much longer than the Jensens.

She turned into Casquez Road on her way up the canyon, and Hopkins's suggestion that she work with him on the Toyon Road hit-and-run homicide kept snaking its way into her brain. The small local police department had to rely on the sheriff's department when any crime other than the usual DUI's, speeding violations, gang fights, drug activities or domestic violence came its way. The county did

provide coroner and crime scene analysis services; however, its homicide investigations were as pokey as her students turning in their papers. She figured Hopkins wanted her involved now so he could make an end run around the bureaucracy.

So, as had been the case twice before, she was torn. Although she had fled police work to less-stressful jobs on the tranquil Clarion campus, she had to admit she sometimes missed the excitement of working on a case. However, she knew Jim would be horrified if she became involved in another homicide, and Phil would never agree to it, no matter how desperate Vista Park PD's need was.

And she needed Phil's support if she was ever to get a promotion and tenure.



Back in her office, Ardis dialed Lori's number but again got her voicemail. Remembering that Lori had listed her boss's name when she'd started volunteering at the Center, Ardis found her application and read that it was Cary Williams. She picked up the phone and dialed his number.

"Cary Williams' office, Lucinda speaking."

"This is Dr. Ardis Jensen. I'm trying to reach Lori Powell, a volunteer at my counseling center. She didn't show up last night, and I'm a little worried. Would Mr. Williams know where she might be?"

"I'll put him on."

"Cary Williams." He sounded harried.

She introduced herself and the reason for her call.

There was a long pause before he said, "I sent Lori to a conference in Chicago last week. I think she planned to stay on to visit friends. She should be back next week."

"Thanks. I'm glad to know where she is. I'll call then."

His explanation relieved her mind. However, she was surprised the usually conscientious Lori hadn't let Niles know she would be gone. And, impossible as it was, she

still couldn't stop thinking about Lori's being somewhere with Sam Abbott.

## CHAPTER 3

Oberman,” a husky voice said after four rings.  
“Hi, Niles. What’d you find out about Sam Abbott?”  
Ardis asked.

“I got the scumbag on my cell just as I drove into the parking lot. He alleges he had stomach flu that night and had to leave before he threw up.”

“You believed him?”

“I never believe any of these guys. Told him I’d call his probation officer unless he could give me proof.”

She laughed, wondering how Sam could do that.

“And he said?”

“I gave him till ten o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“Good luck. Now, about Lori. Her boss told me she’s attending a conference in Chicago. She didn’t tell you?”

“Not a word.” Niles didn’t sound happy.

“I’ll talk to her when she gets back so she won’t leave you stranded again.”

The phone rang as soon as she’d hung up.

“How about payback for me talking to your class next week?” Hopkins asked.

Ardis smiled. He wasn’t going to give up trying to lure her into joining the murder investigation.

“What do you have in mind?”

"I'm on my way to revisit the hit-and-run scene. I can pick you up." He sounded hopeful.

"Now, why would I want you to do that?"

"Don't you want to keep your profiling skills up?"

She leaned back in her chair, thinking that over. He was right.

"I'll come on one condition. You talk about a real case you've worked on Monday so my follow-up profiling lecture will be reality-based."

"Done. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."



As Hopkins drove to the edge of Vista Park, seedier apartment houses surrounded by lemon orchards and row crops began to appear, he turned onto Toyon Road. As she smelled the pungent scents of broccoli and onions mingled with fragrant lemons, Ardis had the feeling she'd been here before. She tried hard to remember when or why but finally gave up when Hopkins pulled his dented Toyota to the curb.

She stared at the fluttering yellow crime-scene tape that surrounded the lemon tree where the victim had been found and figured the killer had chosen this site because of its remoteness. He'd been smart—the body hadn't been discovered for almost half a week. She sighed. Determining the time of death would be difficult.

"Let's take a look," Hopkins said as he climbed out of the car.

Ardis grabbed a notepad and pen from her purse and followed, stumbling as she walked over dried leaf-covered clods.

When she reached the tree, she ducked under the tape and went close to it.

"What condition was the body in?" she asked.

Hopkins furrowed his brow, his face stoic.

“Skull bashed in, crushed chest, broken legs, bruises on her face and body, dried blood in her ears. From the the skid marks, it looked like the killer ran over her more than once.”

Ardis’s stomach churned as she considered the savagery of the attack.

“That’s pretty sadistic.” She wondered what had made the killer exhibit such brutality. Anger at the victim? If he knew her, what had she done to provoke his rage?

Hopkins continued. “The ME figured the vehicle was a big one.”

“Like a pickup or SUV?”

“We’re working on it,” he said, leaning against the tree.

“I hope you’ve identified her.”

Hopkins shook his head. “Bronkowski and I are working hard, but still no missing person reports or any witnesses. We’ve knocked on doors in the entire apartment complex, but either people weren’t home or they saw nothing. We’ll keep at it, because somebody has to have seen something.”

She didn’t want to tell him yet of her fear the victim was a Clarion student, but if they didn’t identify the woman soon, she knew she’d have to. In the meantime, she’d better make it clear to him that all she was here to do was to share some of her observations.

She gazed at the road and saw stains that were probably dried blood.

“Did the ME think she died out here or after she was dragged to the tree?”

“Autopsy’s not finished, but I’m nagging him, because I want to know if she was sexually assaulted.”

“Sad to say, that would fit, because I think the killer was extremely angry. Rape is a common expression of that kind of rage.”



Friday after her morning class, Ardis started to work on her profiling lecture for Monday only to realize she needed more information from Hopkins. He sounded pleased when he answered.

“Ardis, I was just thinking about you.”

“You’re not going to back out on me, are you?”

“Not unless the chief sends me out on something else. I got the reports from the crime lab and the ME.”

“I’ll come to the station for them this afternoon.”

“I got a better idea. Meet me at the Vista Park Apartments. Bronkowski and I will be looking for witnesses this morning. You could help us.”

He was still trying to pull her into the investigation. Knowing he wasn’t going to give up, she gave in and decided she might as well accept his offer.



Before leaving, Ardis stopped by her office to drop off materials she wanted her student assistant to copy. She was surprised to see Chris Baylor, the chair of the biology department, standing at her door.

“Got a minute?” he asked.

“Sure, come on in.” She didn’t know him well, but the buzz among students was that he was a great teacher.

“I’m here to ask a favor.” He sat in the chair on the other side of her desk and crossed his chino-clad legs.

“Ask away,” she said, wondering where he’d gotten his winter tan.

“I’m hoping I can talk you into replacing a member of the Academic Standards Committee while he’s on a sabbatical leave this spring.”

Ardis was surprised at his request because Academic Standards was an important committee new faculty rarely got to serve on. But serving on it would help when *she* came up for promotion and tenure, so she knew she shouldn’t say no, even though it would add to her workload.

He gave her an expectant look.

“They only meet once a month.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you know about the next meeting,” Chris said and stood. “Something else I want to ask you about—Danny Liston. I’ve been his advisor for the past two years, and he’s been a great student. But the last few weeks he’s been complaining about assignments, comes to class late and makes nasty comments about other students’ lab work. Big attitude problem. Have you seen that in your forensics class?”

She remembered Danny’s becoming upset when the class talked about a murder victim.

“Only that last week he seemed bothered by our discussion about victims of violence.”

Chris frowned. “He’s got so much potential. I hope nothing’s wrong.”



Ardis parked at the apartment complex and walked up the stained concrete sidewalk to the entrance where Hopkins was waiting. She cringed inwardly at the cigarette butts and empty beer cans tossed among the tired-looking boxwood hedges. The beige stucco walls were dotted with rust streaks, and she wondered why anyone would want to live here.

“Welcome to the Welfare Arms,” Hopkins said.

She made a face.

“I hate to think what it’s like inside.”

He shrugged. “No better, no worse. I think the judge should sentence the slumlord to live here. Make him suffer.”

“Where’s Bronkowski?”

“He’s on his way.”

A blast of chill wind suddenly slammed into the building. Ardis buttoned her jacket.

“You two get anything this morning?”

“Nah. Out of eight apartments we covered, only three people were home—a female in apartment twenty and a teenager in twenty-two. Neither of them saw or heard anything, but an old guy in twenty-four thought he heard tires screeching.” Hopkins frowned. “Only problem, he couldn’t remember what night it was.”

Ardis looked toward the opposite wing.

“What about those apartments?”

He pursed his lips as he opened the door to the entry hall for her.

“Most of them weren’t home. I hope we’ll have better luck this afternoon.”

A well-dressed, well-coiffed woman who looked to be in her fifties followed them in holding tightly to the hand of a little girl about seven years old. They started up the stairs, and Ardis nudged Hopkins.

“She doesn’t look like someone who’d live here. Why don’t we catch her before she disappears?”

He nodded and hurried up the stairs after the woman. Ardis followed.

“Ma’am,” he asked, “can we talk to you a minute?”

The woman turned around, looking puzzled.

“What about?”

“I’m Detective Hopkins of the Vista Park Police,” he said as he flashed his badge. “We’re investigating a homicide in the area.”

The woman shuddered. “I don’t know how I can help.”

“Can we talk in your apartment?”

“I guess so.” She led the way down the hall and put the key in the door. “Jenny, dear,” she said as she opened the door, “change into your play clothes and stay in your room till I finish talking to these people.”

A scowling Jenny hesitated a moment but finally trudged down the hall and disappeared. The woman took off her coat, laid it over the nearest chair and brushed a few strands of brown hair away from her face.

“What is this about a murder?”

Hopkins shifted his feet.

“The body of a hit-and-run victim was found in the orchard.” He pointed out her living room windows. “Do you remember seeing or hearing anything unusual last Friday night?”

She shook her head and crossed to the windows with Hopkins on her heels, as if she were looking for the site of the horrifying murder.

Ardis gazed around the room. What little furniture there was looked tired—faded and worn as though it had come from a thrift shop. That just didn’t jibe with the attractive, stylish woman Hopkins was questioning. Only the laptop on the dining room table looked like it was worth anything. She recognized the Biogram logo on the top and was surprised that one of its employees might live here, since she knew the company paid well.

The woman and Hopkins turned away from the windows.

“I’m sorry I can’t be of more help,” she said. “I’ve been here since Friday night babysitting for my daughter—she’s out of town at a conference.” She frowned. “It worries me that a murder occurred so close by. I keep telling her she should move.”

“Do you think *she* might have seen anything before she left?”

“She’s been gone since last Friday morning, and I didn’t see her before she left. She was supposed to be back yesterday, and I’m beginning to be concerned. I left a message on her cell phone, but she hasn’t called back. I don’t know what to do.”

Ardis stiffened. A Biogram laptop and a young woman who hadn’t returned from a conference seemed way too coincidental. She dreaded asking but had to know.

She took a deep breath.

“Is your daughter Lori Powell?”

“Yes, she is. I’m Frances Powell. Do you know Lori?”

“She’s been volunteering at my counseling center for a year and does such a good job.”

“She did mention something about that.”

Ardis exchanged a glance with Hopkins.

“Mrs. Powell, I hate to ask you, but we really would appreciate it if you could come down and tell us whether our victim is your daughter.”

Frances Powell’s face drained of color to the point Ardis reflexively reached out in case she fainted. Then the woman drew a deep breath and straightened her back as if girding for battle.

“Let me get one of the neighbors to stay with Jennie.”



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