

# Chapter One.

It had never been a joke that I'd found especially amusing, and George Ruiz was more than well aware of this. Squinting at me through the oddly static cigarette smoke, he waited for my response—seemingly counting off the seconds it took for me to raise the coffee cup to my lips and take a sip. When one was not forthcoming, however, he merely nodded thoughtfully, taking it all in his stride, and leant over the table, winking playfully.

“I said,” he said. “My dog’s got no nose.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“And that’s it? You’re not going to play the game?”

We'd been sitting in his mother's grotty kitchen for the past hour, talking about everything from the state of local politics to the way the rain ran through the dirt on the kitchen window. It had been riveting stuff, and had I had anywhere else to go on such a grey, shitty winter's afternoon, I would have. As it was, I'd decided that this was at least better than sitting in my flat listening to Ray LaMontagne and picking my toenails. Even with the dog joke.

I looked about the kitchen at the pots piled up in the sink, the greasy newspapers stacked by the kitchen door and the three in-need-of-emptying litter trays at the side of the sink—and thought that maybe there were advantages to my condition, after all. I was sure that had I shared George's olfactory ability, I'd have been well on my way to lung cancer, too. Anything to take the edge off it.

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“So you’re just going to keep right on ignoring me?” he said.

“I’m having a bad day.”

He sniffed with disgust and lit a fresh cigarette off the butt of the last. “You’re always having a bad day. Your life is one long run of bad days, mate. If you want my opinion—”

I didn’t, but that had never stopped him before.

“—what you really need to do is, you know, get a fucking grip. Not being offensive, you understand, just telling it like it is.”

One of his mother’s cats—Gemini, I think she called it, though for the life of me I didn’t know why—had oozed around the door from the hallway while he had been speaking. George now got to his feet, sticking the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and picking up the moggy by the scruff of the neck. Opening the back door, he threw it out into the rain and returned to his chair at the table.

“Bloody things get right on my nipple ends,” he explained. “If it was up to me, I’d drown the bloody lot of them. Or just hit ’em with a good, hefty brick.”

“You could always set your dog on them.”

“I haven’t got...” George wasn’t the nicest man on the planet, which was understandable, really, since he had never been the nicest boy on the planet, either. He was a bully and a lout—the kind of person I’d always striven to avoid, even as, all those years ago in the school playground, I’d found myself perversely attracted to the prospect of being his friend. He was more than happy to ridicule another’s failings, publicly mocking the dragging-footed gait of cripples and cruelly toasting port-wine stain birthmarks with a nice glass of the house red. But when the joke was on him, when the tables were turned and he found himself caught out, George was unexpectedly generous. His smile would light up the room with its nicotine glow and

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he would positively chortle at the absurdity of it all.

It didn't do to push it, however—as I'd learnt on more than one occasion.

“Bastard,” he chuckled. “Nice one, Price. You got me for a second, there.” He slapped me on the upper arm; a little over one year and one adventure later, it's still tingling. “Don't let it happen again.”

As the afternoon dragged on, George became increasingly morose. We sat in that kitchen, the light fading completely, the windows misting up (*on the outside*, George insisted, the room was that cold), and what little conversation there'd been totally dried up. I wanted to leave, but all I had waiting for me were four channels on a cracked fourteen inch television and two working bars on a five-bar gas fire. That and five tins of beans and one bottle of Stella. Not the most promising of Saturday nights, then.

“I've been invited to a party,” George told me, without looking up from the table top. He said “party” as though it were fatal blood disorder. I could understand that.

“Yippee.”

He raised an eyebrow and smirked at me. “A typical day in Paradise.”

“Parties coming out of every orifice.”

“Not that sort of party, I'm afraid,” he said. “But I appreciate the thought.”

“So what kind of party is it?” I said—after waiting a moment for our riotous mood to settle a little.

George shrugged and sat up a little straighter in his chair. His lank, greasy hair fell across his face and, perhaps for the first time, I noticed he was greying at the temples. It wasn't the startling shade of grey that would make him look distinguished

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in middle age, either. Rather, it looked as though he'd rubbed cigarette ash into his scalp and I knew it could only ever contribute to his unhealthy air of disassociation.

“A family gathering,” he told me, begrudgingly. “Like I say, not really a party at all. Stale sandwiches and dentures. You know.”

I nodded. I'd been to a few of those in my time. Yet another bond to tie dear, despicable George and I together.

“I take it you're not going, then?”

“I have to.” He smiled. Or sneered. It was difficult to tell which. “Call it familial obligation.”

“There might be some money in it for you, you mean.”

“Pots of the fucking stuff.” His eyes were sparkling with malevolent glee—the prospect of such unrivalled riches almost more than his little heart could bear. He told me of his ailing Aunt Martha, a spinster of this parish and drowning in financial success. As he told it, her investments were famous in family lore. She saw opportunity where others saw “inevitable” financial ruin, and had never been afraid to pounce—accumulating the kind of wealth no one in their family had ever dreamed of.

“And me,” George Ruiz said, winking at me, “I've always been her favourite, Price. She thinks the sun shines out of my shit-hole.”

“Which it does.”

“Naturally.”

A sound came from upstairs. A dull thud that no doubt meant that his mother was finally getting up. We both looked at the ceiling, George still puffing on his ciggy as if his life depended on it.

“She doesn't want me to go,” he told me. “Thinks I'm spoiling her chances—which, I have to admit, I am.” He looked at me and shrugged, a sadness behind his

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eyes that I'd never seen before... or, at the very least, one that I had seen and somehow managed to block out. "It's all academic, anyway," he continued. "I'm probably not going to go."

This was a fairly typical tactic of George's; as he saw it, his self-contradictory statements kept the enemy guessing. And in his confused little world, everyone was the enemy. Even me, it would seem.

"And miss out on a sausage on a stick and the promise of untold riches? Are you a fool, George Ruiz?"

He smirked and defiantly stubbed out his cigarette on the table top, a few inches away from the overflowing ash tray. "Maybe I am. Wouldn't put up with the likes of you if I wasn't, now, would I?"

The sound of movement upstairs was growing louder and more urgent. I heard a grunt of frustration and a barely muffled curse, before something fell to the floor with a muted thud. "Her leg," George explained. "She always drops it when she's getting it down off the top of the wardrobe. Especially if she's been on the piss the night before. I've told her, keep it by the bed, where it's handy, but..." Again he shrugged. "You know what they're like. Can't tell them a bloody thing."

I shook my head and smiled sympathetically—wondering just how bad it was for him, living at home with Carla Ruiz, her prosthetic limb and all her cats. Whenever I met her, she was always polite, if a little crapulent, with the air of one who felt as though she should have been born into more elegant times. Her cigarettes were always smoked through an ivory holder and she often enunciated with a mathematical precision that was never quite convincing. Occasionally, as she passed him on the way to the drinks cabinet, she would ruffle her sons hair affectionately, but George's reaction would always tell me far more than the act itself. Pulling away and

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cringing, it would have been obvious to anyone observing that he detested her with a passion. What they may not have noticed, however, was the tension in his neck and shoulders—the tightness around his jaw and lips that informed me, the more educated observer, that, George Ruiz was afraid of his mother... or, perhaps, afraid of what she could inadvertently do to him.

“I think you should go,” I said, a little sadistically, I must admit. “You can’t let yourself miss out on an opportunity like this, Georgie. It’s too... you know, *monumental*. Money like that... it could change your life forever.”

It was the most I had said all afternoon. He eyed me suspiciously as I tried not to let the guilt show, imagining Carla beating him over the head with her false leg when she found out that he was still intent on stealing her sister’s money out from under her nose, and for a moment, I thought he was onto me. If I could see his vulnerability through the angry, violent façade, it was no doubt true that he could also read me like a book. In the playground—the memories of which still haunted me some twenty years later—he had always worked me like a well-trained puppy, knowing just what to say and how to say it. He’d called me to heel and used my fear of exclusion (from our gang of two, rather than school itself) to make me do things I wouldn’t ordinarily do. Today, however, he seemed oblivious to just what was going on inside my head. Or if he wasn’t, he certainly hid it well.

He rubbed his face and sat back in his chair, rolling his head from side to side to relieve the tension in his neck. “Don’t think I could stick it,” he finally admitted. “*Familial obligation* or not, I hardly know any of them and...” He twitched his eyebrows at the ceiling. “Well, she’d be looking daggers at me all night. More than a boy could bear.” Lowering his eyes to meet mine, suddenly smiling, the realisation that I had yet again been played came too late.

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“Unless...” he said.

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It was still raining heavily when I left, but it was nevertheless a huge relief to be out of the Ruiz household. I had escaped, it was true, before Carla had managed to hobble her way downstairs for her five p.m. breakfast of cigarettes and Malibu, but I had not successfully avoided the snare that had followed George’s planned “unless”. Better men than I had been trapped by his machinations, this I knew—but as I pulled up my jacket collar against the wind, the welcome rain beating down on my balding head, I couldn’t help feeling that it would have been better if I had spent the afternoon alone in my flat, after all.

Cursing my bad luck and rank stupidity, I stopped at the kerb, preparing to cross. A piece of cardboard floated by in the gutter, as limp and lifeless as I felt, and as I looked up from watching it slip down into the drain, I caught someone scrutinising me from the other side of the road.

She stood within the shadow and shelter of an old familiar oak—holding a cat that, although I couldn’t have been certain, I thought might have been Gemini beneath her chin, stroking it mesmerically and staring at me unashamedly. Wearing a long, unfashionable raincoat and green Wellingtons, her drenched auburn hair plastered to her head, neck and face, she was anything but attractive... and, yet, I couldn’t stop looking at her.

She looked at me.

I looked at her.

And the rain continued to fall.

I raised a hand uncertainly, wondering if I should cross the road and talk to her—ask, perhaps, if she was lost or if there was anything I could do to help—but my

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hand got no higher than my waist before she turned and started walking down the road, away from me, in the direction of the abattoir. Hunched against the onslaught of rain, she looked somehow older from behind. I estimated that she was possibly only in her late twenties and, yet, as she walked quickly away with the cat still tucked under her chin, she looked much older... forty and prematurely frail, I thought, weighted down by innumerable burdens.

As I started to walk after her—not quite knowing why, or what I was going to say once I caught up with her—a car pulled into the kerb behind me and beeped its horn. Turning, I saw the familiar Renault Clio and groaned, torn between running after the old young woman and returning to the car. The cat-cuddling woman promised something—I didn't know what, but it had to be preferable to the bad news the car and its owner would inevitably be delivering. And, yet, it would look odd if I didn't do what I knew I must. To chase after a stranger was one thing—but to do it while my father was sitting in his car waiting for me to get in was another.

I thought of George's phrase *familial obligation* and opened the passenger door.

"Now don't say a word," Dad told me as I closed the door behind me. The dry, warm interior was welcoming—reminiscent of the family days out we'd suffered through my childhood, when it had *always* rained—but I was already missing the strange girl and her cat. I very briefly wondered if I could get Dad to follow her, but as he continued talking, I realised just how impossible that was. My fate had been sealed the minute I got into the car, as surely as if I had been a little boy accepting a lift from a stranger. I really should have known better.

"This is how it's going to be," Dad said, pulling back out into the road. He put the windscreen wipers on their fastest setting as the rain came down more heavily and

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I had to look away. “I’ve stuck my neck out for you, here. No question. But I don’t mind because that’s what father’s do for their offspring.” Only Dad could make me feel like a malfunctioning mattress. A rare talent. “I had a word with Tony Fraser. You remember him, right? Used to fix fridges for McArgills? Anyway, he works for the parks and gardens people, now—“

“Fixing fridges?”

“Eh? What?—No. Not fixing fridges. Jesus, Price, get a bloody grip. What on earth would he be doing fixing fridges for the parks and garden people? No, what he —”

“Do they still call them that? Parks and garden people, I mean.”

Dad stopped at the traffic lights on Waterhouse Road. He took a long, deep breath while I looked out of my side window, hoping to catch glimpse of my mystery woman. Twisting his hands on the steering wheel, the vinyl squeaking against his sweaty palms, I imagined him counting to ten under his breath—and took far too much satisfaction from the thought.

“I did say, didn’t I?” He spoke with a forced calm that had once terrified me. Now it just made me smile. “When you got in the car—I told you, right?”

“What did you tell me, Dad?”

“I told you not to say a word, did I not?” I nodded, not saying a word. “So don’t. Ok? Just sit there quietly like a good lad and listen to what I have to say.”

I pointed out that the traffic lights were on green and he muttered something I didn’t quite catch as he put the car in gear and drove on. I expected him to immediately pick up where he had left off, but instead he sat quietly for a few minutes, concentrating on the road and sucking on a Werther’s Original that he got out of the glove compartment (without even offering me one.) Thinking that this

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might go on all evening, I used the conversational lull to once again look for the mystery woman, even though I knew that we must have overtaken her a good ways back. We passed closing corner shops and disused cinemas, school grounds and multi-storey car parks. Five more minutes of silence and the rain started to ease up. I listened to Dad crunch the last of his sweet, feeling suddenly quite old and pathetic—sleepy from the warmth of the car’s impressive heater.

“So, like I was saying,” he finally continued, “I was having a word with him and I happened to mention that you were looking for a job.”

“Looking” was probably stretching it a bit, but now didn’t seem a good time to point that out.

“He always liked you, you know,” Dad said. “He told me that. Said that he saw something in you. He didn’t say what, and I didn’t ask, but to cut a long story short, they’re looking for... they’re looking for an assistant gardener at the Italian Gardens at Redburn and... well, the job’s yours if you want it.”

I didn’t want it, of course. The last thing I wanted to be was a *gardener*, assistant or otherwise. Unqualified for the job in every respect, I could already see just how much of a disaster it could well be. It wasn’t so much that I wouldn’t be up to the job. The truth was, I could pretty much turn my hand to anything. But my heart needed to be in it. Were I to do a job as well as it had to be done, it required a certain degree of motivation and commitment on my part—and I could already see in this instance just how lacking in those departments I would be.

“An assistant gardener,” I said, trying to figure out the best way of breaking the news to him.

“Could be quite an opportunity,” he told me, indicating a left. I didn’t know where we were going, but I had a funny feeling. “There’s the chance of promotion

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and, well, who wouldn't want to work in such beautiful surroundings?"

Redburn was a peculiar leftover from Victorian times. Perched on the edge of a cliff, the townspeople and their foreboding architecture traded on their meagre heritage, keeping the funicular railway running and suckering the tourists in once a year with the fabled and originally titled "Victorian Week". Craggy and a little stifling, it was grey in winter and not much better in summer—the one-time smugglers cove its only redeeming feature, but for the Italian Gardens... where Dad seemed intent on my working.

I remembered them from my childhood—regimental formality and precise colour, so at odds with the garish, excessive fashion of the day—and it was true that they, at least, *were* beautiful. On that Dad could not be contradicted. I remembered looking down on it from a high pathway, crouching between the comfortingly wild undergrowth and wondering how they got Nature to run in such abnormally straight lines. It had seemed obscene, somehow, even to the naïve, seven-year-old me, and, yet, it had nevertheless been impressive and, yes, beautiful.

I smiled to myself when I recalled how, later that day, Mam had encouraged me to smell the flowers—still convinced that the Anosmia I've suffered for as long as I can remember could be cured by simple perseverance. "Sniff up, love," she had said. "No, harder. There. Did you get anything?" I hadn't liked to give her straight "no". It had seemed cruel. And so I had shrugged and told her maybe.

False hope. It's that, not money, that makes the world go round.

"Why don't you give me his number, Dad," I said. "I'll give him a bell and drop by to see him."

He cast me a sideways glance—smiling ruefully and raising an eyebrow. "Oh, I think we can do better than that, don't you?"

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At this precise point in our conversation we passed a road sign. I didn't want to look at it, but I was unable to help myself. *Redburn*, it said. *Two Miles*.

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We found Tony Fraser the Former Fridge Fixer in a disconcertingly modern brick building to the south of the Italian Gardens. From the outside, it looked like a public toilet—square and squat, perfectly situated for the cottaging hordes and the weak of bladder and bowel. Hemmed in on three sides by trees and bushes, it could very easily be missed, had it not been for the booming Bach symphony that came from within.

Dad opened the door and leant in, shouting Tony's name a couple of times before the volume finally lowered. Looking over Dad's shoulder, I saw a man approaching from the shadows at the back of the room. Tony Fraser, I guessed.

"Cliff Waters," Tony Fraser said, with all the volume and enthusiasm of the Bach symphony he'd been listening to. "Fancy seeing you again so soon, you old sod. What can I do for you?"

Stepping out into the light and very pointedly closing the door behind him, Tony Fraser took one look at me and his face broke into a huge, undeniable smile and he nodded knowingly. "Ah," he said. "Of course. Say no more. The prodigal son—right, Cliff?"

Tony Fraser was a tall, slender guy in his mid-sixties. Hair shoulder-length and grey, thick as a lion's mane, he gave off the impression of an old hippy that was "done with all that foolishness". When he stepped towards me, I expected him to shake my hand but, instead, he hugged me, slapping my back vigorously and laughing heartily.

"Bloody good to see you, Price," he said, standing back to get a better look at me.

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“You, too, Tony.” I said it as if we were long lost buddies. The truth was, I couldn’t remember the bloke. I dimly recalled hearing Dad mention the name a few times over the years, but that was about it.

“That’s Mister Fraser to you,” Dad said—with a nod to Tony, just to let him know that he knew how to keep the young uns in their place. “Mind your manners.”

I was about to tell him that I’d do whatever the fuck I wanted with my manners, thank you very much, when *Tony* rolled his eyes, shook his head and said, “Tony will do just fine. Jesus, Cliff, you can be one uptight son of a bitch, at times.” Turning to me with a sympathetic look, he asked, “How old are you now, Price?”

“Thirty-seven,” I said. It sounded ridiculous and we all knew it.

“And he’s reminding you of your manners?” he said. “He still wiping your arse for you, too?”

“He’d like to think he was.”

“I fix you up with a job interview, and that’s the thanks I get?” Dad said, sounding a bit put out. “Ok, fine. Laugh at me, if you want, but manners still count for something with a few of us—as does simple, old-fashioned gratitude. I thought you, at least, would have understood that, Fraser.”

Looking about as contrite as he could under the circumstances, Tony nodded solemnly and said, “I do, Cliff—truly I do. My apologies.”

Dad nodded a little snootily. I could see the little muscle in his jaw twitching and I knew how difficult this must have been for him. He was trying desperately not to lose face but failing miserably—and confronted with this bone-crunching fact, he now had to decide how best to proceed.

“Accepted,” he said, with a tight, almost fascist nod of his head. “I’m not a one for holding grudges so...” Turning in my direction, he cleared his throat and

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looked me directly in the forehead. “I’ll leave you here, then,” he said. “I’m sure you are more than old enough to find your own way home.”

I was about to point out that it was positively chucking it down—thunder rumbling in the east like a percussive harbinger of doom—but before I could say anything, Tony stepped in and told him that that wouldn’t be a problem. He’d be finishing up himself in half an hour and would be more than happy to drop me back off at my flat.

“I take it you do have a flat,” he said to me, once Dad had gone. “You don’t still live...”

“Perish the thought.”

“Pleased to hear it.” He patted me on the back and then flicked his hair from his face, rather effeminately, and started leading me by the arm to the door to the, as he described it, “administrative hub of my little kingdom.” Pausing before the door, he looked at me gravely, the gardens suddenly still and quiet around us, but for the sound of the rain. “If you’re going to work for me,” he said. “There’s someone you have to meet, first.”

I didn’t say anything, merely followed him into the gloomy, windowless building. It felt damp inside and my eyes itched a little. I wondered what delightful smells I was missing.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I was surprised to see that this was more than just a storeroom. Yes, there were the spades, forks, lawnmowers, bags of bleeding compost and terracotta plant pots that I’d anticipated—but there was more than that. A good half of the building’s single room had been turned into a remarkably comfortable-looking lounge area. I saw a couple of sumptuous settees, a footstool and standard lamp (which Tony now turned on, after first closing the door behind him), a

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portable widescreen television, a rack for newspapers, piles of romance novels, dusty rugs on the floor and, even, a microwave oven. All of this paled into insignificance, however, when Tony stepped aside to introduce me to the person he'd brought me to meet.

“Price,” he said. “This is Claudia. Claudia Aslett.”

In her mid-forties, Claudia was beautiful. Her dark hair tumbled over her right shoulder to her breast and her eyes seemed to suck in the light—holding it within, feeding off it and unwilling to share, but all the more enchanting for it. She stared past me at the far wall, in no way acknowledging me, and her hands remained limp and motionless in her lap. Tony leant over and kissed her on the forehead, lovingly—with a sadness that made me want to look away, though it would have seemed rude to do so.

Claudia shifted slightly in her wheelchair and made a tiny, indecipherable sound in the back of her throat. Tony wiped a spot of saliva from her chin with a paper tissue, and then turned to regard me.

“Three years ago, Claudia was driving home from work,” he said, filling the kettle at the sink by the door. “Minding her own business, like we all do. She was a solicitor with a firm in town. Banks, Jaudice and Aslett. She was the Aslett. A full partner and highly thought of. She had a good mind, you see. One of the best in the business, Banks and Jaudice later told me. Plus she had principles. Too many, at times, though she would have said that too many still weren't enough.” He stopped and smiled to himself. A memory stirring, but quickly banished. “Anyway, she was driving home, minding her own business, and, *wallop*. She gets hit by one of those fucking four be four monstrosities. She was driving a Porsche—which, incidentally, she never took above fifty—and... it was a right mess.”

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“That’s awful,” I said, speaking directly to Claudia, just in case. “I’m so sorry.”

“Even worse when you consider that the other driver was three times over the legal limit and escaped without so much as a scratch,” Tony said. “Son of a bitch got a couple of years. Claudia... well, she got life.”

When I had left George’s earlier that afternoon, I could never have imagined that an hour and a half later would find me sitting with Tony Fraser and Claudia, sipping Twinings Assam tea and listening intently as Tony told me all about Claudia—the struggles and sorrows they had had, the little victories that kept them going.

“We’d been friends and neighbours for many years,” he said, the two of us on one of the settees, Claudia pulled up close to Tony. “We got on like a house on fire, but I couldn’t stand that husband of hers. Right pompous little turd. Anyway, when Claudia got a bit of sense—this is before the accident, you understand—and sent him packing, I started doing the occasional odd job for her... don’t look like that. It’s not a euphemism.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean—“

“That didn’t come till later,” he added with a smile and a wink. Patting Claudia on her knee, he said, “We were good together, isn’t that right, love? Still are, if you want the truth. You don’t find that shocking, do you?”

“That you still make love?” I said. “No. No, I don’t. I... I think I’d find it shocking if you didn’t.”

Tony seemed to approve of my answer, even if he didn’t entirely believe me. He sat back and looked up at the ceiling. “It’s been hard, Price,” he said. “There’s no denying that. But it could have been a hell of a lot worse.” He took a sip of his tea and sniffed, blinking rapidly and clearing his throat.

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“Still want to work for me?” he asked.

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