

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

JEFFREY ARCHER



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JEFFREY ARCHER

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER



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To: TOM & LEONA

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Prologue



“President of the United States,” she replied.

“I can think of more rewarding ways of bankrupting myself,” said her father as he removed the half-moon spectacles from the end of his nose and peered at his daughter over the top of his newspaper.

“Don’t be frivolous, Papa. President Roosevelt proved to us that there can be no greater calling than public service.”

“The only thing Roosevelt proved...,” began her father. Then he stopped and pretended to return to his paper, realizing that his daughter would consider the remark flippant.

The girl continued as if only too aware of what was going through her father’s mind. “I realize it would be pointless for me to pursue such an ambition without your support. My sex will be enough of a liability without adding the disadvantage of a Polish background.”

The newspaper barrier between father and daughter was abruptly removed. “Don’t ever speak disloyally of the Poles,” he said. “History has proved us to be an honorable race who never go back on our word. My father was a baron—”

“Yes, I know. So was my grandfather, but he’s not around now to help me become President.”

“More’s the pity,” he said, sighing, “as he would undoubtedly have made a great leader of our people.”

“Then why shouldn’t his granddaughter?”

“No reason at all,” he said as he stared into the steel gray eyes of his only child.

“Well then Papa, will you help me? I can’t hope to succeed without your financial backing.”

Her father hesitated before replying, placing the glasses back on his nose and slowly folding his copy of the *Chicago Tribune*.

“I’ll make a deal with you, my dear—after all, that’s what politics is about. If the result of the New Hampshire primary turns out to be satisfactory, I’ll back you to the hilt. If not, you must drop the whole idea.”

“What’s your definition of satisfactory?” came back the immediate reply.

Again the man hesitated, weighing his words. “If you win the primary or capture over thirty percent of the vote, I’ll go all the way to the convention floor with you, even if it means I end up destitute.”

The girl relaxed for the first time during the conversation. “Thank you, Papa. I couldn’t have asked for more.”

“No, you certainly couldn’t,” he replied. “Now, can I get back to figuring out just how the Cubs could possibly have lost the seventh game of the series to the Tigers?”

“They were undoubtedly the weaker team, as the nine-three score indicates.”

“Young lady, you may imagine you know a thing or two about politics, but I can assure you you know absolutely nothing about baseball,” the man said as his wife entered the room. He turned his heavy frame toward her. “Our daughter wants to run for President of the United States. What do you think about that?”

The girl looked up at her, eagerly waiting for a reply.

~~“I’ll tell you what I think,”~~ said the mother. ~~“I think it’s well past her bedtime and I blame you for keeping her up so late.”~~

“Yes, I suppose you’re right, Zaphia.” He sighed. “Off you go to bed, little one.”

She came to her father’s side, kissed him on the cheek and whispered, “Thank you, Papa.”

The man’s eyes followed his eleven-year-old daughter as she left the room, and he noticed that the fingers of her right hand were clenched, making a small, tight fist, something she always did when she was angry or determined. He suspected she was both on this occasion, but he realized that it would be pointless to try to explain to his wife that their only child was no ordinary mortal. He had long ago abandoned any attempt to involve his wife in his own ambitions and was at least thankful that she was incapable of dampening their daughter’s.

He returned to the Chicago Cubs and their loss of the series and had to admit that his daughter’s judgment might even be right on that subject.

Florentyna Rosnovski never referred to the conversation again for twenty-two years, but when she did, she assumed that her father would keep his end of the bargain. After all, the Polish are an honorable race who never go back on their word.

The Past



1934–1968

Chapter One



It had not been an easy birth, but then for Abel and Zaphia Rosnovski nothing had ever been easy and in their own ways they had both become philosophical about that. Abel had wanted a son, an heir who would one day be chairman of the Baron Group. By the time the boy would be ready to take over Abel was confident, his own name would stand alongside those of Ritz and Statler, and by then the Barons would be the largest hotel group in the world. Abel had paced up and down the colorless corridor of St. Luke's General Hospital waiting for the first cry, his slight limp becoming more pronounced as each hour passed. Occasionally he twisted the silver band that encircled his wrist and stared at the name so neatly engraved on it. Abel had never doubted, even for a moment, that his firstborn would be a boy. He turned and retraced his steps once again, to see Dr. Dodek heading toward him.

"Congratulations, Mr. Rosnovski," he called.

"Thank you," said Abel eagerly.

"You have a beautiful girl," the doctor said as he reached him.

"Thank you," repeated Abel quietly, trying not to show his disappointment. He then followed the obstetrician into a little room at the other end of the corridor. Through an observation window, Abel was faced with a row of wrinkled faces. The doctor pointed to the father's firstborn. Unlike the others her little fingers were curled into a tight fist. Abel had read somewhere that a child was not expected to do that for at least three weeks. He smiled, proudly.

Mother and daughter remained at St. Luke's for another six days and Abel visited them every morning, leaving his hotel only when the last breakfast had been served, and every afternoon after the last lunch guest had left the dining room. Telegrams, flowers and the recent fashion of greeting cards surrounded Zaphia's iron-framed bed, reassuring evidence that other people too rejoiced in the birth. On the seventh day mother and unnamed child—Abel had considered six boys' names before the birth—returned home.

On the anniversary of the second week of their daughter's birth they named her Florentyna, after Abel's sister. Once the infant had been installed in the newly decorated nursery at the top of the house Abel would spend hours simply staring down at his daughter, watching her sleep and wake, knowing that he must work even harder than he had in the past to ensure the child's future. He was determined that Florentyna would be given a better start in life than he had had. Not for her the dirt and deprivation of his childhood or the humiliation of arriving on the Eastern Seaboard of America as an immigrant with little more than a few valueless Russian rubles sewn into the jacket of an only suit.

He would ensure that Florentyna was given the formal education he had lacked, not that he had a lot to complain about. Franklin D. Roosevelt lived in the White House, and Abel's little group of hotels looked as if they were going to survive the Depression. America had been good to this immigrant.

Whenever he sat alone with his daughter in the little upstairs nursery he would reflect on his past and dream of her future.

When he had first arrived in the United States, he had found a job in a little butcher's shop on the lower East Side of New York, where he worked for two long years before filling a vacancy at the Plaza Hotel as a junior waiter. From Abel's first day, Sammy, the old maitre d', had treated him as though he were the lowest form of life. After four years, a slave trader would have been impressed by the work and unheard-of overtime that the lowest form of life did in order to reach the exalted position of Sammy's assistant headwaiter in the Oak Room. During those early years Abel spent five afternoons a week poring over books at Columbia University and, after dinner had been cleared away, read on late into the night.

His rivals wondered when he slept.

Abel was not sure how his newly acquired sheepskin could advance him while he still only waited on tables in the Oak Room. The question was answered for him by a well-fed Texan named Davis Leroy, who had watched Abel serving guests solicitously for a week. Mr. Leroy, the owner of eleven hotels, then offered Abel the position of assistant manager at his flagship, the Richmond Continental in Chicago, with the sole responsibility of running the restaurants.

Abel was brought back to the present when Florentyna turned over and started to thump the side of her crib. He extended a finger, which his daughter grabbed like a lifeline thrown from a sinking ship. She started to bite the finger with what she imagined were teeth....

When Abel first arrived in Chicago he found the Richmond Continental badly run down. It didn't take him long to discover why. The manager, Desmond Pacey, was milking the books and as far as Abel could tell probably had been for the past thirty years. The new assistant manager spent his first six months gathering together the proof he needed to nail Pacey and then presented his employer with a dossier containing all the facts. When Davis Leroy realized what had been going on behind his back he immediately sacked Pacey, replacing him with his new protégé. This spurred Abel on to work even harder, and he became so convinced that he could turn the fortunes of the Richmond Group around that when Leroy's aging sister put her 25 percent of the company's stock up for sale, Abel cashed everything he owned to purchase it. Davis Leroy was touched by his young manager's personal commitment to the company and proved it by appointing him managing director of the group.

From that moment they became partners, a professional bond that developed into a close friendship. Abel would have been the first to appreciate how hard it was for a Texan to acknowledge Pole as an equal. For the first time since he had settled in America, he felt secure—until he found out that the Texans were every bit as proud a clan as the Poles.

Abel still couldn't accept what had happened. If only Davis had confided in him, told him the truth about the extent of the group's financial trouble—who wasn't having problems during the Depression?—between them they could have sorted something out. At the age of sixty-two Davis Leroy had been informed by his bank that the value of his hotels no longer covered his loan of two million dollars and that he would have to put up further security before the bank would agree to pay the next month's expenses. In response to the bank's ultimatum, Davis Leroy had had a quiet dinner with his daughter and retired to the Presidential Suite on the seventeenth floor with two bottles of bourbon. Then he had opened the window and jumped. Abel would never forget standing on the corner of Michigan Avenue at four in the morning having to identify a body he could recognize only by the jacket his mentor had worn the previous night. The lieutenant investigating the death had remarked that it had been the seventh suicide in Chicago that day. It didn't help. How could the policeman possibly know how much Davis Leroy had done for him, or how much more Abel Rosnovski had intended to do in return for that friendship in the future? In a hastily composed will Davis had bequeathed the remaining 75 percent of the Richmond Group stock to his managing director, writing to Abel that although the stock was worthless, 100 percent ownership of the group might give him a better chance to negotiate new terms with the bank.

Florentyna's eyes opened and she started to howl. Abel picked her up lovingly, immediately regretting the decision as he felt the damp, clammy bottom. He changed her diaper quickly, drying the child carefully, before making a triangle of the cloth, not allowing the big pins anywhere near her body: any midwife would have nodded her approval at his deftness. Florentyna closed her eyes and nodded back to sleep on her father's shoulder. "Ungrateful brat," he murmured fondly as he kissed her on the cheek.

After Davis Leroy's funeral Abel had visited Kane and Cabot, the Richmond Group's bankers in Boston, and pleaded with one of the directors not to put the eleven hotels up for sale on the open market. He tried to convince the bank that if only they would back him, he could—given time—turn the balance sheet from red into black. The smooth, cold man behind the expensive partner's desk had proved intractable. "I have responsibilities to my own clients to consider," he had used as an excuse. Abel would never forget the humiliation of having to call a man of his own age "sir" and still leave empty-handed. The man must have had the soul of a cash register not to realize how many people were affected by his decision. Abel promised himself, for the hundredth time, that one day he would get even with Mr. William "Ivy League" Kane.

Abel had traveled back to Chicago thinking that nothing else could go wrong in his life, only to find the Richmond Continental burned to the ground and the police accusing him of arson. Arson it proved to be, but at the hands of Desmond Pacey bent on revenge. When arrested, he readily admitted the crime; his only interest was the downfall of Abel. Pacey would have succeeded if the insurance company had not come to Abel's rescue. Until that moment, Abel had wondered if he would not have been better off in the Russian prisoner-of-war camp he had escaped from before fleeing to America. But then his luck turned when an anonymous backer, who, Abel concluded, must be David Maxton of the Stevens Hotel, purchased the Richmond Group and offered Abel his old position as managing director and a chance to prove he could run the company at a profit.

Abel recalled how he had been reunited with Zaphia, the self-assured girl he had first met on board the ship that had brought them to America. How immature she had made him feel then, but not when they met and he discovered she was a waitress at the Stevens.

Two years had passed since then, and although the newly named Baron Group had failed to make a profit in 1933, it lost only \$23,000, greatly helped by Chicago's celebration of its centenary, when over a million tourists had visited the city to enjoy the World's Fair.

Once Pacey had been convicted of arson, Abel had only to wait for the insurance money to be paid before he could set about rebuilding the hotel in Chicago. He had used the interim period to visit the other ten hotels in the group, sacking staff who showed the same pecuniary tendencies as Desmond Pacey and replacing them from the long lines of unemployed that stretched across America.

Zaphia began to resent Abel's journeys from Charleston to Mobile, from Houston to Memphis, continually checking over his hotels in the South. But Abel realized that if he was to keep his side of the bargain with the anonymous backer, there would be little time to sit around at home, however much he adored his daughter. He had been given ten years to repay the bank loan; if he succeeded, a clause in the contract stipulated, he would be allowed to purchase all the stock in the company for a further three million dollars. Zaphia thanked God each night for what they already had and pleaded with him to slow down, but nothing was going to stop Abel from trying to fulfill the contract to the letter.

"Your dinner's ready," shouted Zaphia at the top of her voice.

Abel pretended he hadn't heard and continued to stare down at his sleeping daughter.

"Didn't you hear me? Dinner is ready."

"What? No, dear. Sorry. Just coming." Abel reluctantly rose to join his wife for dinner.

Florentyna's rejected red eiderdown lay on the floor beside her cot. He picked up the fluffy quilt and

placed it carefully on top of the blanket that covered his daughter. He never wanted her to feel the cold. She smiled in her sleep. Was she having her first dream? Abel wondered as he switched out the light.

Chapter

Two



Florentyna's christening was something everyone present was to remember—except Florentyna who slept through the entire proceedings. After the ceremony at the Holy Name Cathedral on North Wabash, the guests made their way to the Stevens Hotel, where Abel had taken a private room. He had invited over a hundred guests to celebrate the occasion. His closest friend, George Novak, a fellow Pole who had occupied the bunk above him on the ship coming over from Europe, was to be one *Kum* while one of Zaphia's cousins, Janina, was to be the other.

The guests devoured a traditional ten-course dinner including pirogi and bigos while Abel sat at the head of the table accepting gifts on behalf of his daughter. There was a silver rattle, U.S. savings bonds, a copy of *Huckleberry Finn* and, finest of all, a beautiful antique emerald ring from Abel's unnamed benefactor. He only hoped that the man gained as much pleasure in the giving as his daughter showed in the receiving. To mark the occasion, Abel presented his daughter with a large brown teddy bear with red eyes.

"It looks like Franklin D. Roosevelt," said George, holding the bear up for all to see. "This calls for a second christening—FDR."

Abel raised his glass. "Mr. President," he toasted—a name the bear never relinquished.

The party finally came to an end about 3 A.M., when Abel had to requisition a laundry cart from the hotel to transport all the gifts home. George waved to Abel as he headed off down Lake Shore Drive, pushing the cart before him.

The happy father began whistling to himself as he recalled every moment of the wonderful evening. Only when Mr. President fell off the cart for a third time did Abel realize how crooked his path must have been down Lake Shore Drive. He picked up the bear and wedged it into the center of the gifts and was about to attempt a straighter path when a hand touched his shoulder. Abel jumped around, ready to defend with his life anyone who wanted to steal Florentyna's first possessions. He stared up into the face of a young policeman.

"Maybe you have a simple explanation as to why you're pushing a Stevens Hotel laundry cart down Lake Shore Drive at three in the morning?"

"Yes, officer," replied Abel.

"Well, let's start with what's in the packages."

"Other than Franklin D. Roosevelt, I can't be certain."

The policeman immediately arrested Abel on suspicion of larceny. While the recipient of the gifts slept soundly under her red eiderdown quilt in the little nursery at the top of the house on Rigg Street, her father spent a sleepless night on an old horsehair mattress in a cell at the local jail. George appeared at the courthouse early in the morning to verify Abel's story.

The next day Abel purchased a maroon four-door Buick from Peter Sosnkowski, who ran a secondhand car lot in Logan Square.

Abel began to resent having to leave Chicago and his beloved Florentyna even for a few days, fearing he might miss her first step, her first word or her first anything. From her birth, he had

supervised her daily routine, never allowing Polish to be spoken in the house; he was determined there be no trace of a Polish accent that would make her feel ill at ease in society. Abel had intently waited for her first word, hoping it would be “Papa,” while Zaphia feared it might be some Polish word that would reveal that she had not been speaking English to her firstborn when they were alone.

“My daughter is an American,” he explained to Zaphia, “and she must therefore speak English. Too many Poles continue to converse in their own language, thus ensuring that their children spend their entire lives in the northwest corner of Chicago being described as ‘Stupid Polacks’ and ridiculed by everyone else they come across.”

“Except their own countrymen who still feel some loyalty to the Polish empire,” said Zaphia defensively.

“The Polish empire? What century are you living in, Zaphia?”

“The twentieth century,” she said, her voice rising.

“Along with Dick Tracy and Famous Funnies, no doubt?”

“Hardly the attitude of someone whose ultimate ambition is to return to Warsaw as the first Polish ambassador.”

“I’ve told you never to mention that, Zaphia. Never.”

Zaphia, whose English remained irredeemably shaky, didn’t reply but later grumbled to her cousins on the subject and continued to speak only Polish when Abel was out of the house. She was not impressed by the fact, so often trotted out by Abel, that General Motors’ turnover was greater than Poland’s budget.

By 1935, Abel was convinced that America had turned the corner and that the Depression was a thing of the past, so he decided the time had come to build the new Chicago Baron on the site of the old Richmond Continental. He appointed an architect and began spending more time in the Windy City and less on the road, determined that the hotel would turn out to be the finest in the Midwest.

The Chicago Baron was completed in May 1936 and opened by the Democratic mayor, Edward J. Kelly. Both Illinois senators were dancing attendance, only too aware of Abel’s burgeoning power.

“Looks like a million dollars,” said Hamilton Lewis, the senior senator.

“You wouldn’t be far wrong,” said Abel, as he admired the thickly carpeted public rooms, the high stucco ceilings and the decorations in pastel shades of green. The final touch had been the dark green embossed B that adorned everything from the towels in the bathrooms to the flag that fluttered on the top of the forty-two-story building.

“This hotel already bears the hallmark of success,” said Hamilton Lewis, addressing the two thousand assembled guests, “because, my friends, it is the man and not the building who will always be known as the Chicago Baron.” Abel was delighted by the roar that went up and smiled to himself. His public relations advisor had supplied that line to the senator’s speech writer earlier in the week.

Abel felt at ease among big businessmen and senior politicians. Zaphia, however, had not adapted to her husband’s change in fortunes and hovered uncertainly in the background, drinking a little too much champagne, and finally crept away before the dinner was served with the lame excuse about wanting to see that Florentyna was safely asleep. Abel accompanied his flushed wife toward the revolving door in silent irritation. Zaphia neither cared for nor understood success on Abel’s scale and preferred to ignore his new world. She was only too aware how much this annoyed Abel and couldn’t resist saying, “Don’t hurry home” as he bundled her into a cab.

“I won’t,” he told the revolving door as he returned, pushing it so hard that it went around three more times after he had left it.

He returned to the hotel foyer to find Alderman Henry Osborne waiting for him.

“This must be the high point in your life,” the alderman remarked.

“High point? I’ve just turned thirty,” said Abel.

A camera flashed as he placed an arm around the tall, darkly handsome politician. Abel smiled toward the cameraman, enjoying the treatment he was receiving as a celebrity, and said just loud enough for eavesdroppers to hear, "I'm going to put Baron hotels right across the globe. I intend to bring to America what César Ritz was to Europe. Stick with me, Henry, and you'll enjoy the ride." The city alderman and Abel walked together into the dining room and once they were out of earshot Abel added: "Join me for lunch tomorrow, Henry, if you can spare the time. There's something I need to discuss with you."

"Delighted, Abel. A mere city alderman is always available for the Chicago Baron."

They both laughed heartily, although neither thought the remark particularly funny.

It turned out to be another late night for Abel. When he returned home he went straight to the spare room, to be sure he didn't wake Zaphia—or that's what he told her the next morning.

When Abel came into the kitchen to join Zaphia for breakfast Florentyna was sitting in her high chair smearing a bowlful of cereal enthusiastically around her mouth and biting at most things that remained within arms' reach—even if they weren't food. When he had finished his waffles, dripping with maple syrup, Abel rose from his chair and told Zaphia that he would be having lunch with Henry Osborne.

"I don't like that man," said Zaphia, with feeling.

"I'm not crazy about him myself," replied Abel. "But never forget he's well placed in City Hall to be able to do us a lot of favors."

"And a lot of harm."

"Don't lose any sleep over that. You can leave the handling of Alderman Osborne to me," said Abel as he brushed his wife's cheek and turned to leave.

"Presidunk," said a voice, and both parents turned to stare at Florentyna, who was gesticulating the floor where the eight-month-old Franklin D. Roosevelt lay on his furry face.

Abel laughed, picked up the much-loved teddy bear and placed him in the space Florentyna had left for him on the high chair.

"Pres-i-dent," said Abel slowly and firmly.

"Presidunk," insisted Florentyna.

Abel laughed again and patted Franklin D. Roosevelt on the head. So FDR was responsible not only for the New Deal but also for Florentyna's first political utterance.

Abel left the house, to find his chauffeur waiting for him beside the new Cadillac. Abel's driving had become worse as the cars he could afford improved. When he bought the Cadillac, George had advised a driver to go with it. That morning he asked the chauffeur to drive slowly as they approached the Gold Coast. Abel stared up at the gleaming glass of the Chicago Baron and marveled that there was no place on earth where a man could achieve so much so quickly. What the Chinese would have been happy to strive for in ten generations, he had achieved in less than fifteen years.

He leaped out of the car before his chauffeur could run around to open the door, walked briskly into the hotel and took the private express elevator to the forty-second floor, where he spent the morning checking over every problem with which the new hotel was faced. One of the passenger elevators wasn't functioning properly. Two waiters had been involved in a knife fight in the kitchen and had been sacked by George even before Abel had arrived, and the list of damages after the opening looked suspiciously high: Abel would have to check into the possibility that thefts by waiter were being recorded in the books as breakage. He left nothing to chance in any of his hotels, from what was staying in the Presidential Suite to the price of the eight thousand fresh rolls the hotel needed

every week. He spent the morning dealing with queries, problems and decisions, stopping only when Alderman Osborne was ushered into Abel's office by his secretary.

"Good morning, Baron," said Henry, patronizingly referring to the Roznovski family title.

In Abel's younger days as a junior waiter at the Plaza in New York the title had been scornfully mimicked to his face. At the Richmond Continental when he was assistant manager it had figured in whispered jokes behind his back. Lately everyone mouthed the prefix with respect.

"Good morning, Alderman," said Abel, glancing at the clock on his desk. It was five past one. "Shall we have lunch?"

Abel guided Henry into the adjoining private dining room. To a casual observer, Henry Osborne would hardly have seemed a natural soulmate for Abel. Educated at Choate and then Harvard, as he continually reminded Abel, he had later served as a young lieutenant with the Marines in the World War. At six feet, with a full head of black hair lightly sprinkled with gray, he looked younger than his history insisted he had to be.

The two men had first met as a result of the fire at the old Richmond Continental. Henry was then working for the Great Western Casualty Insurance Company, which had, for as long as anyone could remember, insured the Richmond Group. Abel had been taken aback when Henry had suggested that a small cash payment would ensure a swifter flow of the claim papers through the head office. Abel did not possess a "small cash payment" in those days—although the claim eventually found its way through because Henry also believed in Abel's future.

Abel had learned for the first time about men who could be bought.

By the time Henry Osborne was elected to the Chicago City Council as an alderman, Abel *could* afford a small cash payment, and the building permit for the new Baron proceeded through City Hall as though on roller skates. When Henry later announced that he would be running for the Ninth District of the House of Representatives in Illinois, Abel was among the first to send a sizable check for his campaign fund. While Abel remained wary of his new ally personally, he recognized that a tame politician could be of great help to the Baron Group. Abel took care to ensure that none of the small cash payments—he did not think of them as bribes, even to himself—was on the record and felt confident that he could terminate their relationship as and when it suited him.

The dining room was decorated in the same delicate shades of green as the rest of the hotel, but there was no sign of the embossed B anywhere in the room. The furniture was nineteenth century, entirely in oak. Around the walls hung oil portraits from the same period, almost all imported. With the door closed, it was possible to imagine that one was in another world far away from the hectic pace of a modern hotel.

Abel took his place at the head of an ornate table that could have comfortably seated eight guests but that day was laid only for two.

"It's like being in a bit of old England," said Henry, taking in the room.

"Not to mention Poland," replied Abel, as a uniformed waiter served smoked salmon while another poured them both a glass of Bouchard Chablis.

Henry stared down at the full plate in front of him. "Now I can see why you're putting on so much weight, Baron."

Abel frowned and quickly changed the subject. "Are you going to the Cubs's game tomorrow?"

"What's the point? They have a worse home record than the Republicans. Not that my absence will discourage the *Tribune* from describing the match as a close-fought battle bearing no relation to the score and that if a totally different set of circumstances had taken place, the Cubs would have pulled off a famous victory."

Abel laughed.

"One thing's for sure," continued Henry, "you'll never see a night game at Wrigley Field."

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