



## **Damage Control**

*Denise Hamilton*

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Maggie Silver is solidly middle class, with a mortgage to pay and an ill mother to support. She does her best to scramble up the ladder at an exclusive, high-powered PR firm in Southern California, whose clients are movie stars and famous athletes. Now, Maggie is being asked to take on her toughest client yet: Senator Henry Paxton, distinguished statesman from Southern California, who also happens to be the father of Anabelle, Maggie's former high school best friend.

Senator Paxton's young, female aide has been found murdered, and it is up to Maggie to run damage control and prevent a scandal. Thrown back into the Paxtons' glamorous world, Maggie is unexpectedly flooded with memories from the stormy years in high school when her friendship with Anabelle was dramatically severed after a tragedy that neither of them has been able to forget. As Maggie gets further embroiled in the lives of the Paxtons, she realizes that the ties of her old friendship are stronger than she thinks.

## **Damage Control Details**

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## From Reader Review Damage Control for online ebook

### **Abby says**

Damage Control by Denise Hamilton was a thrilling novel that left me on the edge of my seat throughout its entirety. I would recommend this book to people who enjoy murder mysteries and have the time and patience to get through some of the slower parts. There are some ideas and concepts in this novel that may be harder for younger readers to understand, not to mention some of the more mature scenes, so I would not recommend this to any youth readers. Overall, Damage Control was a great book.

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### **Joanne McPortland says**

Good story but overlong, and needed better editing to remove the many repetitious parts. SoCal atmosphere right on.

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### **Kim says**

What a pleasant surprise! I really liked this one. Maggie's love of perfumes was fun too.

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### **John says**

Back in the day, young sixteen-year-olds Maggie Weinstock and Anabelle Paxton were inseparable, even though Maggie was born on the wrong side of the tracks and Anabelle came from the rich and powerful Paxton dynasty. But then something went wrong at a beach party, and the two drifted apart.

Now, sixteen years and an unsuccessful marriage later, Maggie Silver is working at a high-powered crisis management/PR agency that helps the famous put the right spin on whatever mishaps might occur. She's looking after a cantankerous mother, trying to afford an upside-down mortgage, working as near 24/7 as makes little difference and popping Adderall whenever she thinks no one's looking. When her boss instructs her to handle a new case, the murder of a young political intern, it takes a moment to realize that he wants her to control the spin for the renowned politician for whom that intern worked: Senator Henry Paxman, the father of her long-lost pal Anabelle and the paterfamilias of what had been in her adolescence her surrogate family.

Never quite sure whom she can trust, if anyone, Maggie somehow muddles her way through to a solution not just of the intern's and another, consequential murder but of what really went on that fateful night at the beach . . .

The premise is great and the plot complex enough to satisfy the most demanding mystery reader, while Hamilton's certainly a very fluent writer so I never got bored, but at the same time I felt that in places the execution was a bit clumsy. Towards the end, for example, as the killer is preparing to wipe Maggie out with a bullet through the head, that person spends some pages explaining large chunks of what happened both

sixteen years ago and now. Why? Because it suits the exposition rather than because it might ever be likely to happen this way outside a James Bond movie ("Bwahahaha Herr Bond -- let me explain zu you my secret plans before zu die eine hideous death!").

Similarly clumsy are the odd little datadumps for the ignorant among us; I did not feel sure, for example, that I really required two or three lines informing me that Georges Simenon was a prolific mid-twentieth-century crime writer whose Parisian detective yadeyadeyada. (Perhaps Hamilton's editor persuaded her that the kids these days don't know what a Simenon is.)

As you'll be guessing, quite a lot of the time that I was reading this book I was vacillating between enjoying it hugely (most of the time) and being irritated by it (too often for comfort). The central character, Maggie Silver, is a great creation, and the fact that she has so many personal blemishes and hangups made me like her all the more. Some of the other characters were pretty shallowly drawn, though ("shallowly drawn"? well, you know what I mean): Anabelle's mother Miranda, for example, I was never able to conjure up in my mind's eye, and the same goes for the dead woman's boyfriend and for Maggie's colleague Samantha. (As an aside, it was also a bit of a distraction that one of the supporting cast was called Bernie Saunders.)

This is one of those novels that'd be ideal for a long train/plane journey: a joy to read (when not clunky), by and large pretty gripping, a great protagonist . . . and yet, and yet, and yet I felt that it somehow didn't live up to the author's obvious and undoubted skills as a storyteller.

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## Linda says

### **DAMAGE CONTROL** by Denise Hamilton

Scribner (September 2011)

Review by Linda S. Brown

Author Denise Hamilton has a unique way of "drawing" various parts of Los Angeles: glamorous or gritty, her style is positively melodic. One thing is clear, however, you can't take the investigator out of the author, a former reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. In Maggie Silver, protagonist of this new mystery, **DAMAGE CONTROL**, there are hints of Hamilton's popular journalist character, Eve Diamond, from her earlier series. What makes **DAMAGE CONTROL** unique from Hamilton's earlier works are the interesting time jumps between 1993 – when Maggie and Anabelle were teenaged best friends – and 2009 (the period Hamilton has set as present day). History, particularly social events and technology, made great leaps during that brief span of time.

The opening scene is poetic in cadence, with an early hint of danger and intrigue. The setting is the summer of 1993, with Maggie as a high school student hanging at a party with some very cool kids in a very cool (if seedy) beach scene. As Maggie and her friend Anabelle approach the scene, they stop under a palm tree "for a lip gloss boost. Above us, something rustled, but when I looked up, it was only dead gray fronds trembling in the breeze. The air smelled of coconut oil, spilled beer, and Mr. Zog's Sex Wax." (The wax, by the way, is for surfboards.) "From the party bungalow came hoots and jeers, then the knifing soprano of a girl's laugh. Black Flag blasted from fuzzy speakers. As the song ended, a wave crashed in perfect time just beyond the dunes."

In late summer 2009, the now adult Maggie Silver works for The Blair Company, a public relations firm that

specializes in cleaning up messes in which celebrities and politicians find themselves caught. Her boss, Jack Faraday, is a rather frightening figure, ruthless in his protection of the firm's clients and relentless in his use of his employees. In addition to Maggie (public relations specialist), there is Fletch (resident computer geek), and Matt Tyler (company investigator). And there is the almost mythical Thomas Blair, the genius and power behind the curtain.

As mastermind Blair points out, "The Internet abhors a vacuum," Blair said. "If you don't talk, others will, and within hours you'll have an electronic echo chamber of gossip and innuendo." And in 2009, *TMZ*, *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *MySpace* and other blogs and online media outlets were taking the lead in releasing news to the public, particularly the public's avaricious following of celebrity news and scandal.

**DAMAGE CONTROL** is about crisis management on a celebrity level, and Hamilton shines a very bright light on scandal. Blair sets up what the company calls a "truth squad" to confront media about attacks on their clients and "press mentions." When they find a mistake they call up the culpable journalist, casting themselves as "crusaders for journalism ethics."

Maggie thinks of it more as working magic. Occasionally, however, the magic turns nightmarish, as when she finds herself having to work "damage control" on the family she knew so well as a teen, the family of her teenaged best friend, Anabelle Paxton.

The methods of crisis management can be appalling to those being "managed": the new client, U.S. Senator Henry Paxton, comes to The Blair Company when his young aide, Emily Mortimer, is discovered dead. The Blair CM team suggests a press conference with the Senator and the aide's grieving parents. "Henry Paxton stared at Faraday with revulsed fascination." Apparently, it doesn't suit the senator's East Coast prep school background and Pacific Palisades present-day lifestyle to use the tragedy of others' to further his own cause. It does not, however, prevent him from holding the press conference.

There are times in this novel when the author appears uncomfortable with dialogue. It is almost as if dialogue is employed by reluctant necessity, as if the author has already allowed the reader to venture so far into the characters' heads that spoken words should not be required.

Hamilton's experience as a reporter shows in the thoroughness of her research: her character's use of Adderall as a performance (neuro) enhancer, as well as politics, intrigue, and of all things, perfume, the special idiosyncrasy of Maggie.

There is, of course, romance, in addition to intrigue and murder: Maggie, Anabelle, Anabelle's police captain husband Randall, Anabelle's handsome brother Luke, the Blair investigator Matt – all find themselves in varying roles that need untangling throughout the novel, some past-tense, some in present time.

But the over-arching theme in **DAMAGE CONTROL** seems to be scent. Fragrance. Aroma. Perfume... This is the sense that plays the most significant role to Maggie. This reviewer asked the author about that topic in an online blog exchange:

LB: Denise, I'm fascinated by your use of perfume -- and other fragrances, scents, aromas -- in **DAMAGE CONTROL**. It's an incredible book, and almost causes sensory overload ... What made you focus on scent as a motif?

DH: Hi Linda, I'm so glad you enjoyed my book. Regarding sensory overload, well, I guess that's how I experience the world on a daily basis - on the verge of sensory overload. I've always used a lot of sensory images in my books. In **SUGAR SKULL**, Eve Diamond is crawling through the dirt basement of an

abandoned building damaged by an earthquake and I tried to imagine what it smelled like, that damp, dank smell of earth, of rotting wood, the chalky dust in the back of your throat from the plaster falling off and decaying. I also think that in LA we live in an olfactory paradise - the fragrant orange blossoms, night blooming jasmine, sage and thyme and rosemary of the hills...the salt tang of the sea. So that was all natural scents, and then with my interest in perfume, I added in more complex blended scents. I think that smell is the least appreciated and utilized of our five senses, and it was time to bring it back to the fore, especially in solving a mystery!

Hamilton excels in her use of various types of sensuality in her descriptions of surroundings – the sight of particular architecture, the smells of certain flowers, the sounds of music or the ocean – but in the sensual world of **DAMAGE CONTROL** there is no romance or relationship that hasn't been tainted or spoiled or thwarted.

The question is can Maggie Silver stay in control of her own senses long enough to solve the murders – and protect herself from the “damage control” sought by others?

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### **Carol Frazer says**

New author for me. I will read others by her.

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### **Aaron Lazar says**

Damage Control is a complex psychological thriller set in current day Los Angeles, peopled with vibrant characters battling fears of survival and loss, tautly stretched loyalties, and well-camouflaged villains.

The story begins when Maggie Silver--a young PR rep who's struggling to support her cancer-stricken mother and keep a house with an upside-down mortgage--is assigned to insulate Senator Henry Paxton and his family from the press by spinning the sordid facts of his aide's murder and protecting the family's reputation. After all, the Senator has been tapped for a much higher office, and chances are he'll move upward quickly.

The problem is Maggie knew the Senator's family when she was a teenager and was the poor church mouse best friend of rich kid Anabelle Paxton. Years have passed, and in the time since they grew apart, neither has acknowledged or faced the memories of the one horrible night they shared on the beach.

Hamilton weaves some interesting themes throughout this complicated novel, including subtly erotic romance, power struggles and cover-ups, and dangerous flirtations with potential killers.

The author's style is breezy and smooth, and occasionally she sneaks in some lovely poetic passages, well worth savoring.

"At the cemetery, Anabelle threw the first spade of earth on the coffin. The wind shifted and ash fell softly and silently over us all, blanketing the dark soil and clinging greasily to our clothes, reminding us of where we'd come from and where we would all return."

(Note: the "ash" here refers to cinders from the wildfires burning nearby)

Here's another simultaneously lovely and unsettling segment:

"A voice whispered at the edge of my consciousness as the jets screeched and the tide sucked the pebbles. If only I could make out the words. But it was just out of reach, echoing with faint, faraway laughter, taunting me with secret knowledge.

Anabelle?

What if she'd crossed the highway to the ocean, swimming out until she drowned? I pictured her body carried on the swell of the waves, arms spread like wings, orange crabs crawling in and out of empty eye sockets, long blond ropes of hair floating like seaweed, a million microscopic sea animals clinging to her curves, illuminating her in a phosphorescent shroud."

Most intriguing was the author's inclusion of scents into the story. Hamilton's descriptions of the perfumes Maggie loved and remembered was evocative and poetic, and her use of fragrance as a vital clue was brilliant. Her passages reminded me of my own passion for essential oils and their subtle, complex aromas capable of transporting one to places quite foreign and delicious. I discovered after reading the book that Denise Hamilton spends time with fragrance in a professional capacity (she blogs about perfume, for one thing) and this explained the interesting additions. See this passage:

"The previous Christmas, we'd stood at her mother's vanity table, dabbing Caron's Nuit de Noel behind our ears from the ravishing black Deco crystal flask. It was Christmas in a bottle, rich and exotic, all mulled wine and candied chestnuts, green pine with sandalwood and roses and a holiday goose roasting on the horizon. Anointed for midnight mass, we'd floated down the stairs in a cloud of scent and black velvet."

Although this reviewer is hardly a perfume aficionado, the descriptions of this fragrance brought to mind the Young Living essential oil blend "Christmas Spirit," a delightful amalgam of orange peel, cinnamon bark, and spruce leaf oil.

In DAMAGE CONTROL, surprises are deliciously revealed and sufficiently shocking. Denise Hamilton is a proficient writer who maintains perfect tension and keeps her readers turning the pages.

I recommend this tightly woven tale of deception and love.

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### **Hallie says**

Denise Hamilton is on familiar turf with her standalone, "Damage Control." As in her reporter Eve Diamond series, Hamilton explores Los Angeles, this time the über-privileged element behind the walls of Malibu's gated community. Protagonist Maggie Silver is another scrappy outsider, determined to prove she's worth the \$750 an hour. The Blair Company, a high-power public relations firm, charges for her services. It's the kind of company that starlets who get caught buying heroin have on speed dial.

When Senator Henry Paxton's young female aide is murdered, Maggie is tapped to manage media fallout. She realizes she's been offered this plum assignment because her relationship with the Senator's daughter Annabelle gives her entree to the family's inner circle. Maggie and Annabelle were bosom buddies in high school until a traumatic night of sex and violence at a Play del Rey beach club. Soon Maggie is up to her neck in family drama. Fueled by Adderall and ambition, Maggie is like Icarus flying to close to the sun as she gets closer and closer to finding a killer and discovering what really happened that night years ago.

Hamilton is an adept storyteller who keeps the pages turning, enmeshing the reader in what may or may not be Maggie's amphetamine-induced paranoia right up to a surprising finish.

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### **Michelle says**

Really liked this book! I always dislike the first chapter or so when starting a new book because it takes a while to get engrossed in the story. With this book, though, I was immediately involved in the story and with the characters and couldn't wait to find out what would happen next. The pacing of *Damage Control* was perfect. Small secrets or revelations were revealed here and there keeping the reader interested up until the last page. These characters have so many secrets and it was fun to see them unravelled bit by bit instead of solving all the answers in the last few pages. I was still trying to decide who was good, bad, lying, etc...up until the very end. The only thing I would change is the cover of the book (which has nothing to do with the content, I know!). Just doesn't seem to go with the story at all. I won this book on Goodreads First Reads Giveaways and almost didn't enter because of the cover, but was interested in it after reading the description. I hope other reader look past the cover and read the description also cause it was a good read!!

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### **Deborah says**

This review covers not only "Damage Control," but also Denise Hamilton's other book, "The Jasmine Trade" and her "LA Noir" short story collection which she edited.

I cannot say enough about the writing style of Denise Hamilton. She not only knows the streets of LA, she breathes life into them through her every written word. It's chilling to read her books. Denise has the skill of a fine surgeon, knowing just when and where to place the razor and how to cut to release that last shred of skin between our belief and disbelief. Her hand is quick and so adept we hardly know we've been "had" until it's over and we're shocked to see our heart in our hands. She is a master writer of this genre. I have a feeling Denise is a masterful writer of anything she chooses to put her mind to. I think she's spoiled me for reading anyone else in noir fiction, female or male.

"The Jasmine Trade" is breathtaking. I was completely spellbound by the insider information and story surrounding a young girl killed outside a shop with her bridal dresses in her car! What starts out as a horrendous, but not that unusual these days, tale of a young girl's tragic murder, turned into a spider web of the macabre for me. Denise Hamilton unveiled layer after layer of LA's underside, teaching me things I had no idea existed; i.e., "parachute kids?" I'd never even heard this was happening in our country. And she shone a light into some dark dwellings both physical and psychological that left me shuddering.

What I found most exciting about Ms Hamilton's writing in both the novels I read (and her short story "Midnight In Silicon Alley" in her L. A. Noir Collection) was her ability to use an ordinary pace, an simple staccato of words and sentences to lay out the most astounding and dark situations. A clip of interchange between characters that conveyed more than just the words themselves...It was like reading the movements of a cat studying it's prey before pouncing! Glorious and so unusual I wanted to clap and yell, "Yes!!" several times through the books. This kind of writing is intense and so freaking rare!

Let me say a little bit about Eve Diamond, who is the journalist/investigative writer protagonist of "The Jasmine Trade." She is vulnerable, hard-core on the side of right, and devoted to her story. I'm a huge fan of this character. I loved everything about her. Hamilton hits just the right chords with her balance between a woman with the insecurities of a feminine sort, and a journalist looking for more than just the surface report in order to lift the scab off a deeper slash on the LA landscape. It's Denise's development of both these sides of her that makes Eve a remarkable character, but it's the use of Eve's vulnerabilities that makes the story itself just blast off the pages. She is unrelenting when looking for the truth behind a murder; but, bound up and driving that is the underlying concern for Asian children abandoned by their parents, for instance. Eve Diamond is a character I can happily read more about in Hamilton's other novels.

What was new to me about these books among all the books I've read? The dark tone of "voice." The descriptions of the underbelly of the city and the surrounding scruff and side-beaches. The brilliance of too much light at night and used tinsel garishness by day, both literally and figuratively. The "invisible" people that stray and strand along the sidelines of the glitz and glamour of Hollywood and LA. Concepts of evil hidden behind the flat, compliant faces of ordinary kids in designer label outfits- -apparently, no drugs applied. How swiftly calm, security and routine can be smashed in a smoky room, in an unknown section of town where you weren't aware that nobody speaks English, and you don't know how to get a ride home. The multi-cultural nature of a city that is a microcosm of our country and where we're headed.

I've tried to convey to you how unusual and how brilliant a writer Denise Hamilton really is. "Damage Control" will send ice splints through your veins. "The Jasmine Trade" will change the way you look at Asian children and their parents for a while; at least it changed things for me. I haven't been able to put these books, and Ms Hamilton's short story out of my mind. I keep returning to parts of them long after I've read them. When studying fine arts and art history I learned that one of the tests of a masterpiece is that we can't stop looking at it. We find ourselves continually drawn back into the painting, finding more things of interest and wanting to look at it longer. There is much of this quality in Denise Hamilton's books. They just keep coming back to haunt you

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### **Ellen Crosby says**

Terrific! Great lyrical writing, excellent story. LA lovingly described by someone who knows it well. Put it on your "must read" list.

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## **Taylor Mortsoff says**

I thought this book was okay, I felt like it dragged on through most of the book. Only towards the end did it pick up some....

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## **Carl Brookins says**

More than just romance can often flower under the hot desert moon. In southern California, a lot more. In the artificially irrigated hothouse of perfectly sculpted bodies, overabundance of wealth, aggressive power and overweening ambition are a dangerous combination that leads, almost inevitably, to corruption. And it is corruption that's at the heart of this complex, lyrically written tale, along with a strong dose of murder and mystery.

Maggie Silver grew up on the far side of the tracks. Now in adulthood with a mortgage, a failed marriage, and an ill mother, she's scrambling for a place, if not in the sun, as near as she can get without singeing her fingers. Her values are aspiring middle class. She'd like to be one of the beautiful people, and for a while in a private school with a rich girl friend named Anabelle Paxton, the giddy, youthful exuberance of unsupervised teenaged life seems to point to a life to come of luxury and happiness.

Fast forward to today. Having lost that youthful connection to the good life, Maggie is establishing herself as a fixer. Working for the powerful public relations firm, Blair Company, she finds herself once more entangled with the Paxton family, Henry, now a powerful U.S. Senator, Luke, the golden son and Anabelle, once her very best girl friend. A murder has happened and the situation must be managed. The Blair firm gets paid a great deal of money by wealthy clients to do exactly that. What happens then, to Maggie, the Paxtons, to other members of the firm is enthralling, complicated, and almost a Greek tragedy.

The author has taken a common theme, power, wealth and their corrupting influences, and infused the story with a strong dose of both good and evil. and while she carefully and fully illuminates much of the evil that resides in Los Angeles and its special culture, there is at times, a faint but fascinating aura of envy, as if the author yearns, however ruefully, for just a little taste of the life she writes about. The genius of the novel lies in part in the complex and convoluted story and the way the author infuses this story with life.

Hamilton has not penned a polemic against the culture of southern California. Rather she holds up the citizens, and the organizations to a searing light and lets readers judge the actions and the influences that result. Unlike Raymond Chandler, with whose writing she is compared, her sympathies clearly lie with all the characters, while never condoning their actions, or trumpeting the consequences. So in the end, readers, themselves having perhaps experienced a little bit of envy for the characters, can close the book and ponder the questions we all may ask ourselves, to whom do we really owe the greatest loyalty?

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## **Marlyn says**

Maggie Silver's profession is damage control. She gets paid to clean up, or hide messes made by famous people. When we meet Maggie she's on her way to the home of an actor who has been accused of sexual

assault by his children's nanny. Maggie's job is to spin the incident to make the nanny seem dishonest and mercenary in order to take the appearance of transgression away from the actor.

Before she has a chance to do much, however, her manager calls to tell her they have an even more important client back at the office. When she gets there, she's surprised to see someone she once knew very well: the father of her high school best friend, now a respected Senator.

When Maggie realizes what she is expected to do, she briefly considers resigning, but she knows she can't. She has a mortgage to pay and a cancer-survivor mother to support, and so she must recall of the unpleasantness that ended her friendship with Anabelle Paxton.

It takes some time before Maggie allows herself (and the reader) into the place where those memories are hidden. The gradual revelation of those memories begins with smells: sand and salt water, barbecue-flavored potato chips, patchouli. It's already been made clear that the olfactory sense is very significant to Maggie. In the first chapter of the book Maggie describes dabbing her wrists with perfume just before meeting a client:

...clean, crisp notes of citrus, bergamot and verbena. Nothing cloying or clobbering...Just a subtle scent amulet to infuse me with secret grace and power.

Ms. Hamilton skilfully describes Maggie's reactions to sights, sounds, and smells to increase the already strong empathy the reader has with her through the first-person point of view. We become so attuned to Maggie's senses and emotions that we can almost feel the heat of the sun on her arms, the dizziness caused by watching a record spinning on a turntable.

This is one of those books that (as I probably say too often) you will want to read slowly and savor, yet at the same time rush through to learn what happens. And what happens does not disappoint, save to signal the end of our time with Maggie.

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\*FTC Full Disclosure: Many thanks to the publisher, who sent me an e-galley of the book for review purposes.

### **Sheila Beaumont says**

This riveting novel, both mystery and political/psychological thriller, drew me in on the first page and kept my rapt attention all the way through to the end. The characters were exceptionally well drawn and believable, the story was filled with surprising twists and turns, and I found the portrayal of the PR "damage control" firm and its complex, tortuous machinations fascinating. This is a book I'll want to reread soon so I can savor Ms. Hamilton's excellent storytelling and writing without having to rush ahead to find out what happens next.

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