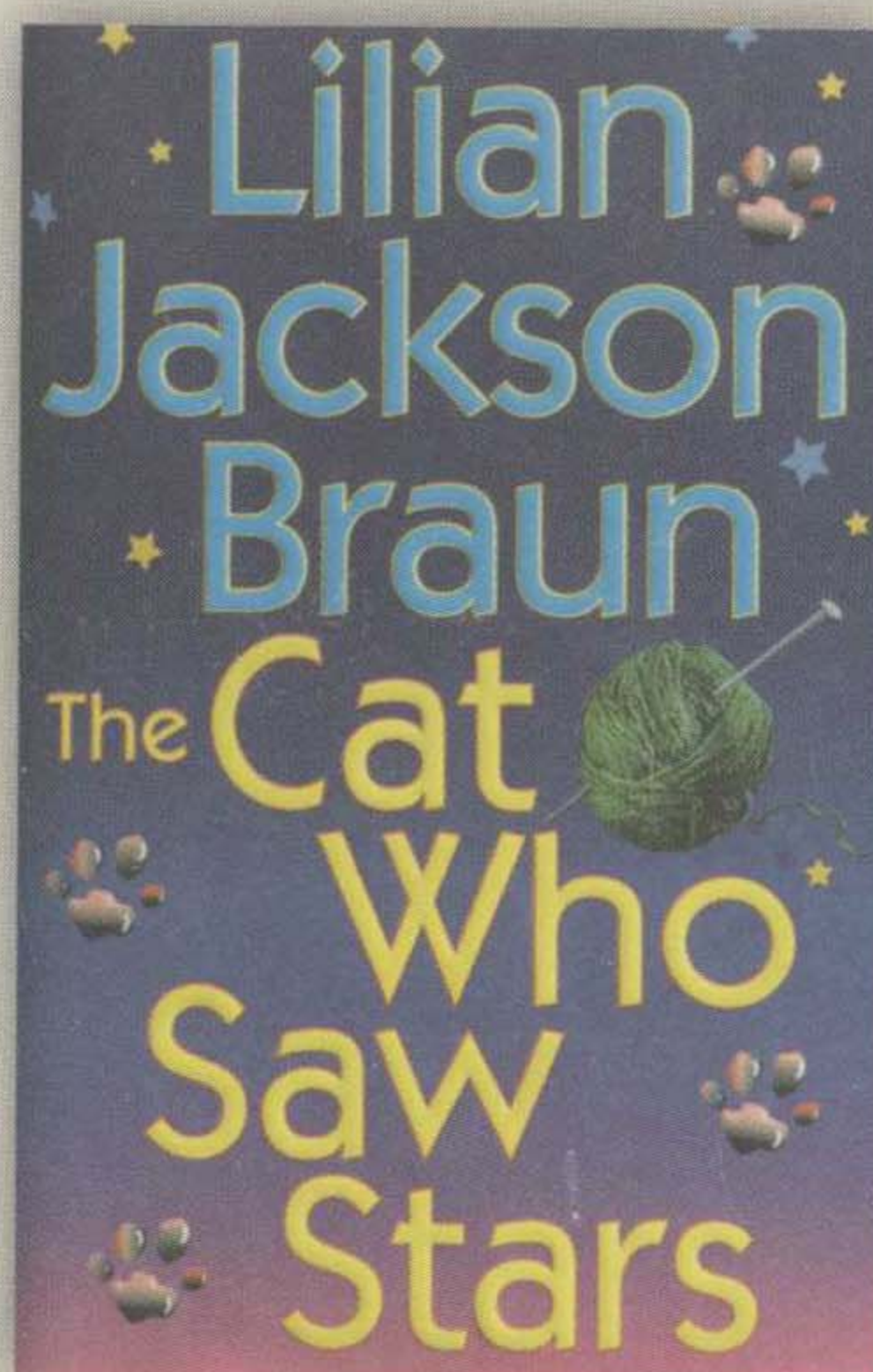
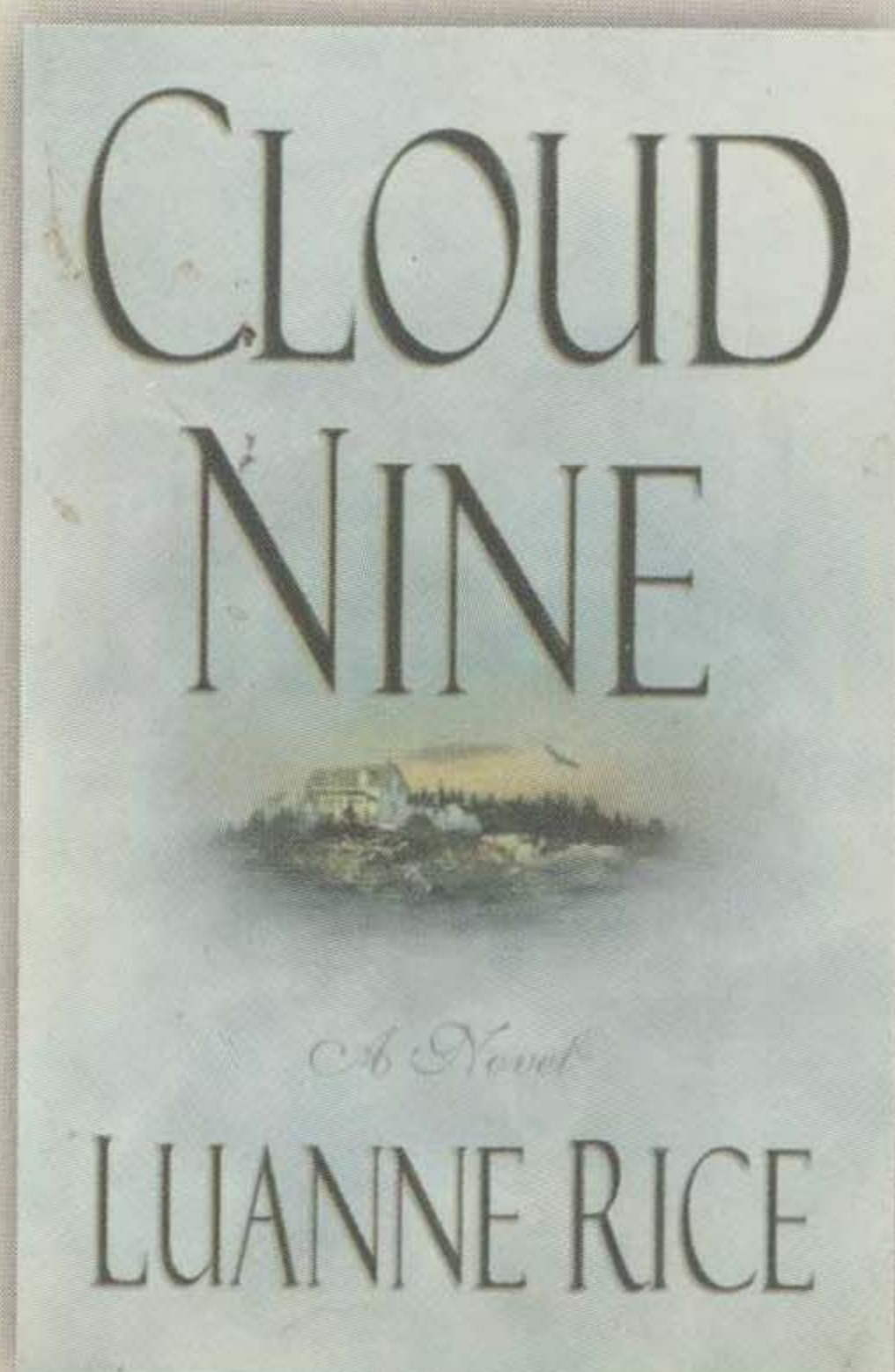
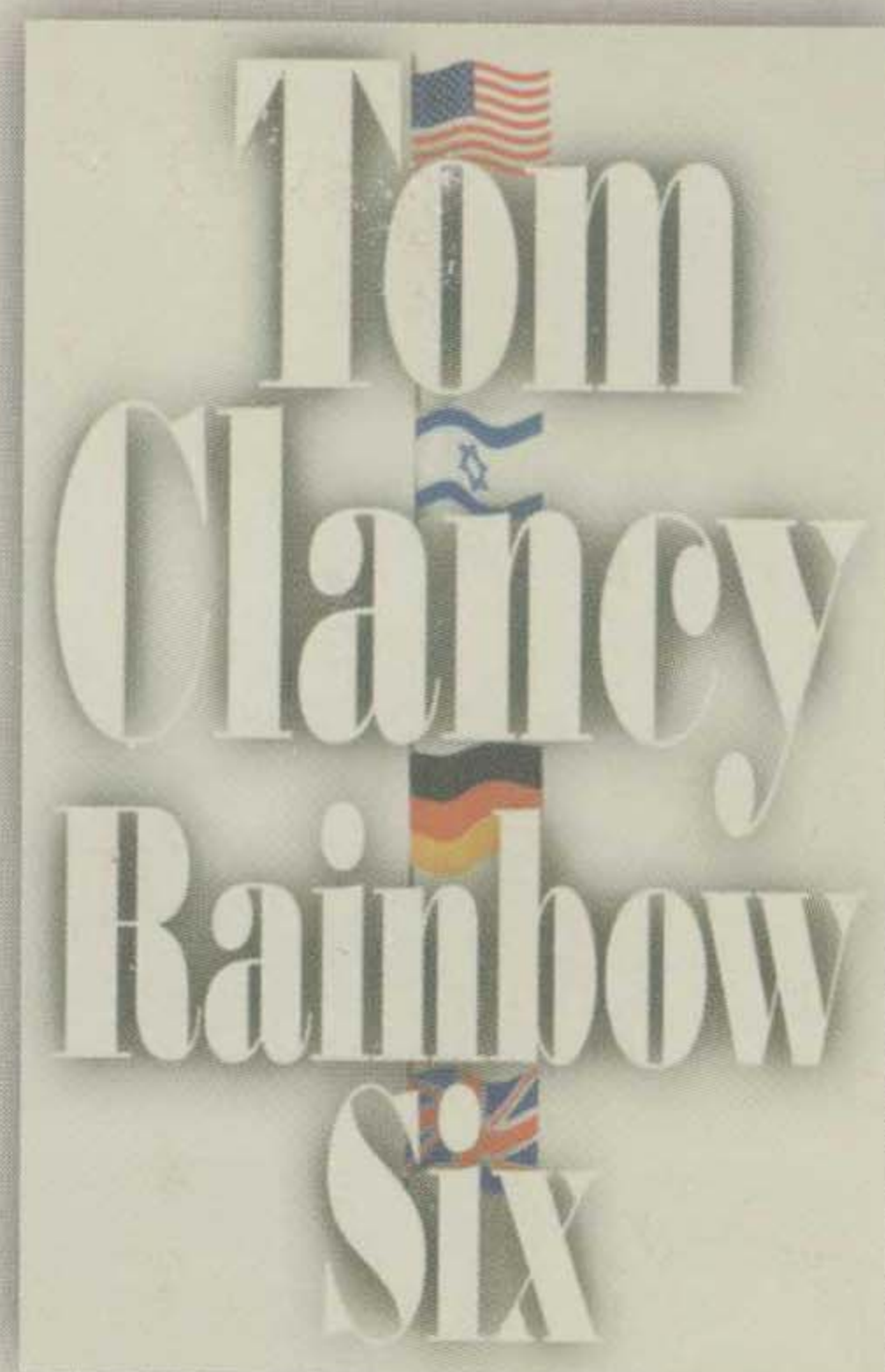
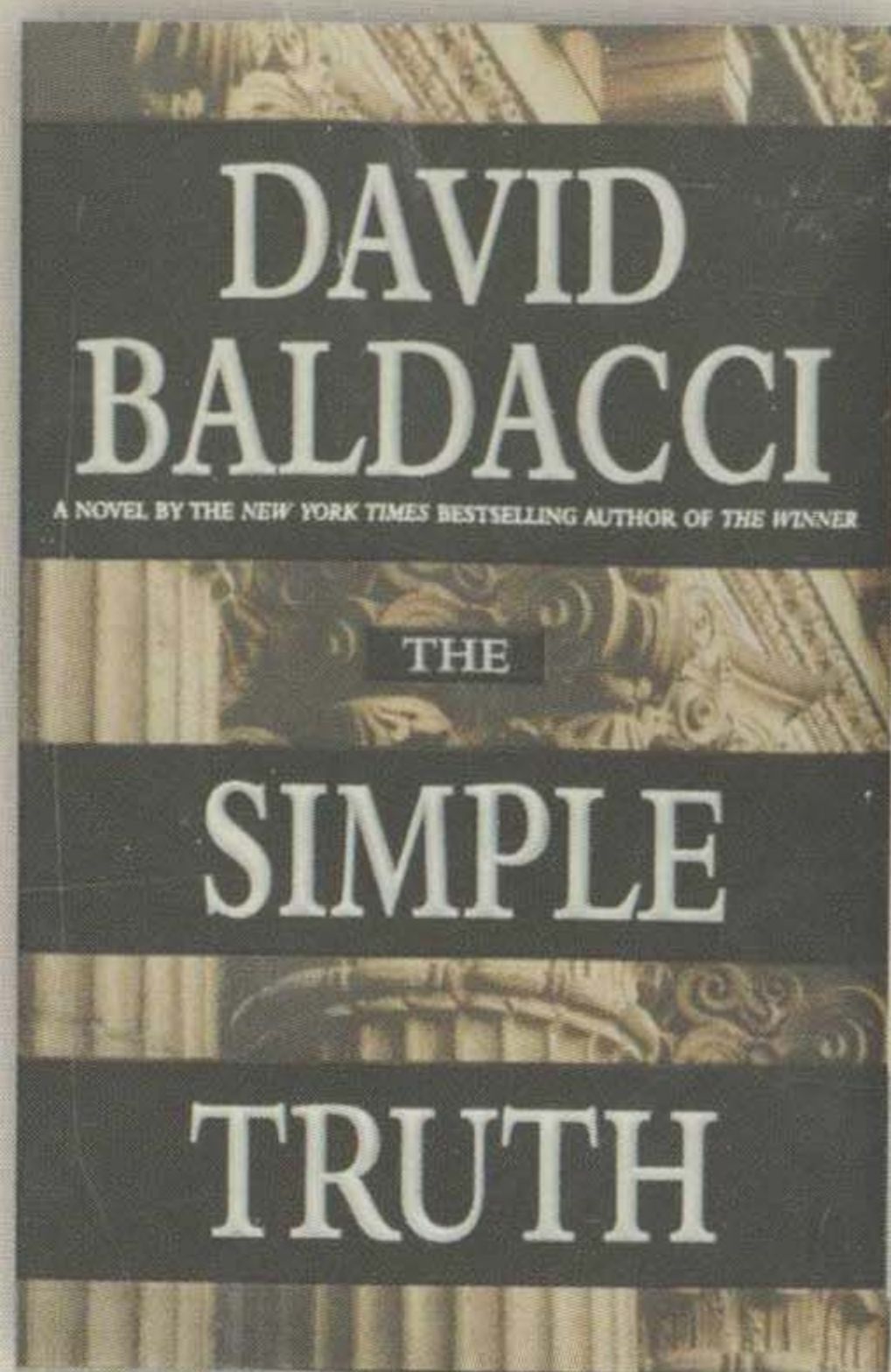


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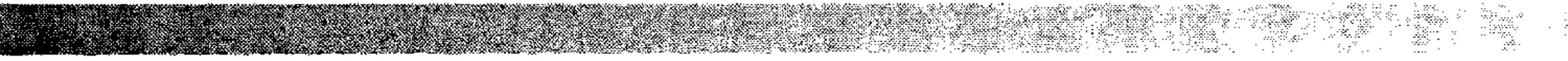
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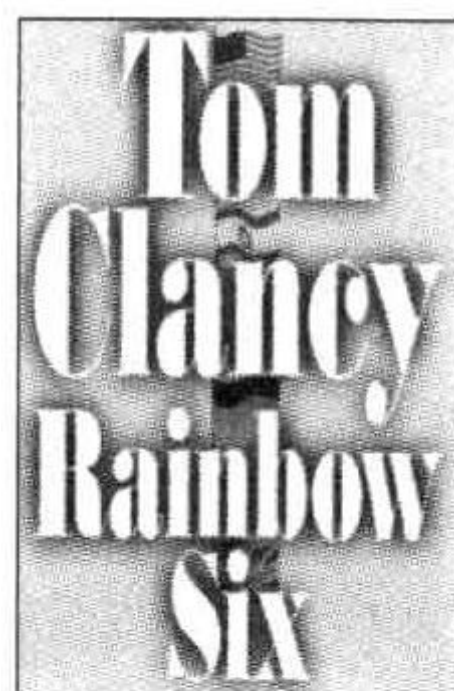
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CONTENTS

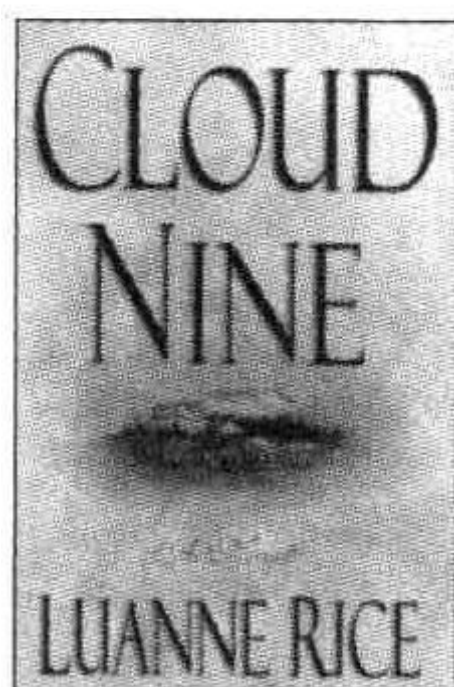


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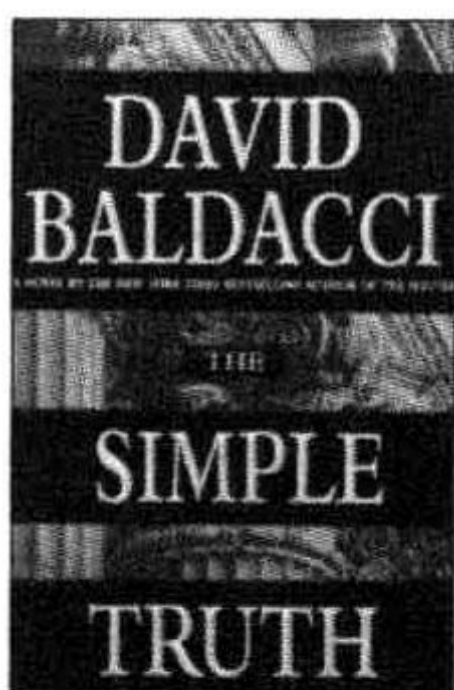


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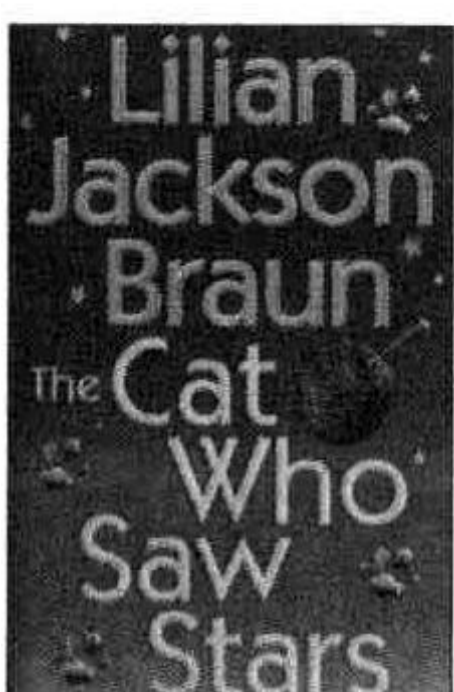


THE SIMPLE TRUTH

by David Baldacci

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363



THE CAT WHO SAW STARS

by Lilian Jackson Braun

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503



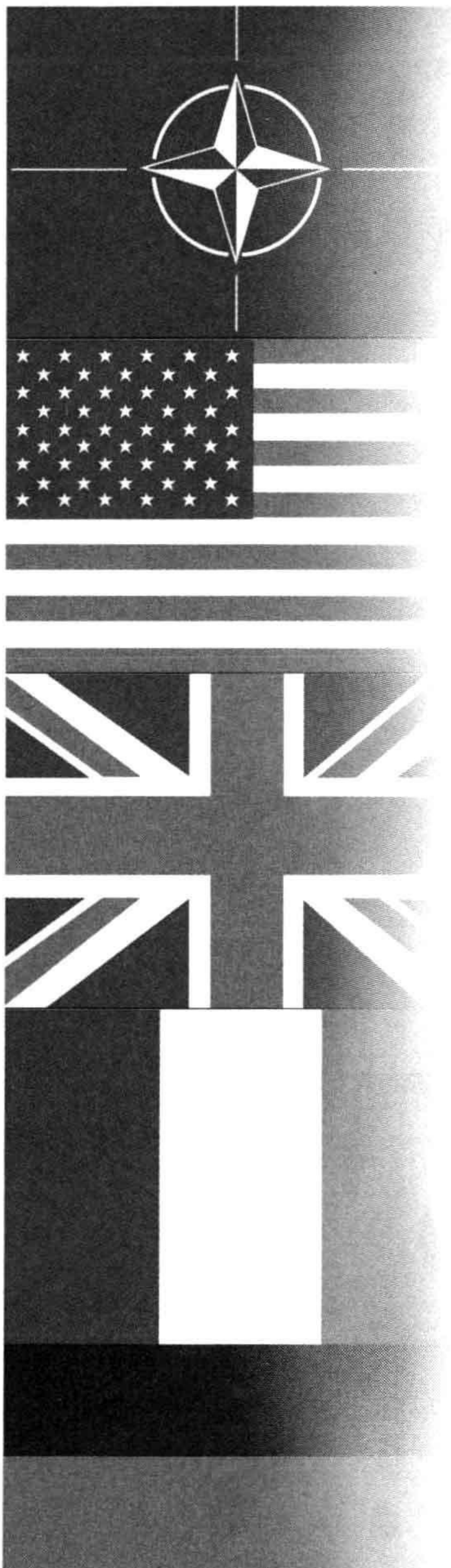
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PROLOGUE

SETTING UP

JOHN Clark had more time in airplanes than most licensed pilots, and he knew the statistics as well as any of them, but he still didn't like the idea of crossing the ocean in a twin-engine airliner. Four was the right number of engines, he thought, because losing one meant losing only twenty-five percent of the aircraft's available power, whereas on this United 777 it meant losing *half*. Maybe the presence of his wife, one daughter, and a son-in-law made him a little itchier than usual. No, that wasn't right. He wasn't itchy, not about flying anyway. It was just a lingering . . . what? he asked himself. Next to him, in the window seat, Sandy was immersed in a mystery, while he was trying to concentrate on the current issue of *The Economist* and wondering what was putting the cold-air feeling on the back of his neck. He sipped his glass of white wine, shook his shoulders, and went back to the article on how peaceful the new world was.

Right. Well, yes, he had to admit that things were a lot better than they'd been for nearly all his life. No more swimming out of a submarine to do a collection on a Russian beach, or up a fetid river in North Vietnam to rescue a downed aviator. Someday maybe he'd do a book. Problem was, who'd believe it? And would the CIA ever allow him to tell his tales except on his deathbed? He was not in a hurry for that, not with a grandchild on the way. He grimaced, un-

willing to contemplate that development. Patsy must have gotten pregnant on their wedding night, and Ding glowed more about it than she did.

John looked back to business class—the curtain wasn't in place yet—and there they were, holding hands. The flight attendant made the rounds, removing his wineglass as the aircraft taxied out to the runway. Her last stop was by Alistair, over on the left side of the first-class cabin. John caught his eye and got a funny look back. The Brit, too? Wasn't that something? Neither of them had ever been accused of nervousness.

Alistair Stanley had been a major in the Special Air Service (SAS) before being permanently seconded to the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). His position had been much like John's—the one you called in to take care of business when the gentler people got skittish. Al and John had hit it off right away on a job in Romania eight years before, and the American was pleased to be working with him again, even if they were both too old now for the fun stuff. Administration wasn't exactly John's idea of a job, but he had to admit he wasn't twenty anymore, or thirty, or even forty. It was remarkable enough, he told himself, that he was still alive.

The airliner started moving. The usual sensation came, like being pressed back into the seat of a sports car jumping off a red light, but with more authority. A little voice in John's head said, "Rotate," and the floor came up under his feet. The body of the aircraft followed the nose into the sky, and the flight began properly.

"On our way, honey," Sandy said, taking a second away from her book.

John smiled. "Who done it?"

"Not sure yet, but probably the wife."

"Yeah, divorce lawyers are so expensive."

Sandy chuckled and went back to the story as the stewardesses got up from their seats to resume drink service. Clark finished *The Economist* and started *Sports Illustrated*. Darn, he'd be missing the end of the football season. That was one thing he'd always tried to keep track of, even when off on a mission. He'd been a pretty good linebacker in high school, and Indiana University had shown some

interest in him. Then he'd decided to forgo college and join the navy, as his father had before him, though Clark had become a SEAL rather than a skimmer sailor on a tin can.

"Mr. Clark?" The stewardess delivered the dinner menu. "Mrs. Clark?"

One nice thing about first class—the flight crew pretended you had a name. John had gotten an automatic upgrade because of frequent-flier miles. The menu, he saw, was pretty good. He settled back and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. These flights always seemed overheated to him.

The captain got on the intercom next, interrupting all the personal movies on the mini-screens. They were following a southerly routing to take advantage of the jet stream. That, Captain Will Garnet explained, would cut their time to Heathrow by forty minutes. He didn't say it would also make for a few bumps. Airlines tried to conserve fuel, and forty-five minutes' worth would put a gold star in his copybook. Well, maybe just a silver one.

It started on the left side of the aircraft. The man was dressed properly, wearing a jacket. That was what got John's attention. Most people took them off as soon as they sat down, but—

It was a Browning automatic, with a flat black finish that said "military" to Clark and, less than a second later, to Alistair Stanley. A moment later two more men appeared on the right side, walking right next to Clark's seat.

"Damn," he said so quietly that only Sandy heard him. Why had he packed his side arm in his carry-on and stowed it in the overhead? What a rookie mistake! He had only to look to his left to see the same expression on Alistair's face. Two of the most experienced pros in the business.

"John . . ."

"Just relax, Sandy," her husband replied quietly. He sat back. Three of them. One was taking a stewardess forward, where she unlocked the door to the flight deck. John watched them go through and close the door. The other two stood forward, where they could see down both aisles of the aircraft.

Only three? Might there be a backup guy disguised as a passen-

ger? That was the one who controlled the bomb—if there was a bomb—and a bomb was the worst thing there could be. A pistol bullet might punch a hole in the skin of the aircraft, forcing a rapid descent, but nobody died from that. A bomb would kill everyone aboard, probably . . . better than even money. Clark hadn't gotten old by taking that sort of chance.

By now the bad guy would have gotten onto the radio and passed along the bad news of the day, and the director of security for United—Clark knew him, Pete Fleming, former deputy assistant director of the FBI—would call his former agency and get *that* ball rolling, to include notification of the CIA and the State Department, the FBI Hostage Rescue Team in Quantico, and Delta Force down at Fort Bragg. Pete would also pass along the passenger list, with three names circled in red, and *that* would make the troops at Langley and Foggy Bottom wonder about a security leak. John dismissed that. This was a random event.

It was time to move a little. Clark turned his head toward Domingo “Ding” Chavez, just twenty feet away. When eye contact was established, he touched the tip of his nose as though to make an itch go away. Chavez did the same . . . and he was still wearing his jacket. He was more used to hot weather, John thought, and probably felt cold on the airplane. Good. He'd still have his Beretta .45. Ding knew what was going down and had the good sense to do nothing about it . . . yet. How might he react with his pregnant wife sitting next to him? Domingo was smart and cool under pressure, but he was still Latino, a man of no small passion.

THE guy at the head of the left-side aisle was going over the passenger list. He started moving, and fifteen feet later he was looking down at the woman in the window seat next to Alistair. “Who are you?” he demanded in Spanish.

The lady replied with a name John didn't catch—a Spanish name. Alistair was leaning back in his seat, staring with wide blue eyes up at the guy with the gun.

A scream came from the back of the aircraft. “Gun, that's a gun!” a man's voice shouted. Now everybody would know, John thought.

The right-aisle guy knocked on the cockpit door and stuck his head in to announce this good news.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Garnet. I, uh, am instructed to tell you that we are deviating from our flight plan. We have some guests aboard who have told me to fly to Lajes, in the Azores. They say they have no desire to hurt anyone, but they are armed, and First Officer Renford and I are going to do exactly what they say. Please remain calm. I will be back to you later.” His voice was as cool as the smoke off dry ice.

Lajes, in the Azores, Clark thought. Former U.S. Navy base. Still active? The left-side guy had spoken in Spanish. Basques? That was still perking over in Spain. The woman, who was she? Early fifties, well turned out. The Spanish ambassador to Washington was male. Might this be his wife?

The left-side man shifted his gaze a seat. “Who are you?”

“Alistair Stanley,” was the reply. There was no sense in Alistair’s lying, Clark knew. They were traveling openly. “I’m British,” he added in a quaky voice. “My passport’s up in the—” He reached up and had his hand slapped down by the guy’s gun.

Nice play, John thought, even if it hadn’t worked. Alistair might have gotten the bag down, produced the passport, and then had his gun in his lap. Alistair was up to speed. The three wolves didn’t know the sheep herd had three dogs in it. Big ones.

More Spanish from the left side. “Where is your husband?” he demanded. They wanted him, not her. Bad intelligence, guys, Clark thought. The two he could see were talking to each other quietly, but the body language said it all. They were annoyed. So he had three (or more?) angry terrorists with guns on a two-engine airplane over the North Atlantic at night. They were late twenties, Clark thought. Old enough to be technically competent but young enough to need adult supervision.

The air changed then and not for the better. Number 2 went into the cockpit and stayed for several minutes. When he reappeared, he went back to Number 3 instead of taking his post to cover the right-side aisle. They spoke in raspy whispers that Clark understood in context if not content. Nobody’s really in charge, he decided. Three

free agents with guns in an airplane. It was time to start being afraid. Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Number 2 headed aft to look at the woman sitting next to Alistair. He just stood there for a few seconds, then looked at Alistair. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I told your friend, old man. Alistair Stanley. I have my passport in my carry-on bag if you wish to see it."

"Yes. Show it to me!"

"Of course, sir." In elegantly slow movements the former SAS major opened the overhead bin and extracted his black carry-on bag. He unzipped the side compartment and pulled the passport out, handed it over, then sat down, holding the bag in his lap.

Number 2 looked at the passport and tossed it back into the Brit's lap while John watched. Then he stormed away to speak with Number 3 again. Alistair let out a long breath and looked around the cabin, finally catching John's eye. These three were dumb. They hadn't had an intelligence team in place to tell them their primary target hadn't made the flight, and so here they were, committed to a mission that was already blown. Soon they'd realize that their guns were the only power they had and that they might as well start using them.

Clark couldn't just sit here and wait for them to start killing people. It took five minutes more until Number 2 decided to talk some more with Number 3. When he did, John turned to catch Ding's eye again, swiping one finger across his upper lip as though to stroke a mustache he'd never grown. Chavez cocked his head as though to reply, "You sure?" but he took the sign. He loosened his seat belt and reached behind his back with his left hand, bringing his pistol out before the alarmed eyes of his six-weeks-pregnant wife. Domingo touched her right hand with his to reassure her, covered the Beretta with a napkin in his lap, and waited for his senior to make the play.

Clark unbuckled his seat belt and started to stand.

"You!" Number 2 called from forward. "Sit still!"

"Hey, look, I, uh, had a few drinks, and—well, I gotta go. How about it? *Por favor*," John added sheepishly.