

Downsized

CHAPTER 1

Quade O'Bric stared out the window on a late afternoon flight. He swirled the last bit of scotch in his glass, but hesitated about finishing it off.

The ugly argument with his boss, Thorny, still gnawed at him. The old guy had sounded just like O'Bric's wife, nagging him about his drinking and lack of communication from the field. Hell, it wasn't O'Bric's fault he hated to use his company cell phone. He told them he'd never remember to charge the damn thing, and he liked to booze it up when away from the office for a few days.

The drink, his fourth of the flight, had begun to take the edge off his temper. A couple more rounds, and he'd be able to put the whole situation with Thorny into perspective.

He shifted in the extra-wide seat, noting that the seatbelts seemed shorter than he remembered on the plane ride out to Florida. O'Bric grimaced. Covering training camp had played hell with his waistline. Almost a week of hotel food, press conference mixers, and the necessary social schmoozing had taken their toll on his already thick, middle-aged spread.

The first-class flight attendant tapped him on the shoulder and smiled. "Your glass please, sir. We're preparing to land."

"Geez, already? Hey, honey, how about cutting me some slack? Today's my birthday."

"Happy birthday, Mr. O'Bric." The attendant held out a hand for his glass.

"Okay, okay." He caressed the glass with a beefy paw, then gulped down the last swallow and surrendered it, grudgingly.

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O'Bric raised his seatback up and watched the familiar skyline come into view. As dusk launched its first gray specters, the high-rises cast deep shadows over the city, erasing the rough edges. The lake reflected a prism of sunset colors, making the usually choppy waters look calm and inviting.

A smooth landing served to bring O'Bric completely out of his bad mood.

His mind began to fill with ideas for the next day's column as he bumped along the jetway and ambled through the terminal. He had gotten enough material to fuel his sports column for the next month. Once Thorny read the first installment, he'd get off O'Bric's back about the other stuff. He always did.

Although O'Bric felt a little woozy, after nearly a week on the road spreading the "OB charm," he felt ready and eager to get back to work in his small, cluttered office, and the glass-enclosed sports department lovingly nicknamed "the dugout."

Once outside, O'Bric headed for the long-term parking lot to ransom his SUV. The Midwestern evening coolness cast a chill over his sunbaked arms and neck. He retrieved a windbreaker from his carry-on and eased it over his tender skin, turning up the collar, but leaving it unzipped. The public wouldn't see *him* acting like a gawdamn wimp.

In a little under a half hour, O'Bric pulled into the Thom-Com parking lot, located on the far corner of First—two blocks from the Thompson Tower company headquarters. Plenty of time later to stop by the Log Cabin for a nightcap with the guys, and then go home to sleep off his jet lag. With the way things have been going between them, Glenda wouldn't wait up—not even for his birthday.

O'Bric flashed his pass and left his red Ford Explorer. He hopped out, and did a quick step east on First Street. He could still move fast over short distances, despite being out of shape. He carried too much fat on his forty-four—no—forty-five-year-old

frame, but the added weight didn't bother him as long as it didn't interfere with the job he loved. At least it hadn't so far.

Thom-Com had plans to buy the old Reston building—right next door to the Tower—tear it down, and construct the three-story employee parking garage they'd been promising. But with all the cost cutting lately, it would probably never happen.

"Let 'em walk. Let 'em freeze. They're only employees," O'Bric grumbled.

Thorny may run the company, and want the best for his people, but he answered to the board of directors, who demanded a heavy profit, recession or not. In O'Bric's humble opinion, his old friend had lost his backbone, and had slipped over to the dark side.

He vaguely remembered their argument before he'd left for Florida. In the heat of the moment, O'Bric may have said something about Thorny's lack of moral fiber even though he owns Thom-Com. *Hell, he could fire the whole blood-sucking board.* That may have been when the disagreement had turned ugly, or . . . maybe it was when O'Bric said, "I'd like to tell the guy who came up with the company cell phone idea where to shove it."

A brisk spring wind whipped off the nearby lake, cooling the city. O'Bric shivered, decided to zip up his windbreaker after all, and accelerated his pace.

At the corner, he hung a right and crossed the street to squeeze into a section of the building's revolving door. He exited into the lobby of the misnamed Thompson Tower—a mere five stories high.

Offices for the Thom-Com Company's two newspapers occupied the second and fourth floors. The third-floor administrative staff served both the morning Press-Journal and the evening Record-Dispatch, separating the competing newsrooms and editorial departments.

O'Bric stood a moment, lamenting the lobby's layout, only a shadow of its former self. Where the old classified desk had

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once stood, was a bank of telephones tied to anonymous clerks on the third floor. A row of glowing, buzzing vending machines had replaced the people-friendly newsstand and snack bar. With the possible exception of a slimmed-down expense account, the bright-new, soulless, corporate-style lobby pained O'Bric most.

He'd seen a lot of changes in his twenty years with the company . . . not all bad, but lately they came too fast. It seemed every time he returned from a trip, something had changed. What surprise might he find this time? Of course, he understood Thom-Com's reason for belt tightening. With the onslaught of media alternatives, newspapers didn't enjoy the popularity they once had.

The clackety, thumpa-thump of the ground floor printing presses laboring behind artificial-marble lobby walls soothed his mind while he waited for the elevator. The door opened, and O'Bric entered an empty car.

He punched the fourth floor button, hearing a faint echo of the former operator's familiar greeting: "This-a car goes-a to the Press-Journal with-a the greatest sports-a editor this-a city has-a ever known . . . Mr. Quade O'Bric-a. All others, take-a the next-a car."

Cosmo Di Jaboni had made the flamboyant announcement only when they were alone. After twenty years, O'Bric would miss seeing the slight man's shiny bald noggin and waxed handlebar moustache. The old Italian immigrant had been a fixture and, given a choice, probably would have stayed until they tore the building down around him. Instead, the number crunchers had tossed Cosmo out like an old suit, three weeks prior to O'Bric's trip to Florida. He hoped they had at least given the old guy a nice pension.

In the city room, after each staff reduction, the reporters grimly joked that someday they'd all be gone, and one robot in the basement—connected to the Internet—would collect and turn out all the news for the Thom-Com chain.

"Imagine how much money the Thompson family could save

then," someone would say.

O'Bric shook his head. Soon the Press-Journal and Record-Dispatch would be like a bunch of greedy bankers, charging for everything. Maybe the readers should be thankful that neither Thom-Com paper made them pay for their obits . . . not yet.

He exited out onto the fourth floor's small hospital-green lobby area, furnished with only three hideous, black-cushioned, metal chairs. A new bulletproof glass partition separated the reception area from the city room. O'Bric punched in his code to open the door, stepped inside, and glanced around.

Several reporters should have been pounding out stories or columns, working on books they hoped would become bestsellers, or just standing around gabbing. Instead, O'Bric found only empty desks, dimmed lights, and silence.

He frowned and checked his watch. Supper hour.

While it didn't happen often, the whole staff—with the exception of the city editor, Dave, who'd be in the library chomping on a sandwich and reading a book—would go out together to celebrate something or other.

O'Bric shrugged. No matter, he would work on his column before the others returned. He lumbered to the city editor's desk, picked up a copy of the latest Press-Journal, and opened it to the sports section. The page layout looked great. O'Bric's assistant had done a good job during his absence.

With his nose in the paper, he automatically paced off the twenty-four steps from the news desk to the dugout.

O'Bric looked up from the paper to find the room completely empty, and eerily silent. "What the hell?" His guys must be celebrating with the others. *Good*. He'd get some work done before the rush.

He plopped down at the nearest desk and turned to the front page of the sports section. O'Bric had faxed his baseball piece the previous evening from spring training camp in Florida.

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It still thrilled him every time he saw his byline under the title of his five-mornings-a-week and Sunday sports column: "O'Bric's Bats & Bouquets." A corny title but, what the hey. As long as sports fans ate up his grafs with breakfast, he wouldn't complain.

Occasional letters came from those who disagreed with his appraisals of the local teams. The hate-mail brigade hurled invectives, especially during football season, because of O'Bric's appellation for the city's pro-football team, the Bombers, whom he referred to as the Bunglers. But the consensus ran six-to-one favoring his opinions so, if the Bombers' owners, coaches, and athletes hated his guts, O'Bric didn't much care.

"Those guys don't buy newspapers—fans do," he'd reminded P. Cletus Hammond, the Press-Journal's brown-nosing managing editor, when the weasel had presented the team owners' complaints to Thorny in one of his many bids to discredit O'Bric. It had backfired, of course.

O'Bric finished reading the column, and left the paper open on the desk. "Damn good." He headed for the cage—his glass-enclosed office at the rear of the sports department.

His chair let out a series of pitiful groans as it accepted his bulk. He shoved aside some of the clutter on the desktop, ready to get typing. Oddly, something about the room made him feel a little uneasy.

Slowly, O'Bric realized he had the only desk with stuff on it. *Wow, what's happening—some kinda clean-up campaign?*

He stared at the cleared spot on his desk, then dug into his pants pocket for his key ring. He unlocked the bottom desk drawer, reached to the rear, and retrieved a flask of bourbon. His staff didn't believe his excuse for keeping a flask—to warm him up on cold nights at the stadium—but he didn't care.

This would be his first drink of the night . . . those in flight hadn't counted. O'Bric hesitated a moment, remembering Thorny's caustic words. He tapped the bottom of the flask on his

desk, again angered by their argument. "I don't have a drinking problem, and I sure as hell can write a sports column just as well as I always have."

O'Bric unscrewed the cap, but paused again, thinking of Glenda. Would the pleasure of this snort and the ones to follow at the Log Cabin be worth the frosty reception—if any at all—he'd face at home for "reeking of whiskey?"

Naw. She'd probably be locked in her bedroom, punishing him for not calling her during his trip. She'd deliberately forgotten his birthday for the last two years. Let's see if she'll make three in a row. He figured she would.

With a shrug, he took a generous swig. "Aaaah."

O'Bric screwed the cap back on, and stared at Glenda's framed picture perched on his desk. He tapped the flask to his temple in a salute. "This year's the year, sweetheart. I'll get back to my fighting shape, and we'll see how long it takes you to move back into my bed."

He admired his wife's beautiful white smile and sparkling eyes, then set the flask back in the drawer. She'd aged well, looking just as lovely as the day they'd met. It had been love at first sight. Even though their marriage had been rocky the last few years, he still loved her with all of his heart. He couldn't even look at another woman.

O'Bric sighed, wondering how things had gotten so screwed up. He spun his chair a half-turn, and pulled out his keyboard. Time to get to work.

A note sticking to the monitor interrupted his train of thought. Hammond's unmistakable scrawl said: *O'Bric—See me in the conference room the moment you get in.* —PCH

"Yeah, right," O'Bric grumbled. "You got legs. How about you seein' me, Clety boy."

He ripped up the note, tossed it over his shoulder, and turned on the computer. After keystroking a catchy lead, O'Bric scooted

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his chair back to read what he'd typed.

"Pretty good. Pretty damn good."

He glanced around the dugout. None of his reporters had arrived. Curious, he rose to check the assignment book on his assistant's desk at the far end of the department.

Halfway there, O'Bric stopped, smiled, and slapped his thigh. *Of course, you jerk. It's your birthday.*

The whole crew was probably crammed into the conference room, waiting to yell, "Surprise!"

That's why P. Clete had specified their meeting take place in the larger room and not his swanky office. Come to think of it, Thorny had mentioned a big surprise when O'Bric returned from Florida . . . before their blow up.

Mustn't keep your fans waiting, Birthday Boy.

He headed for the conference room, starting to salivate as he thought of the gooey cake the management usually provided for such auspicious occasions. The gooier the better.

O'Bric paused outside the door, wondering whether to knock or just barge in as he ordinarily would. He would have to fake a shocked look. After a moment of practicing his best surprised expression, O'Bric gave three sharp raps on the walnut door.

Clete responded with a pretentious, "Come," which irritated O'Bric in much the same way as fingernails scratching a blackboard.

Today, however, he'd give the prima donna a pass. "Keep smiling, Quade, it's your birthday," O'Bric mumbled, and threw open the door.

P. Cletus Hammond sat alone at the conference table, writing with his fancy, ebony Mont Blanc Diplomat fountain pen. O'Bric hated that, too. *Damn snob.*

Without glancing up, Hammond said, "Have a seat, Quade." He continued writing. A stack of mint-green personnel file folders sat at either elbow.

O'Bric stood with one foot inside the room, momentarily confused. He stared down at the top of Hammond's balding head, and found himself counting the sparse brown strands.

Hammond made tick marks on a paper in one of the file folders, and O'Bric gave an internal groan. *Ah shit, just what I need.* Annual review time.

In the past, Thorny Thompson himself had gone over the year's work with each editor, in his plush office suite; then he'd give each of them their raises and a list specifying their staffs' raises. O'Bric's review usually consisted of a pat on the back with a hearty, "Good job."

With all the belt tightening, Thorny probably didn't have the heart to face not giving them out, so he'd called in Captain Bligh to do the dirty work. O'Bric felt sorry for the good old guy.

He blew out a breath, determined to get the unpleasanties over with as quickly as possible, and entered the room. The night-cap at the Log Cabin he'd planned for later might run into two or three.

Hammond closed the folder and placed it on the stack at his left elbow. "I wish you'd sit for this, Quade."

Did O'Bric detect a nuance of humanity in the managing editor's voice? Probably not. He remained standing. "Look, Clete, I don't have time to chitchat. I got a column to get out."

Hammond lifted a folder from the chair next to him and placed it on the table. He didn't open it. "I'm trying to make this as painless as possible—for both of us."

"Yeah, you're a regular Mother Theresa. So we don't get raises this time around. So what? Thorny will make it up to us when Thom-Com has a good year. I'm not worried. None of my people will quit over it—guaranteed."

"Your guess is a good one, but not the right one, Quade."

"Listen, I got a lot to do. I've been gone for a few days—or didn't you notice? Cut to the bottom line."

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"Okay. The bottom line is, not only no raises, but Thom-Com is downsizing its operation in this city."

O'Bric stared out the window behind Hammond, hardly noticing the spectacular view of the city lights. It took him a moment to digest the managing editor's statement. *Downsizing*. The word hit him like a punch to the gut. So now, what? Did Hammond want O'Bric to single out which of his reporters to ax?

He twisted a swivel conference chair around, dropped into it, and swung to face Hammond. "That's a whole 'nother ball game. If you think I'm gonna tell some of my people, 'no raises and, by the way, you're fired,' think again. You'll have to do your own dirty work, Mr. Big Shot. Most of them can't stand your guts, so you're not risking your popularity with 'em."

O'Bric pushed up from the table, and started for the door. "I got a column to write."

Spiteful gravity edged Hammond's voice, "You won't let me do this the easy way. I knew you wouldn't. Okay, Quade, I'll be blunt."

O'Bric stopped with his hand on the doorknob, and turned. "Okay, be blunt."

"You won't have to write your column tonight or ever again for this newspaper. The board has decided to shut down the Press-Journal, immediately."

O'Bric stood slack-jawed in stunned silence.

Hammond continued, "However, I've made recommendations to management, and they've agreed to have several key personnel moved downstairs to the Record-Dispatch for reassignment."

He paused, gave O'Bric an oily smile, and said, "Regrettably, you were not among my choices, and will be out-positioned—effective tonight."

Hammond's "gotcha" expression triggered O'Bric's defenses. "Before you go—whatever you said—oh yeah, *out-positioning*, you'd better scoot your ass down to Thorny's office and check

with him about me."

"Mr. Thompson already signed off on it and, I must say, he gave you a most—"

"You're a liar! You son of a bitch!"

O'Bric charged back to the conference table, slapped his palms on the high-gloss surface, leaned over, and glared at Hammond eye-to-eye. "Thorny would never shit-can me like this. You been trying to get him to sack me for a few years now. What kind of crap did you feed him this time, you . . ." He toyed with the idea of smashing Hammond's face into the pile of folders.

With a detached air, Hammond said, "I told you, the situation arose suddenly . . . a financial decision. Outpositioning you gave Mr. Thompson great pain. And yes, I have argued for your termination in the past, but I had nothing to do with it this time."

"Why didn't Thorny fire me himself, instead of leaving it to a goddamn office boy? I know, he—"

"Mr. Thompson left for Europe this morning, on a family vacation. You should know that. He goes every year at this time. You need to calm down, Quade. Don't say something in the heat of anger you may regret—"

"Regret? The only thing I regret is looking at you all these years without coldcocking you, you baldheaded geek."

Hammond slammed his black, horn-rimmed spectacles on a folder. He shoved down on the table and rose to his full 6'4" height, facing down O'Bric, who stood four inches shorter.

O'Bric took a step back.

Hammond stabbed an index finger at O'Bric and shouted, "Look, you has-been . . ."

Then, more calmly, he said, "Mr. Thompson tried to call you in Florida. I can only assume that he *did* want to speak to you directly. But every time he called, you weren't in the hotel, and you never returned his messages. He even tried your cell, but you didn't answer that, either. You never do—never even charge it, do

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you? You were probably too busy out boozing it up with the rest of the sports hacks—”

“Boozin’? What the hell do—”

“Yeah, boozing. I could smell it the moment you walked in. It’s on your breath, your clothes, in your pores—you stink. Face it, you’re a lush. Everybody knows it. And if you don’t, you’re in deep denial.”

O’Bric wanted to drag the pompous ass across the table and pound him into the ground. Fifteen—even ten—years ago, and in shape, he wouldn’t have hesitated. He curled his hands into fists, then stretched them open. But now, even if he could take Hammond, who, O’Bric knew, spent his weekends running, bicycling or swimming, it would avail O’Bric nothing. The weasel had presented a fait accompli.

I need a drink. “Are you through?”

“No.” Hammond picked up his glasses, put them on, and sat down again. He opened the file before him. “Mr. Thompson gave you a hefty severance package, more generous than the others.” He slid a check across the table.

O’Bric eased into a chair, picked up the check and folded it in half.

“Don’t you want to look at it?”

O’Bric jammed the check into his shirt pocket. “I’ll take your word.”

Hammond spoke rapidly, “Mr. Thompson gave you three months’ salary, plus a month’s vacation pay on top. He also threw in a provision to pay for relocation costs, if necessary. Your health insurance will remain in force for one year, at company expense, and then you have the option to continue it on your own. Instructions on how to roll over your retirement account will be mailed to your home this week. I recommend you read the information right away. You have only thirty days to move on it.”

O’Bric barely listened as Hammond rushed on.

When the managing editor paused to rummage through the open folder, O'Bric stood. "Tell Thorny I appreciate his charity. I'll stop by tomorrow to pick up the rest of my shit." He started for the door.

"I'm not finished, Quade. There's one more bit of . . . *charity* . . . Mr. Thompson felt everyone was entitled to outpositioning and placement counseling."

Hammond shuffled through the papers and then extended a sheet toward O'Bric. "Here's a list of authorized counselors. Pick one. Thom-Com will pay the counseling fee until you're re-established, up to one year."

O'Bric turned away again. "Keep your damn list. I'll have a job within the week."

"Quade, I advise you to remove anything personal from your office right away. Don't wait until tomorrow."

O'Bric's throat tightened. He had to force the words out, "If you think I'd steal company property . . . Be here tomorrow morning, about ten. You can do an inventory check. One good thing about all this . . . I don't need to see your ugly face ever again . . . jerk."

Hammond's expression darkened, then he seemed to gain control. "It's not that, Quade. The moving company, by special arrangement, is scheduled to come in about nine tonight and cart everything left here to a storage warehouse. At 10 a.m. tomorrow, the law firm on the fifth floor will begin to move in."

O'Bric jammed his hands into his pockets. "Why do I get the idea this wasn't such a sudden decision? We deserve a month's notice, at least. Should have given us worthless peons time to hook up with another job. I bet you're not losing your job, Mr. Hatchet man."

Hammond shrugged. "It occurred only as a straight business decision. Mr. Thompson decreed no staff could be informed until three days before the fact. If you'd answered your cell, you would

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have known."

Then he smirked. "And, you're right. I'll be moving downstairs to assume charge of a special project, until I take over other duties with the Tampa operation."

"You know what would've been a decent thing for management to do? Let us put out a final edition to say goodbye to the city and the readers. That woulda been nice."

"A Press-Journal final edition will appear tomorrow morning. The Record-Dispatch staff is working on it as we speak."

"What? It's not the—" O'Bric threw up his hands. "Aww, what's the use?" He reached for the doorknob.

Hammond said softly, "You should've listened to me when I asked you to lay off the Bombers. I think you'd have gotten a job with the Record-Dispatch, if you had. I'll never admit to telling you this, but you became a liability for Thom-Com when the Bombers' owners decided to do what they'd originally come to this city to do—expand their primary business."

Hammond clasped his hands on top of O'Bric's personnel file, and gave O'Bric a smug look. "They're putting the Bombers on the auction block, getting out of sports altogether. They bought the old Fletcher department store at Third and Main. Next month, Fletcher's reopens as this city's most modern store, and potentially Thom-Com's greatest advertising revenue producer. Big advertisers have long memories. You, Quade, are a memorable irritant."

O'Bric ran his fingers through his hair, recognizing the logic in the managing editor's words, and hating to hear the hard, cold truth. Hammond's I-told-you-so attitude stung, and O'Bric retorted, "Integrity, whatever happened to integrity? I've still got mine—more than I can say for others around here."

He left the conference room, muttering, "I shoulda busted the jerk in his smarmy face. Who needs Thom-Com, or the Bombers? Not this kid, that's for sure."

Back in the dugout, O'Bric dropped into his chair. His whole

body began to tremble, and his hand shook as he pulled open the bottom desk drawer. He tried to steady the flask with a two-fisted grip but, as he raised it to his lips, some bourbon splashed and dribbled down his chin. A long swig neither calmed his nerves nor relieved his anger.

O'Bric took another big gulp, then put the flask down with a steady hand. "That's better."

When he raised the flask to his lips a third time, O'Bric noted its lightness. "Empty, goddamn it." He hurled it at the glass partition. The flask rebounded and struck him under the eye, before clattering to the floor.

O'Bric examined his reflection of the computer monitor, which had turned black in screen saver mode. The skin underneath his eye had already begun to swell. "Glenda will think I've been mugged."

He cradled his head in his hands. Just what *would* he tell Glenda? What about the kids' tuition . . . the bills, bills, and more bills? Shit, he'd have to get another job, fast.

As he stood, O'Bric's foot found the flask. He kicked it against the wall, then took a deep breath. *Calm down, Quade*. No way would he let that bastard, Hammond, know how he'd gotten to him.

"I advise you to remove anything personal,' huh? Okay," he sputtered. "Nobody'll ever know Quade O'Bric worked here. I came here with nothin' . . . I'm gonna leave with nothin'." He picked up the flask and chucked it into the wastebasket along with the contents of his desk drawers. When one basket overflowed, he started on another.

His desktop and credenza both contained much of the sports memorabilia he'd gathered over the last twenty years. O'Bric held each item a moment, remembering the good times—the pictures, signed baseballs, a football, scrapbooks, boxing gloves, signed sports cartoons. He felt a little like a spurned lover, shit-canning an ex's belongings when the romance had ended.

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All the papers from his in-and-out bin, O'Bric tossed, along with old newspapers, and a ragged-edged appointment calendar.

Finally, he removed the wall hangings: framed, autographed team pictures from local high schools, colleges, and nationwide pro squads in various sports, and set them on his desk. All were copies. He kept the originals at home.

A framed cartoon, depicting a caricature of the Bombers' quarterback as a pilot dropping footballs from an airplane directly over a stadium, and missing, taunted him. It bore the caption: THE REASON THE BOMBERS BUNGLE MORE THAN BOMB?

Ironically, the subject of O'Bric's popularity had ultimately cost him his dream job. He uttered a harsh laugh. "On the auction block, huh? Who would be stupid enough to waste good money on 'em?"

O'Bric lifted the framed mementos, and carried them to the city editor's desk. He held them for a second over the large trash basket before letting them drop. The sound of shattering glass echoed loudly through the empty city room.

"Lawyers instead of reporters in here. It's an obscenity."

O'Bric moved to the elevator. Before the door closed, he glanced one last time at the hushed city room.

His two big fists dabbed at the moisture gathered in the corners of his eyes.

When the door slid open at lobby level, he zippered his wind-breaker halfway.

O'Bric grimaced, stepped from the elevator and left the Thompson Tower whispering, "Happy birthday, Loser."