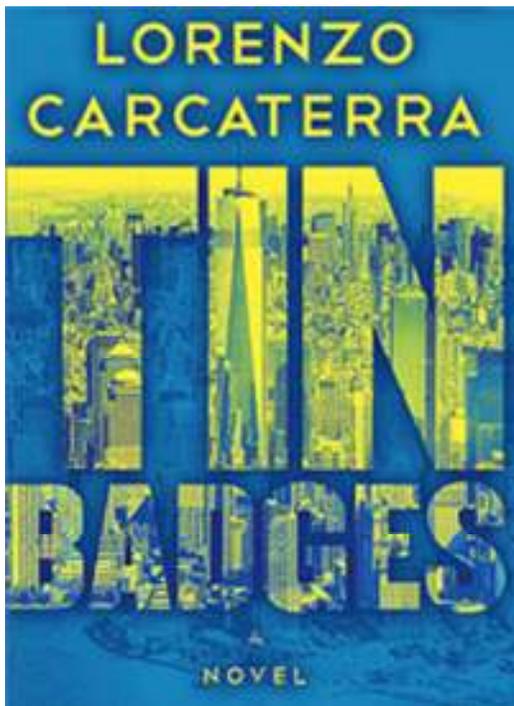


TIN BADGES – An Excerpt



Chief Connors spread out the sheets from the case folder. Next to them he rested a stack of crime-scene photos and a legal pad that had the names and rap sheets of what are now termed “persons of interest.” I rested a landline on a coffee table and punched in Pearl’s number. Once I had him, I put him on speaker, then sat back and handed the room over to the chief.

“Two suspects—Leon Anderson and Rafael Puig—were brought in for questioning,” the chief began. “They had, as you can see from the files, thick rap sheets. They also, unfortunately for us, had an alibi that held up.”

“Who fingered them initially?” I asked.

“One of the tenants in the building,” the chief said. “She said she heard loud noise coming out of the apartment below her, opened her door, and caught a glimpse of two men. Both Anderson and Puig fit the description she gave us.”

“Somebody reached out to the witness?” Pearl asked.

“If I had to bet, I would say yes,” the chief said. “Either way, she suddenly wasn’t sure who it was she saw that night. It was dark, hallway was poorly lit, and she had been having eye trouble the past couple of months.”

“Plus, they had an alibi,” Bruno said.

The chief nodded. “Not exactly a model citizen, but an alibi nonetheless. Claims the two were with him the entire night, clubbing and hanging out at his place. He held up under questioning and we were left with no choice but to cut the suspects loose. You’ll find what you need to know about their alibi in the file.”

“He a loner or is he hooked up with any crew?” I asked.

“A little bit of both,” the chief said. “Last few months he’s been on the payroll of a high-end dealer working out of Washington Heights. My guess is you look hard enough and you’ll find his prints all over this case.”

“What about the two suspects?” Joey asked. “Maybe Tank can give them a second look.”

“Wish it were that easy,” the chief said. “They’re in the wind and have been since the night they were released from custody.”

“They have out-of-town connections?” Pearl asked. “Family or friends they can bunk with till the heat burns off?”

The chief shook his head. “Nothing like that,” he said. “We checked and double-checked.”

“In other words, it would be a major waste of our time if we went out looking to talk to them,” I said.

“Pretty much,” the chief said. “Whoever sent them in to do the job didn’t want to run the risk of having them talk about it. Not to us. Not to anyone.”

“That leaves the alibi witness and the dealer from the Heights,” I said. “We start our work from there.”

“This is no easy case I’m handing you,” the chief said. “This dealer has a wide reach, and he’ll use everything he has to keep the money and the drugs flowing in his direction.”

“Sounds like a ripe time to ask for a raise,” Bruno said, smiling up at the chief.

“It would be,” Ray Connors said. “If I had extra money to give you.”

“The detectives assigned the case didn’t move on it too deep,” I said. “Is that because they weren’t any good or they just didn’t give a shit?”

“A little bit of both, Tank,” Ray answered. “And I figured you might want to talk to them, but frankly I would prefer you didn’t.”

“Any particular reason why?” Pearl asked through the speaker.

“You already know everything they know,” Ray said. “But more than that, I don’t want them to know I have people back on the case. That clear enough for everybody?”

“Clear enough,” I said.

“Same as always,” the chief said. “You’ll have everything you need from me, and you only deal with me. There’s an envelope under the folder with half your fee. The other half you get once you crack the case. As far as expenses, spend what needs to be spent. And anything I don’t need to know, I don’t want to know.”

“I could use a new computer,” Carl said.

“How’d you get your last one?” I asked.

“I found it at the service entrance to the Apple Store,” Carl said with a grin.

“This time use the front entrance,” I said. “And bring a credit card.”

Bruno sat up and nudged me, nodding toward the entrance to the living room. “Looks like we got ourselves some company,” he said.

I glanced up and saw Chris standing in the entryway. He had his hands at his side and was studying the faces in the room. My crew stared back at him.

“And who might this be?” Carl asked.

Chris answered before I could. “My name’s Chris,” he said. “I live here now.”