



“506” (Photo: (K. S. Brooks)
Indies Unlimited, May 29, 2021¹

“If it’s any help, the address we had on file for Celestia’s family is 506 McClellan Lane, here in Syracuse.”

506

“Does the name Tia or Celestia ring a bell?” asked NYPD Homicide Detective Lou Martelli. He was on his cell phone talking to Edward Lane, Principal, Marquis de Lafayette High School. “Oh, yes, of course,” replied Lane. “Very bright young lady. Attractive, too. As I recall, she was here under a scholarship provided by an anonymous benefactor. Unfortunately, Tia left in the middle of her junior year. I must say, it was quite unexpected.”

“How so?”

“Well, one day, her father just walked into my office and abruptly pulled her out of school . . . said something about his being transferred out-of-country. The family was gone two days later, lock, stock, and barrel. No one

¹ Though the photo prompt is from Indies Unlimited’s weekly competition for May 29, 2021, the story was too long to submit for competition. That said, I thank Ms. Brooks for inspiring me to write this tale.

ever saw them again. Nor did anyone ever learn what happened to her or her family. They simply vanished into thin air.”

“Who did the father work for?”

“I haven’t a clue . . . and before you ask, no, our records wouldn’t show that kind of information. Yes, they would show a student’s emergency contact names, address, and telephone numbers, but in most cases, these would almost always be their parent’s names and home telephone or cell phone numbers.”

Lane paused while he consulted his computer files. “If it’s any help, the address we had on file for Celestia’s family is 506 McClellan Lane, here in Syracuse.

“I recall her mother was a stay-at-home mom because there were two much younger children in the family. We talked about them briefly on one parent-teacher’s night at the high school.”

Martelli thought for a moment. “Ed, when I was in high school, we had a photography club. Do you have one?”

“You bet, one of the best in the area.”

“So, there were always lots of guys and gals taking photographs of just about anything and everything throughout the school year, and maybe into the summer?”

“Absolutely. In fact, we used to do most of our own film developing and printing using the old dark room in the basement of the administration building. Posted many of the club’s photos on the bulletin boards throughout the school. Still do, in fact, though today everything is digital. We also use these photos in the school newspaper, for event publicity offsite—for example, on the bulletin boards at the local grocery and drug stores—and in our yearbooks.”

“So, it’s safe to assume Tia appears in some of these photos, whether on purpose or by accident.”

“I would think so, Detective.”

“Ed, this is very important. You may be one of the few people who not only remember Tia, but also, who remember what she looks like.

“I know this may be an imposition, but could I ask you, for starters, to go through the school newspapers and photos for the years in which Tia was a student. If you find any pictures of her, any pictures at all, regardless of their size and quality, please make copies using your cell phone and e-mail them to me. It’s vital we find this woman.

“I wish I could tell you more. Perhaps someday I’ll be in a position to do that. But for now, trust me when I tell you she may hold the key to our understanding of what happened to her classmates, Trent Morrison and Brent Hallaway.”

Lane didn’t immediately respond. In fact, for a moment, Martelli thought he had lost the connection.

“Ed? Ed? Are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m still here, Detective. I don’t know if I can do what you ask. Don’t you need some kind of warrant to obtain those pictures? I mean, first of all, the pictures are of minors. And second, the photos are the property of a private institution—this high school.”

“I understand your concerns, Ed. But as you said, many of the pictures are already in the public domain, so to speak, by having been published in the school newspaper, which certainly must have been taken outside the school, or by having been posted in stores around the local neighborhood.

“Now, we could get a judge to issue a warrant, if that’s required. But frankly, if the press got wind of that, think what might happen when they start poking around. You certainly don’t need the publicity, let alone the interruptions. And believe me, the press can be relentless . . . and ruthless. If there’s even the whiff—”

“I get it, Detective. I’ll do as you ask and be in contact as soon as I have something.”

“And Ed—”

“Yes!”

“I don’t have to tell you how sensitive this is. So, please keep this just between us.”

“I understand. You can count on me. I’ll start looking through the school’s newspapers and other photos as soon as we hang up.”

Martelli’s partner, Detective-Specialist Sean O’Keeffe, sat silently through the entire exchange between Martelli and Ed Lane. He could hear both sides of the conversation. When his partner finally ended the call and put his cell phone on the seat next to him, O’Keeffe turned to him and chuckled. “I got news for you, Buddy. You don’t stand a snowball’s chance in Hell of finding that woman. I don’t care if Ed gives you a thousand pictures of her—they could even have been taken yesterday—she’ll never be found.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Sean?”

“She’s in the witness protection program, Lou.”