

A Watch for Christmas

by Anne Swardson

“*Merde!* Check this out.”

Kwame leaned over the green plastic garbage can, rummaged around for a second, and pulled out a late-model iPhone. It was covered with eggshells and coffee grounds.

“These people are so goddam rich they can afford to throw away a 1,000-euro cell phone,” he snapped.

I looked at the cracked screen. “Does it work?”

“Probably not,” he said. “But it’s still worth something.” He slid the device into the pocket of his green coverall.

“You know we’re not allowed to steal what we collect,” I said, as I always did, knowing he’d ignore me. “Come on, we need to get back to work.”

I took the handles of the garbage can and rolled it to the waiting truck, parked in the middle of the narrow street. We'd only been there for three minutes and a restless line of cars was already building behind us, their headlights shining in our eyes. Night came early in Paris in December.

I snapped the can onto the lift as Kwame did the same for a second can and waved to Philippe, our driver. In five seconds the huge arm lifted the cans up, flipped them over into the truck's deep belly and returned them to the pavement.

Kwame was right that the people on our route threw away a lot of good stuff. We worked in the 16th *arrondissement*, the richest and snootiest part of the city. But I didn't get a thrill out of fishing a hair dryer covered in *Béarnaise* sauce, or a cashmere cardigan with a hole in it, out of the bins I spent my shift emptying.

Kwame did. But was it worth it? I once asked him how much money he'd made selling the crap he'd lifted. He didn't answer, which I took to mean not much. And he'd already gotten one warning from Audrey, our boss back at headquarters. I didn't squeal on him, so Philippe must have.

There was one fun thing about being a garbage collector in such a swanky part of town: selling the Christmas calendars. Once a year, all of us *éboueurs* were given permission to enter the buildings on our route, knock on the apartment doors and hawk a cheesy calendar that the head office supplied. For charity. People

always pulled out a few euros for the cause, muttering that they were in the middle of dinner or doing something terribly important.

I was glad that calendar week was coming up. My favorite part was looking behind the occupants and seeing the richly patterned carpets, the intricate molding around the 12-foot ceilings, the chandeliers, the antique bureaus with spindly legs. I would try to imagine the lives of the people who lived there.

The tiny apartment on the northeast east side of Paris where I'd grown up looked nothing like these places. The only art was a crude wooden mask and a couple of bead necklaces my parents had been able to grab before they fled Congo. The stuffed furniture was full of holes and we ate off a scratched card table. I got the impression that Kwame's background was like that too. Yet we were so different: He believed in breaking the rules, and I didn't.

For a few days after finding the iPhone he kept his hands off the garbage. He must have realized how awful it would be to get fired. Then one night he peered into a bin on the curb and gave a loud gasp.

"Bouna! Come see this!" I rushed over. A set of pale, damp fingers was curled around a cigarette carton and some wet tissues. At first it looked like someone was trying to climb out of the can, hand first. Then I realized that's all there was.

My stomach churned. My parents had talked about seeing massacre sites as they made their escape up the Congo River, but I'd never seen anything worse than me in the mirror after I got pounded by racist bullies at school in France.

I started to walk up to the truck cab to tell Phillippe so he could call the police, but Kwame grabbed my elbow. "Hold on." With a discarded pencil he stirred the debris away from the hand. When it was cleared, we could see on that wrist, before it ended in a jagged mass of blood and tissue, a most amazing watch.

The face was brilliant blue. The numerals were clear white. The wristband was blue leather. A smaller dial appeared to mark the seconds. Written on the front was "F.P.Journe/Invenit et Fecit."

Kwame pointed his phone flashlight down so we could see the watch more clearly. It glowed. I felt I could sink into that blue and start swimming. I almost forgot what must have happened to its owner.

"We need to report this," I stammered.

"Not yet," Kwame said. Slipping on his work gloves, he slid the watch off the wrist—a disgusting but easy process since he took it off the severed end—and put it in his pocket. "Now you can go tell Philippe."

I didn't like it, but what choice did I have?

Philippe called the cops immediately, and we were soon surrounded by them, their flashing red lights reflecting on the graceful stone buildings on either

side of the street. Kwame and I told our story, leaving out the watch. Just a regular trash collection on a regular night. Nope, never seen a hand in the trash before. Nope, didn't see anyone walking by the can. We knew how to play dumb since we'd both often been stopped by cops when doing nothing more than walking down the boulevard.

Then a tall detective who had said little before stepped toward us.

"*Messieurs*," he said, "How do you explain the marks on the wrist?"

"Marks?" Kwame asked, a little too innocently.

"There is a double line around the wrist very reminiscent of a watch band," he said, pointing to the hand. "And here"—he pointed to a scratch from the wrist to the stump—"is a sign a watch may have been forcibly removed. We will have to search both of you."

There was nothing Kwame could do. They found the watch, and they found his gloves, marked with blood that could only have come from the severed hand. He was led away, wailing that he would never commit a murder, that he was innocent. I knew that he was too, but I said nothing. They wouldn't believe me, and it would only get me in trouble.

#

The meeting room in the office of police headquarters, the *Brigade Criminelle*, was packed. Everyone wanted to know whose hand might have been in the garbage, and why one of the world's most expensive watches was on its wrist.

“It's a *Chronomètre Bleu*,” said detective Jean-Pierre Connan, reading from his phone. “F.P. Journe is a Swiss company, and they make fewer than 1,000 watches a year. Total, not just this kind. Buyers have to get on a waiting list and be approved. This model retails for about 50,000 euros—more on the secondary market.”

“So we are looking for a known person, maybe a celebrity. But no one like that has been reported missing,” chimed in Hugo Bresson, the lead detective. “As for the suspect, Kwame Ngwa grew up around Paris. He's the son of Cameroonian immigrants and lives in one of those low-income suburbs north of town. He sold souvenirs by the Eiffel Tower for a while. No criminal record but a typical low....”

Commander Jacques Bassin held up his hand. “Enough. All routine. What we are looking for is evidence tying him to the crime, and to the victim. I'm hearing none of that, even though he is the obvious suspect. Forensics says the hand was cut off just after the victim died, based on blood flows, and the killing was fresh. Surely that narrows the time frame.”

A heavy, bald man spoke up. “What about the other garbageman, um, Bouna Mujinga? Just because he didn't have the hand doesn't mean he wasn't complicit. I

mean, these guys worked together, right? They both are young and poor.” He didn’t need to say they were both Black. Everyone in the room was aware of that.

Bassin swiveled to look at him. “What you are suggesting, Bruno, is that we should look at a man who had no apparent connection to the hand when we can’t even find any evidence that the one who did is guilty?”

Bruno opened his mouth to reply, but a female voice spoke up from the back of the room. “*Monsieur le commandant*, is it possible Monsieur Ngwa didn’t do it? Not to mention the other one. Think of all the things that have to fall into place for either to be the killer: One of them had to slip away from his shift and secretly kill the victim, unseen. He had to dispose of the murder weapon, unseen, not to mention the tool he sawed the hand off with. And, *justement*, why would he cut the man’s hand off, and not take the watch?”

The room was silent. Everyone looked down at their laps.

“And you are?” Bassin asked.

“Céline Duval, *monsieur le commandant*. Junior detective. I’ve been working in this section for about six months.”

Bassin curled his lip slightly.

“Thank you, *Mademoiselle*, for those questions. For now, we have a suspect who had the victim’s watch in his pocket. Hugo, Jean-Pierre, keep looking for information on Monsieur Ngwa, or however you pronounce it. And stay tuned for

anything on Bouna. Céline, you may look into other possibilities, though I'm skeptical. Bruno, please accompany the young lady. Everyone is dismissed."

#

Céline had opened her mouth to ask to be called "detective," but realized there was no point amid the hubbub of moving chairs and shuffling feet.

Bruno appeared in front of her, silent. They stared at each other for a full minute, him looking down over his potbelly and her up with her chin juttied out, arms folded.

"This is your party," he finally said. "I'm just the babysitter."

She needed to get rid of this guy. He spent all his time at union meetings, never solved cases, and clearly didn't care for her.

"I'll tell you what, Bruno. I know we have to work together, but why don't I gather some background first? I'll let you know when I have some interviews lined up that we can do together."

He brightened, nodded his head and disappeared.

Céline walked out of the headquarters building, near the northern border of Paris. Ahead of her gleamed the all-glass façade of the *Palais de Justice* building, the replacement for the old pile down on the Ile de la Cité on the Seine.

She tried to calm her breathing. She was used to condescension and worse from her fellow officers. It had never changed, from the time she graduated from

the police academy with the highest scores on the written test to now. But this was her chance to show her colleagues what she could do.

Where to begin? The trouble with insisting that a suspect was innocent was that it revealed nothing about the guilty party. So, she thought to herself, I'll start with what we do know: The place. She checked out a car and headed to the 16th arrondissement.

The hand had been found as the truck was on tiny Avenue Alphant, just off the Avenue Malakoff near Porte Maillot. Not the richest part of the 16th, but the apartment buildings were all of that classic cream-colored stone, with intricate iron grillwork on each level. It was dark already, even though it was only 5:45 pm, almost exactly 24 hours after the hand had been discovered.

She pulled the car onto the sidewalk on Malakoff, with the Police tag on the windshield, and set out on foot. Uniformed cops had already questioned residents of the area right around the bin and found no one who had seen anything suspicious. Or anyone who showed any interest, except to complain about how the garbage trucks blocked traffic.

And in fact, when Céline turned onto the Avenue Alphant, she saw that a garbage truck was plying its route. Several cars were lined up behind it. The *éboueurs* seemed unperturbed, calmly rolling the bins out two by two and then

back after the lift emptied into the truck. Then they banged on the side of the truck and the driver moved to the next set of bins.

Céline had seen this routine many times, in Paris and growing up in Lyon, but had never really thought about how it worked. She watched for a while from across the street and realized there was not one single moment when either of the two men was alone or could leave their routine. The drivers of the cars behind them would go crazy, for one thing.

The two men were shouting good-naturedly at each other. Some phrases seemed to be in an African language. But suddenly Celine heard: “*Allez*, Bouna, have you heard anything from Kwame?”

She saw Bouna shake his head. “No, and we probably won’t. The cops decided he did it and that’s that.”

What luck! Céline darted across the street. “Monsieur Mujinga? Bouna? I’m a police detective.”

Bouna jumped as if he’d heard a gunshot and looked feverishly around him.

“No, please don’t worry. I know you didn’t do it, and I don’t think Kwame did either. And I know you’ve already been interviewed by the police. But I think we are all missing something. Can we meet to talk, informally? Off the record?”

Bouna’s companion was looking at him strangely.

Bouna shrugged. “I don’t see why, but OK,” he said. “Tomorrow before I start my shift. There’s a café across the street from where the truck leaves, near the Porte de Saint-Ouen Métro stop. Meet me there at 4 pm, I have to get back to work now.” He turned abruptly away.

Céline headed back to the car, walking past the Christmas lights along the main street and thinking about what she might possibly learn from someone with no apparent connection to the crime. She comforted herself with a piece of advice from her mentor when she first joined the force: Just keep asking questions. Let the answers lead you along the path.

One thing she knew: Bruno wasn’t invited to this conversation.

#

Why did I agree to meet with that cop? I thought to myself as I walked to the café the next afternoon. Will she try to pin the murder on me? What was a woman doing being a *flic*, anyway? Especially one who was no bigger than a teenage girl.

The stale-smelling bar was filled with *éboueurs* who were, like me, about to go on duty. They were slouched over the scratched-up zinc bar and sipping Ricards or, for the Muslims, Coca-Cola.

She was at a beat-up wooden table in the back, her feet barely touching the floor. I sat down without saying a word. René, the owner, came over to take our

order and gave me a curious look. I didn't bring a lot of white women, or anyone, into his café.

“Café express, s'il vous plait,” she said. I ordered the same.

“My name is Céline,” she began. “Thank you for coming. I know you've probably had some bad experiences with law enforcement before, but I promise I'm just seeking information. Like I said, I don't think you or Kwame did it.”

She was right about bad experiences. The cops were not my friends, even though I had a spotless record. How often had I been asked to show my papers on the street, without any cause? Asked how I came to be French if I was African? (*“Né ici, monsieur. I was born here.”*)

“Why should I give you any information? What's in it for me?”

“What if you can help clear your friend Kwame?”

“He's not my friend.” That was for sure. He was a garbage-stealing scumbag who always left me the heaviest cans to roll to the truck.

She took a little sip of her coffee. “Do you want the cops to think they can arrest a Black man on no evidence yet again? Next time it could be you. In fact, it may still be you this time. The cops are keeping an eye on you. I mean, not me. But they are suspicious.”

She had a point.

“All right. But I have no idea what happened. What we told the cops was true. Except for the watch.”

She nodded. “I get that. I saw the way you and your new partner worked last night. Neither of you had one second to slip away to pee, much less kill someone and cut his hand off. Not only that, if someone killed the owner of that hand, why didn’t they keep the watch? It’s actually one of the most expensive in the world. There are very few of them in circulation. We’re trying to trace it. Just tell me anything you remember about that night.”

I folded my hands under my chin. “It was a shift like any other. Did I see anyone on the street? Sure. That *quartier* is filled with rich senior citizens who walk their dogs at that time. But there was no one who seemed out of place. And the hand could have been put in there any time. In fact, how do you know it wasn’t in there before the *concierge* of the building pulled the cans to the street?”

She nodded. “We asked, and she had just put them out half an hour before you arrived. But that’s the way I want you to think, Bouna. You have something going for you that no cop does, not even me: You’re invisible. Every night you go down the street where this murder occurred, and no one even glances at you. Well, unless you’re blocking traffic. Keep your eyes open. Watch for anything unusual. Anything. Here’s my card.”

This cop wasn't so bad, I thought as I headed out the door and across the street to the truck. She liked the way I thought. I wondered if the male detectives she worked with ignored her or condescended to her, like my white bosses did to me.

#

Céline arrived at the station just as the forensic team called in with the body identification: Serge Roussel. His wife had called and reported him missing, after waiting a day because she'd assumed he was with his mistress. Hair from the brush she'd supplied matched the hand's DNA.

"He was the biggest businessman in France, almost," Hugo said to Céline, who didn't mind the mansplaining because she had barely heard of Roussel. "His company, Didendi, does telecoms, TV, video games, you name it. He's always in *Paris Match* and the other glossy magazines."

"And he was in a big takeover fight," said Jean-Pierre, looking at the computer screen where he had just done a search. "A smaller company called Luxor—it does fashion—launched a hostile bid last month and is taking it to the Didendi board next week. Or was."

"Who runs Luxor?" Céline asked.

Jean-Pierre squinted at the screen. "Vincent Bouteillon. He's known as...."

Before he could finish, Commander Bassin walked into the room and said “....Known as a cutthroat raider who has built his empire by tearing down the competition. I can’t believe you have to look up these household names. This takeover battle has been covered in the business press for weeks.”

He brushed an imaginary speck off his spotless suit jacket with a sneer. “The irony is, the two men used to be close friends. They went to all the top schools together, and both worked at Didendi before Vincent went out on his own.”

“Commander, does this make Bouteillon a suspect?” Bruno asked.

“We have a suspect,” Bassin said. “I don’t see why we should go poking around in the affairs of one of France’s most powerful men without any reason. Business competition does not a murderer make.”

“Sir, I watched the garbagemen work their shift last night,” Céline said hesitantly. “There isn’t one single second Kwame could have stepped away and committed this crime.” She deliberately didn’t mention meeting with Bouna at the café. Enlisting a civilian to help investigate was not proper procedure, and she knew nothing was more important to Jacques Bassin than procedure.

“So maybe he did it before his shift,” Bassin snapped. “He couldn’t resist the watch. Maybe cutting off the hand is some African ritual....”

“*Mon commandant*, Kwame was born here,” Céline said without thinking.

Bassin swiveled his head and gazed furiously at her. “Have you found anything leading to a different culprit? Because I have heard nothing.”

“Um, no, *mon commandant*,” Céline said, looking down and trying to pretend she didn’t hear the soft chuckles from the other detectives.

“Give up on that,” Bassin snapped. “Go knock on some doors in Kwame’s neighborhood. Somebody there must know something. Bruno, go with her and show her the ropes.”

Céline nodded, feeling very small and very despairing and very skeptical that Bouna would turn up anything to get her back in the commander’s good graces.

#

It was Calendar Week. I was looking forward to the routine, even though I felt bad that Kwame was in jail awaiting trial. I had considered going to see him there, but decided getting that close to the cops was not a good idea.

Léopold, my new partner, and I set out about 7 pm. The idea was to catch people just before dinner. We wore clean uniforms and had our badges hanging around our necks. There were a lot of scammers who pretended to be official garbagemen around Christmastime, which was sad. It was bad enough to be the real thing.

Sales were slow until we turned onto the Avenue Alphant at the corner of Malakoff. We were in front of one of the most elegant buildings in the neighborhood, with tall cupolas on each corner of the roof and full-length balconies running along the high floors.

As always, the concierge let us into the building. We took the elevator to the top floor, the 6th. The idea was to work our way down. For the first few floors, though, we got no sales from the few people who answered our knock on the solid, polished-wood doors. Not until we reached the third floor did we get a response.

The man was wearing a perfectly tailored navy suit, a crisp white shirt, a subtly printed tie and a soft leather belt.

Before we could even finish saying, “*Joyeux Noël*,” he broke in: “What do you need? I’m working.” Léopold began stammering out an answer: “Um, sir, we are the garbage persons collecting for Christmas....” Before he could finish, the man snapped. “Again this year? *Merde*, I guess there’s only one way to get rid of you.” He shot out his hand to reach into his pocket, pushing up his pristine shirt cuff.

I was struck mute by what I saw on his wrist: A brilliant-blue F.P. Journe *Chronomètre Bleu*.

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“Did you say anything to him?” Céline asked. Bouna had called her as soon as he finished selling calendars, and they were sitting in a bistro in the funky Batignolles neighborhood, where Céline lived.

“No. I was too surprised. And what would I ask?” he replied.

They were interrupted by a beep from her cell phone: a text. She picked it up and her eyes widened.

“That was the office. Guess who lives in that building? Vincent Bouteillon.”

“Who?”

Céline explained about the business rivalry.

“Jacques, Commander Bassin, said Roussel—you remember, that’s the victim—and Bouteillon used to be close friends. In fact, a clerk at the F.P. Journe Paris boutique confirmed that the two men bought their watches together, about three years ago. Maybe the takeover bid caused them to turn against each other?”

“Are you sure that was Bouteillon? Do the police records show what floor he lives on?”

Céline stared at Bouna, astonished. “It’s incredible how you think like a policeman. No, we don’t know. And even if we did, we have no evidence on him. Yet. Bouna, you need to keep watching. I’ll talk to my boss and see if he will finally agree that we—well, he thinks it’s me and Bruno—are getting somewhere.”

#

Determining that the watch man was Vincent Bouteillon was easy, since our garbage route passed along his street every night at about the time people get home from work. A few days after Céline and I talked, I saw that a large black Citroën limousine was the first car trapped behind us as we picked up the cans. A back door opened and the same man emerged, looking cross. Some people don't think they should have to wait in line, ever.

“Same time tomorrow, Pascal,” the man called as he headed toward the building's front door.

“Oui, Monsieur Bouteillon,” I heard the driver respond as he closed the door.

I was excited about calling Céline and telling her about the identification. But I knew that didn't connect him to the hand with the watch, or anything else.

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“Let me get this straight, Mademoiselle. You are working with a garbageman? Are you planning on hiring him onto the force?” Commander Bassin was at his most biting.

“Certainly not, *monsieur le commandant*. He is a witness. As such, he has already confirmed that the man seen wearing a watch identical to the victim's—an extremely rare and hard-to-find piece—is Vincent Bouteillon. Does not that warrant further investigation?” Céline was trying to keep her voice even as they stood face-to-face in the commander's office.

“We could have IDed him with our resources. And so what? I’ve about had it with you ignoring orders,” Bassin snapped. “Have you done any more research in M. Ngwa’s neighborhood?”

Céline hung her head. Of course she hadn’t.

“Bruno!” Bassin stuck his head into the central command room. “Get in here.”

Bruno arrived in about two seconds. “Take this young lady with you and knock on doors around where our suspect lives. Do not let her out of your sight.”

“Oui, *mon commandant*,” Bruno said cheerfully. “Come on, young’un.” He put his beefy arm around her shoulders as he shepherded her out the door.

#

“How’s the food?”

That’s about all I could think of asking Kwame as we sat on opposite sides of the clear plastic divider. I’d decided to visit him in prison on my day off. Once I got the text from Céline that she was stuck with Bruno, I figured it was over. On my own, I had no idea what to look for or where to find it. So I decided to overcome my fears and go see him, in that huge pile in the south of Paris. It was as bare as I expected. There were hardly any Christmas decorations, even.

Kwama shrugged and leaned back in his plastic chair. “I’ve seen better chow in the cans we collected.” He laughed, in an artificial kind of way.

“What do you hear about your case?”

“Not a damn thing. My lawyer says the prosecutor hasn’t sent in the documents responding to his petition for release because I couldn’t have done it. Shit, how am I going to cut someone up while I’m on shift? You know that better than anyone. What are you doing to help?”

I wasn’t about to tell him that I was actually trying, since that seemed to be all over. And I didn’t want him to think I was willing to do him any favors.

“It’s your fault, man. What did you take the watch for?”

He shrugged. “Money, of course. I’m not like you, always dreaming about the millionaires on our shift. It’s just their trash. It doesn’t tell us anything about them.”

“Of course it does! It’s a window into their lives,” I shot back. “Garbage tells us about the people who threw it out.”

Tells us about the people who threw it out. A light dawned. I stood up.

“Kwame, you’ve given me a great idea, one that might even help you. Bye.”

I left before he could ask me what I was talking about.

#

When Céline got Bouna’s call, she’d insisted that their meeting had to be at the same dank café near where Bouna began his shift. She couldn’t risk being seen by anyone on the *Brigade Criminelle*.

After their coffees arrived, he began by explaining how Kwame's remarks had inspired him to try looking at Bouteillon's garbage.

"I wasn't sure it would be possible, on the job. But I found I could rifle through the cans from his building pretty fast while Léopold was rolling the others to the truck."

"And?" She leaned forward.

"For several days, there was nothing. I think maybe he was moving. There were remains of packing boxes in the recycle can, and lots of fancy old clothes in the regular garbage. Then one night, I saw a pile of papers fall out of the can into the truck as it was being tipped over. I grabbed them just as the crusher was coming down. They must have been at the very bottom of the can to land at the top of the pile."

He reached into a bag and pulled out a slightly damp wad of papers. The documents were covered with figures in columns, and Bouteillon's name was on them.

He passed them to Céline, who pulled on a pair of rubber gloves, spread them on the table and perused them page by page.

"These appear to be Bouteillon's bank statements," she said. "But it's a Swiss account from a Geneva bank, not a French one. There are some large

transfers here, including to other Swiss accounts, but they're numbered, I can't tell who they belong to.

"What do you think it is?" He leaned over and looked at the musty papers.

"If Bouteillon paid someone to kill Roussel, he had to transfer the money somehow. Transfers that size aren't allowed in France but Switzerland is a hotbed of private money transfers."

"Private? Does that mean you can't learn what this is?"

"Let me show it to some of the guys in the finance service and see what they can come up with. Even Commander Bassin will have to agree we're onto something here. Onto something big."

#

There were only a few people in the meeting room at police headquarters. Normally when a high-profile case was solved, everyone jammed in and a few Champagne bottles were opened. But not when the perpetrator was found to be a pillar of France's business community.

Jacques Bassin stood at the head of the long table. Céline and Bruno were to his left. The other detectives and uniformed officers who had been directly involved were on the other side.

"This was an unusual case," he said curtly. "Just in case anyone doesn't know the whole picture, we were able to trace the financial transfers"—he didn't

say how the documents had been discovered—“and one was to a man known to be a contract killer. A Bulgarian. When we confronted Bouteillon he confessed. When Bouteillon tried to take over Roussel’s company Roussel viewed it as a total betrayal of their friendship and said he would do everything in his power to prevent it. Bouteillon felt he had to stop him. He’s in custody and the other suspect”—Jacques couldn’t bear to say his name—“has been released.”

“But how did the hand get into the trash, and why was the watch still on it?” asked Hugo.

“The hand with the watch was supposed to be proof the killer had gotten the right man. He and Bouteillon were supposed to meet in front of the building. But the killer arrived early, just after the trash cans were rolled out to the sidewalk. Just as he was getting the hand out of his bag, the garbage truck came around the corner and he was afraid of being discovered, so he threw it in and ran away. Bruno, thanks especially to you for your supervisory role in this investigation.”

With that he was gone, and the other detectives quickly filtered out of the room.

Bruno moved toward the door with a nervous glance at Céline, but she grabbed his elbow.

“Bruno, you know well that you did zero in this inquiry,” she hissed. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Er, uh, why should I contradict the commander? You were on the team, right? You get some of the glory, if glory is what you want to call it.”

“And how would it look if I told everyone the truth? Exposed you as a do-nothing hypocrite?”

“Oh come on, Céline....”

She stopped him. “I have a better idea. Do me a favor and I won’t say anything. You’re on the union’s education committee, right?”

He nodded eagerly. “How can I be of help?”

#

I was back on the route with Kwame. Who, of course, didn’t thank me for getting him out of trouble. And didn’t care about the great detective work I’d done.

We were just turning off the Avenue Alphanand when my phone rang. It was Céline. I hadn’t heard from her in a while, not since she told me they’d arrested Bouteillon. She’d told me I did a fantastic job, but then she’d vanished. I felt empty. Not just when I worked my dreary shifts, rolling and swinging those cans in exactly the same way every night. All the time. Helping Céline had made everything in my life brighter, more interesting.

“I’ve got news,” she said. “My fellow officers were so impressed with your work that they want to sponsor you for the police academy. It won’t be easy, but I

think you have a gift for it. And the force could use more people like you.

Interested?"

Become a cop? In my world, they were the bad guys. But what if there were, indeed, more cops like me?

"How soon can I start?"