



A Novel from
Bellefond Book 1

Saltwater



by
Elara Kincaid

Saltwater



Copyright © 2026 Elara Kincaid

All rights reserved.

Bellefond Book 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Contents



1	The Bay Gives It Back
2	The Shape of a Lie
3	What the Sister Knows
4	The Elder's Version
5	The Co-op and the Bay
6	Anansi's Reach
7	Eleven Years
8	The Man Building Something
9	The Rival
10	The Notebook
11	Cracks in the Theory
12	What the Bay Holds
13	The Figure on the Road
14	What Marise Knew
15	Marise's Source
16	Who He Really Was
17	Coventry
18	Heat Rising
19	The Ally's Hands

20	The Photograph Returned
21	The Half-Built Resort
22	At the Grave
23	The Ruling Stands
24	Reading the Object
25	The Refusal
26	The Story Runs
27	Through the Fence
28	Where He Hid It
29	The Last Low Water
30	Paragraph Eighteen
31	What the Case Cost
32	The Developer
33	A Name on Dominica

Chapter 1

The Bay Gives It Back



The phone went at twenty past five, before the ceiling fan had done anything useful with the heat, and it was Lazare from the co-op landing. Not the police. "Séraphine." The careful kind of quiet he uses when there are ears on an open line, when there is something he will not put on it directly. "They bring something in by the breakwater. Come before the rest, eh."

I had been sitting at the kitchen table since past midnight with the carton of Marise's papers—the one I had been moving between the kitchen and the bedroom and back for six weeks now, telling myself each time that I was nearly done with it. The lid was off. I left it off and carried my sandals down the stairs in my hand because the road is cooler underfoot that way, and because I was not entirely awake yet and not thinking past the bay. Bellefond at twenty past five is a place still deciding what it is. The marina's white hulls sat against a sky that hadn't committed to a colour, and the beach road held one taxi with the driver asleep across the front seat and the radio murmuring the tail end of something. I passed the rum shop with its chairs still upturned on the tables. The market women would start at six. I had perhaps twenty minutes before the whole parish came down to see what

the sea had given back. They were already thirty at the heel of the bay—the working heel, where the co-op pirogues haul up over the flat stones and the ice house runs its overnight hum, not the marina end with its painted sign for the resort's glass-bottom excursions. Not one of the thirty was talking. A boy of perhaps twelve had ridden his bicycle down fast enough that he still held it by the saddle and had not thought to lean it anywhere. Somebody's radio two yards off was still running the early farm report, prices for green fig and dasheen and plantain, until a woman from the school board reached over without being asked and turned the volume to nothing, and nobody thanked her, and nobody needed to. Lazare came up to the top of the slip to meet me. He is sixty or so, compact, with the sunned-leather colour of a man who has spent his working life offshore, and he looked at me the way Bellefond looks at its own complications—not asking for rescue, only requiring that someone with good eyes see clearly. "Edmund Calixte," he said. Low, the name given to me privately before the public version could settle around it. "Three of the boys went out early for the nets. They found him off the far caisson. Not deep. Not far."

I knew the name. Marise had known it better. I held that where it was for now. *Dèyè Pêcheur* had brought him in—Lazare's cousin's pirogue, the name lettered with such ambition that the painter had run out of space on the bow and the final *r* had come out very small. Two men held Edmund Calixte between them on the thwart, careful in the way you handle someone who can still be embarrassed. They had a waterproof sheet pulled to his collarbone. His face was turned up and his eyes were

closed, which someone had done for him before anything else was attended to. He was forty-three years old. I had seen him once since his return from England—at the credit union last week, sitting with a manila folder pressed flat against his knees and looking at the floor tiles. His feet were bare. One sandal sat on the bow thwart where a hand had set it, upright, the strap still buckled in its small square buckle as though Edmund had only put it aside for a moment and would want it back. I stood at the gunwale looking at that sandal. Not at the swelling at his left temple the rocks could account for or could not. Not at the darkness of the water in his clothing or the slack angle of his wrists. The sandal, set down neat, strap buckled. "He swam?" I asked Lazare. Something moved across his face. "Since we were boys Edmund didn't go in the water. Something happened when we were small—he never said what. He came back from England with good money and still he'd walk the coast road two hours to Soufrière sooner than take a boat across the bay." He looked at the man on the thwart. "You ask anyone from the co-op. Ask anyone who knew him growing up."

The crowd above us on the slip had grown to forty, maybe more, as Bellefond gathers around its difficulties—the whole parish arriving before the official account can get there first. A woman in a church hat who had been on her way to first mass and been redirected. An old man with a net he had stopped mending and set down beside his feet. The boy with the bicycle. The police truck came down the beach road at a quarter to six. Inspector Aurélien descended the slip with his cap under his arm and his notebook already open to a blank

page—which is its own kind of statement, a page waiting and ready. He looked at the body, then at the water, then at me, in that order. "Madanm Toussaint." Not unfriendly. Tired in the way men get tired when a thing is going to be decided above their heads and they already understand the direction it will go. "You should let us work."

"I'm on the public beach," I said pleasantly. "Same as the rest of Bellefond."

He wrote something in his notebook. "He drank," he said, low, delivering the official pre-version so I would not be surprised by the version that came later. "Since he came back from England. Wallet on him, money still in it. No marks the sea and the rocks can't account for." A brief pause. "The ruling will come down from Castries. It will go the way it looks."

"He didn't drink," I said. "Three years sober. His sister counted them with him."

Aurélien wrote another thing down and did not respond to that. He went back to the thwart. I know the geometry of official accounts. There is a window—a few hours—when the shape of a thing is still soft enough to push. After that it sets, and the people who know the other version have to decide whether to carry it in silence or put it somewhere it can draw air. I told Aurélien I would carry the news to the family, since somebody had to, and the family would take it better from a familiar face. He looked at me for two full seconds, adding up a column he did not like the sum of. Then he went back to his work.—

The Calixte house sits above the cemetery road, where the parish buries its dead and the living build a

little higher up the hill. Cement block, painted the light blue that half of Bellefond is painted, with shutters that have gone the grey-blue of that colour after the salt has been working on them long enough—not blue anymore, the memory of blue. There is a hibiscus beside the gate, deep orange, of the variety that opens in the morning and drops by early afternoon. One was open when I arrived at the gate. It would be on the ground by the time I left. Philippa Calixte came to the door before I knocked. Someone had phoned her—a cousin, a co-op wife, some cousin of a co-op wife—because in Bellefond the news moves faster than any official truck. She had her house dress on, blue flowers on white cotton, and shoes with no laces because she had put on the nearest thing and had not thought about the rest. Her hands were at her sides. She looked at me. I looked at her. In Bellefond there is a conversation that happens entire before anyone speaks, a full exchange done in the register of who came to the door at what hour wearing what expression. She already knew. She had known from the moment the first call came. "Come inside," I said. Her kitchen smelled of coffee that had been started and abandoned, the pot still on the low flame, the cup on the table with the first pour sitting cold in it. On the table she had gathered four things without knowing she was gathering them: Edmund's phone in a cracked green case, a small key on a plain ring with no tag, the envelope from England that had arrived the week before Edmund's return and which now held nothing, the letter long since read and reread and filed somewhere else, and a photograph of the two of them as children outside the school gate—both squinting against whoever was holding the camera, Edmund's arm around

her shoulder. I turned off the flame under the pot. I sat across from her. "They found him in the bay," I said. There is no gentle shape for this kind of sentence. "Co-op men, early this morning. I was there before the police."

Philippa put both hands flat on the table. She looked at them, checking. "He didn't drink," I said. "I know what they'll say. He didn't drink."

"Three years." Her voice was very quiet and very precise, the certainty of a woman with only one thing she is completely sure of. "He called me every year on the anniversary. He kept count the way some men count money, careful, not willing to lose track." She looked up at me for the first time since I sat down. "He was frightened these last weeks, Séraphine. Not the old kind—not the drinking kind of frightened, where you pick at everything because you can't leave it alone. The other kind. Where you go quiet. Where you stop leaving lights on in the evening."

"What was he frightened of?"

She turned the cracked phone over once, set it down face up on the table. "He wouldn't say the details. He said it was better if I didn't know specifics—better for me. He said he'd found something connected to the bay and the resort land. Something under the water that the dredging had moved. And something on paper, at the land registry in Castries. He said the two things together were—" She stopped. "He said *together* and then stopped saying." A pause. "He borrowed dive gear from Tibo at the co-op. The week before this. And he went to Castries twice."

"Was he at the resort site?" I asked. "Tibo saw him on the coast road at night. Two nights before—" She did not finish. "Tibo thought he was only walking because

Edmund used to walk at night when he was thinking hard about something. He didn't mention it until I called him this morning."

From the road above the house I heard the second vehicle slowing. "There's a notebook," Philippa said. She reached to the counter and came up with a small purple thing, the spiral-bound kind, the ninety-cent stationer notebooks with the times tables printed on the back cover. It had the compressed, dense feeling of a book that has been filled steadily and then pressed shut over months, nothing loose inside it anymore. "He left it here a month ago. He said for safekeeping. He said don't open it unless something happened." She pushed it across the table to me. "He didn't say what kind of something."

I looked at the notebook. I thought about Marise's exercise books numbered by month along the spine—**désanm, janvyé, févriyé**—left on the shelf in her flat while her laptop was taken, because whoever emptied the rooms saw the spines and thought homework. Patient work that read as a child's copybook to anyone who looked without looking carefully. "If I ask questions," I said, "some of what I find won't be good to hear."

"Sa ou ka ban mwen, ba mwen," Philippa said. Whatever you can give me, give it. "I'm not here for the comfortable kind."

The knock came then. I went and stood in the doorway—Aurélien with the young constable behind him and a notebook larger than Aurélien's already open. I told them Philippa Calixte had asked me to sit with her, that I would be in the kitchen and out of their way, that I was sure they would want to give the family a few minutes to

collect themselves before the formal questions began. I said it all pleasantly and held the door open just long enough to give the request its shape, then I stepped aside. Aurélien looked at me for the second time that morning with the expression of a man running the same sum twice and getting the same answer he doesn't want. He went inside. —

The yard was quiet. The hibiscus had opened its second flower in the time I had been in the kitchen, and that one too would drop by afternoon, and the plant would do the same thing again tomorrow regardless. Down the hill I could hear the generator finally catching—the ice house, the market, the first boat motors going out—the whole ordinary machinery of Bellefond starting itself without reference to anything that had happened on the thwart of *Dèyè Pêcheur*. I had the purple notebook in my pocket. I had what Lazare had told me—a man who would not get in the water since childhood, a man who had been known his whole life on this bay—and I had what Philippa had told me: frightened in the quiet way, asking questions about the bay bottom, borrowing dive gear the week before he drowned. I had the sandal set down with its strap buckled. And back at my table with the lid still off, I had the carton of Marise's papers that I had been going through for six weeks in the way you go through something you cannot finish without finishing what it means. Edmund Calixte had been Marise's source. Not a coincidence I could set aside. There is a point when you are still deciding whether to take a thing on, and there is another point after which you are already in it. Standing in the yard with the dropped hibiscus at my feet, I

understood I had passed the second point some time ago—possibly when Lazare called, possibly when I saw the sandal on the thwart, possibly the moment I had sat across from Philippa and understood that someone had told a very clean and very convenient story about a man who had not been drunk and had not gone willingly into deep water. Aurélien would be inside for another hour. I had Tibo to find and the co-op men to talk to before the morning had set into what it was going to be. I walked down toward the bay.

Chapter 2

The Shape of a Lie



Aurélien had come back down to the slip by the time I returned to the bay. He was at the thwart again, not crouched over it, just standing the way a man stands over a thing he has already been told he will not be allowed to undo. I watched him from the top of the wall—a tall man, with the holding-back quality of someone who has spent a career in small places learning exactly when not to say what he is thinking. He had been the police in Bellefond for eleven years. Long enough to know where everything touches everything else. He crouched beside the thwart for perhaps two minutes. He did not touch anything. He looked at the sandal on the bow thwart—I watched him look at it—and his face did not change. Then he stood and looked at the water for a long time. I came down the slip. He heard me and turned. "Séraphine." Not *Madanm* now, the way he had said it an hour ago on the stones with his notebook open. This was the other register, the one kept off the page. He had dealt with Marise in her time, and he knew which one the family required. "You were here before the truck."

"Lazare called me. I came before the generator caught."

He nodded, as if this were the answer he had

expected and was not pleased about. He looked at the covered figure on the thwart, then at the water. Then at me. "Three years sober," I said. "Afraid of open water since he was a child. Two trips to Castries last week, visits to the land registry and the planning office. Borrowed dive gear from the co-op the week before he died." I said all of it evenly, the way you lay objects on a table to let someone look at them. "I thought you should have that version alongside the one you're writing down."

Aurélien was quiet for a moment. He had a pen in his right hand that he had not used for anything. He is left-handed; I had noticed that once, some years before, when he was doing something else, and the pen in the wrong hand had stayed with me in the way small wrong things do. "The examination will be thorough," he said. "The examination will be what it's permitted to be."

He looked at me with the expression of a man who cannot argue with that and knows it. "Don't print anything before the family has time to grieve, Séraphine."

"I'm not printing anything. I'm sitting with Philippa Calixte, who asked me to come." I paused. "What I'm going to do is ask some quiet questions. You'll know I'm doing it, and I'll know you know. That seems like the right arrangement, given that you can't reopen it."

He looked at the water again. The morning was full by now—the sun had made its colour decision, the kind of flat yellow light that Bellefond gets in the early hours before the heat builds. The generator had been running for an hour and the ice house was making its grinding sound, the market stalls were calling their first prices, and *Dèyè Pêcheur* sat at the bottom of the slip with Edmund Calixte on the thwart and none of it connected to any of

the rest. "He was seen at the resort construction site," Aurélien said. Not to me specifically. To the water, or to himself, in the register of a man speaking something aloud that he has been carrying since he first heard it. "Two nights before. You'll find that from the co-op men anyway."

"Yes," I said. "Tibo told Philippa. She told me this morning."

He nodded. He put the pen in his shirt pocket. "Be careful, Séraphine," he said. He said it as people do in Bellefond when they mean something more precise than the words, when careful stands in for a sentence they can't quite put on an open road by the water. Then he walked up the slip to the young constable and the waiting truck, and I left him to the business of building the official version.—

Philippa was in the kitchen when I came back, in the same chair she had been in before the police arrived, but the table was different. The four objects were still there—the cracked phone, the key, the envelope, the photograph—but she had added a fifth thing: a small tin from the shelf above the stove, the kind that used to hold biscuits, with a painted rooster on the lid. She had the lid off and was looking at what was inside. I sat down. "I found them after you left," she said. She meant after Aurélien and his constable had gone, because **after you left** meant after the official presence had left the house, not after me. The tin held folded papers, six or seven of them, some folded small and some just folded in half. "Edmund put them here before Christmas. I was looking for the tin because I keep the extra key for the side gate in it, and the key was already there—" She looked at the tin.

"He must have put the key in and the papers in at the same time. Like he was using the key as a reason to have the tin in his hands."

I looked at the papers without touching them yet. "What did you tell the inspector?" I asked. "What I told you. He wrote some of it down."

"He wrote the part about the dive gear and the trips to Castries?"

She looked at me. "He wrote something. I don't know what it said."

I took the small purple notebook from my pocket and put it on the table beside the tin. She looked at it the way you look at something that used to belong to a person and now belongs to the fact of them being gone. "Tell me about the last month," I said. "Not the official things. The small things—what time he called, what he was eating, how he seemed when he came for Sunday lunch. Start where you like."

She was quiet for a moment, turning the rooster tin in her hands. Then she set it down and started. Edmund had come back from England in March—the early part, before the rains—with a suitcase and a folder of documents and a manner that Philippa had first read as the kind of quietness a man carries when he has made a difficult decision and is still in the early part of living with it. She had assumed it was about the return itself: eight years in Coventry, the cold, the exhaustion of building a life somewhere that has no use for the things you know, and then choosing to come back to something that has changed around you while you were gone. But the quietness had not lifted how kind of quietness lifts, gradually, as a man gets his footing. It had gotten denser.

He called her on Tuesdays, which he had always done from England, and the calls had shifted: shorter at first, then longer, then short again. In May he had called on a Thursday, which he had never done. He said he was fine. He said things were going well with the land registry matter—he used that phrase, *the land registry matter*, as if it were a formal case—and that he had found something that needed careful handling but that he was being careful with it. He asked if she still had the key to his old room. She said of course. He said good, keep it somewhere safe. "He used to leave things here," Philippa said. "When we were small, he would leave the things he valued at my house because our mother's house had a different situation. He trusted my locks." She looked at her own hands. "He trusted me to not look."

"Did you look? Before this morning?"

A pause. "Once," she said. "I looked at the tin. I saw the papers were folded up and I put the lid back on. I thought he would tell me when he was ready."

He had eaten at her table three times in the last month—more often than usual, which was itself a signal she had noticed but not acted on. He ate like a man who is always somewhere else in his thoughts, not badly, not anxiously, just with half of him behind the act of eating. He had fixed the pipe under her kitchen sink on one of those visits, a job that had needed doing for two years, and she had thought that was a good sign, a man fixing things was a man thinking about the future. Now she thought it was a man settling what needed settling. "Was there anyone he mentioned?" I asked. "Anyone he seemed to be avoiding, or anyone he talked about more than usual?"

She thought about it. "He mentioned the developer. Beaumont. He had met with him, or near him, at some parish event—something about the coastal access consultation, the planning thing. He said Beaumont was very smooth." She paused. "Edmund didn't use that word warmly."

I wrote *Beaumont* in my notebook and said nothing. "And there was someone at the credit union," Philippa went on. "A woman there who had been helpful. He didn't say more than that. He said she had given him access to something in the public record that he needed to see and that she had done it properly, nothing irregular, but that she had understood what he was looking for and pointed him right." A pause. "He said that like it surprised him. That someone understood and pointed him right."

I thought about the manila folder pressed flat on his knees at the credit union, the way he had looked at the floor tiles. "The dive gear," I said. "Was that the first time he'd gone in the water since—"

"He didn't go in the water." Her voice was flat. "He borrowed the gear. He had Tibo teach him how the mask worked, Tibo told me this morning, how to clear it and what to do with the valve. He practiced it on land. In Tibo's yard." She looked at me steadily. "He practiced it in the yard. He was preparing. He was not going to go in the bay without preparing."

She smoothed the sleeve of her house dress with one hand, pressing the fabric flat against her forearm. "He had a plan," she said. "He had a list of things to do and he was doing them in order. That is who Edmund was. He did not stumble into things."

Outside the road was fully awake now, a truck going by, the dog from the house next door starting and stopping its barking. Somewhere up the hill a radio was on the local music program, the kind they play at midmorning when people have stopped working for a short break. "The papers in the tin," I said. "I want to look at them. Not take them—just look."

She slid the tin across. I unfolded the first one. It was a photocopy of a planning application, stamped by the Castries office, dated two years before. The applicant was a company registered in Barbados with a name that meant nothing to me yet. The application was for a coastal modification permit—dredging, the adjustment of the breakwater's outer caissons, and an extension to the marina jetty. The permitted work list went to a second page, and on the second page someone had put a small pencil mark in the margin beside a line about "subsurface survey access, inner bay, contingent on fisheries board notification."

The fisheries board notification was checked in the application as completed. The mark in the margin was a question. I refolded it and unfolded the second one. A printed email—no header, no recipient line, only the body of the message, someone having printed it that way deliberately or the header having been cut off. The message was eight lines: a summary of landings data for the inner bay, by month, for the previous three years. The final paragraph noted a discrepancy between the co-op's recorded landings for that section and the survey data the marina project had filed with the fisheries board. The numbers did not agree by a meaningful amount. I put it down. "He was careful," I said. More to myself than to

Philippa. "He was." She looked at the tin. "He had a plan and he was careful and he ended up in the bay." She said it very quietly, without any of the vocal change that would make it a cry or a complaint. Just the fact of it, stated. I thought about what Aurélien had said at the waterfront: **Be careful, Séraphine.** I thought about the pen he held in the wrong hand. I thought about the way he had looked at the sandal on the thwart and then looked at the water, and what that sequence meant in an honest man who does not have room to maneuver. I refolded the papers and put the tin back with its rooster lid on. I told Philippa I would come back tomorrow. I told her not to move anything, not to give anything to anyone, and not to answer questions about the notebooks or the papers without calling me first. She said she understood. She said it the way Bellefond understands things—not as a promise to a stranger, but as an arrangement between two people who have known the same person and now know the same thing about how he died. I walked home. The carton of Marise's papers was still on the kitchen table where I had left it. I stood in the doorway looking at it—the open lid, the exercise books numbered by month, the patience of a dead woman's work waiting to be finished. The fan turned over it. Down at the bay the morning was fully made, the ice house grinding, the market calling prices. I sat down and put Edmund's purple notebook beside the carton and opened it to the first page.

Chapter 3

What the Sister Knows



The parish square in Bellefond has a standpipe, a breadfruit tree, the credit union on the east side, and the pharmacy on the corner with the handwritten sign about blood pressure medication in the window. On the morning after Edmund Calixte was found in the bay, it also had the quality of a place where something has happened: people pausing longer than they needed to, conversations that moved to the side of the road to continue. The ordinary business of the square going on, and underneath it a current that goes through a village when someone has died badly and nobody is saying so out loud yet. I had come because Philippa was going to the square—to the credit union, then to the pharmacy for her mother's prescription—and she had asked me to walk with her. She did not say she didn't want to go alone. She put on her good dress and carried her bag and I walked beside her, and we did the errands without discussing Edmund, because Philippa is the kind of woman who finishes her errands. In front of the credit union, coming out of the door, we met Lucien Beaumont. He stopped. He registered Philippa's face with the attention of someone who has been given information in advance and has prepared for the encounter. Then his expression

opened into grief—not performed grief, something more careful than that, something practised into the vicinity of real. He was perhaps fifty, with good shoes and the ease of a man who has been the best-dressed person in the room for long enough that he no longer notices. He wore a white shirt, sleeves to the wrist despite the heat, which in Bellefond reads as a kind of formality. "Philippa." He took her hand in both of his. "I heard this morning. I am so sorry. Edmund was—we all valued him here. A careful man. A man who asked the right questions." He held her hand for exactly the right number of seconds, then released it. "If there is anything the Beaumont Foundation can do for the family. Anything at all. You only need to ask."

Philippa said thank you. She said it small and genuine, the way people say thank you when they mean it and are too tired to say more. He looked at me then, with the assessing look that people give to the slightly-known person at a difficult moment, sorting out who I was and what I was doing there. "S raphine Toussaint," he said, placing me. "Marise's sister." A warm smile, a hand extended. "I was sorry about Marise too. The island loses good reporters badly and doesn't count the cost of it."

I shook his hand. His handshake was a practised thing: firm, brief, warm without being cloying. "You knew Edmund well?" I asked. "Bellefond is a small community." He made a gesture toward the square, encompassing it. "We all know each other here. He'd been away some years—England—but before that, yes. His family has been in this parish since his grandfather's time. A solid family." He looked at Philippa. "A family that

deserves answers, if there are answers to give."

It was exactly the right thing to say. It acknowledged the unspoken question, placed himself on the side of the family, and gave nothing away. I watched the people on the square who had caught sight of him—a small readjustment in each of them, a leaning toward, the gravity of someone the community has decided is trustworthy. A woman I didn't know called out to him from across the square and he lifted a hand in acknowledgment. The pharmacist at his window nodded. "The resort parcel," I said. "The coastal access consultation—when does that close?"

He looked at me with the pleasant interest of a man who has fielded difficult questions before and knows how to make it feel like an ordinary conversation. "The final signing is in three weeks. We've had a very positive process with the community board." A slight pause—calibrated, I thought, calibrated to the weight of the moment. "Though of course any further conversations with the co-op will need to wait a respectful period, given what's happened."

"Of course," I said. He said goodbye to Philippa again, with warmth, and went on down the square. I watched him go—the walk of a man who has never in his life wondered whether he belonged in the room. There is a kind of man the island makes and then cannot hold, who goes to the capital or to England and comes back wearing the manner of the place he went to, and you can read the borrowed manner like a watermark. Beaumont was not that man. Whatever he had become he had become here, in this square, shaking these hands, and it had grown on him the way bark grows, from the inside,

until it could not be told from the wood. That was what made him hard. A borrowed thing you can strip. A thing that grew you can only cut, and cutting it takes the tree. Philippa said: "You see what I mean."

"Yes," I said. "I see exactly what you mean." --

Edmund's room was at the back of Philippa's house, beyond the kitchen, with a window that looked out on the yard where the hibiscus was—a different angle, the bush from behind, the back of its leaves rather than the morning face. He had been sleeping there since his return, his suitcase under the bed and his clothes on a wooden stand he had brought from the spare room because the room had no wardrobe. The clothes were still arranged on the stand, two shirts and a pair of trousers on the rail, the way a man keeps them when he is going somewhere soon and expects to need them. Philippa stood in the doorway. She did not come in. "He kept it neat," she said. He had. The room had the tidiness of someone who has spent years in a small flat in a cold country learning to keep their things in order because there is not much room and everything has to go back where it belongs. A small stack of books on the floor beside the bed—three of them, one with a bookmark, one face-down on the cover that showed a map of the eastern Caribbean with shipping routes marked. A travel alarm clock on the windowsill, the cheap digital kind, and beside it a strip of passport photographs from a machine, four images of Edmund against the white background, not smiling, looking directly at something just above the camera. I picked up the photograph strip. "For a visa?" I asked. Philippa looked at it from the doorway. "He didn't say what for. He had them done two weeks ago, at the

place on the Castries road."

I looked at the face in the photographs. Four identical expressions: not guarded, not afraid, only the focused calm of someone who is paying attention to a fixed point. A man measuring something. I put the photographs back. I picked up the face-down book—it was a slim thing, a publication from the university press in Barbados, called **Coastal Rights and Marine Resource Management in OECS States**, and the bookmark was in a chapter about fisheries board reporting requirements and their relationship to coastal modification permits. I put the book down where it had been and looked around the rest of the room. On the small table by the door—the one that served as a desk, with a power strip plugged into the wall and a cord for a phone charger still attached—there was a sheet of paper folded in three. Not folded carefully. Folded the way you fold something when you want to be able to unfold it quickly and read it again. I unfolded it. It was a printout of a tide table. St. Lucia, inner Bellefond Bay, dated for the month before Edmund died. Several of the dates had small marks beside them—pencil, the same hand as the marks in the planning documents. The marked dates were all low-water days, the **L** beside each one, the days when the bay pulls back and the bottom of the inner breakwater is reachable without a boat. I stood there for a moment with the tide table in my hand. "Philippa," I said. "Did he talk about what specifically he thought was under the water? What the dredging had moved?"

From the doorway she was quiet for a moment. "He said—he said there were things that went down before the marina was built. Old things. A chain, part of a chain,

for the old anchorage—you know the old co-op had a different arrangement before the marina, they used to moor the bigger vessels off the inner point." She paused. "And he said something else had gone down too. Not old. More recent."

"What kind of thing?"

"He didn't say. He said he had a theory and he wanted to confirm it before he said it. He said if he was right it was—" She stopped. Started again. "He said *serious*."

I refolded the tide table along its original creases and put it back on the table. "Can I take the books?" I asked. "For a few days."

She said yes. She said it with the trust that is different from permission—permission would have hesitated; trust just says yes. I took the three books and the tide table. I left the passport photographs on the windowsill because they belonged to her grief and not to the investigation. The travel clock was still counting. Outside the window the hibiscus had its back to us, the undersides of its leaves catching the afternoon light. —

That evening I sat at my table with the books on one side and the carton of Marise's papers open on the other and Edmund's purple notebook in front of me. The notebook was dated along the top of each entry—the way a reporter does it, the date as the first line, then the account. He had been keeping it since March, the week he arrived back. Twelve weeks of entries, most of them brief, a few long. I read the long ones first. The entry for the second week of May was six pages in his tightly compressed handwriting—a shorthand that wasn't quite any system I knew, more like a personal code:

abbreviated names, symbols for things he wanted to be able to say quickly. A fish drawn in the margin, the same flat-bellied fish that Marise had drawn in her own notebooks beside her sources. When I saw that I put the notebook down and picked up Marise's *janvyé* exercise book, and I found the fish on the third page, and the initials E.F., and the column of dates beside it. The dates in Marise's book and the dates in Edmund's notebook did not match exactly. They came from opposite angles—she was recording what he gave her, and he was recording what he found—but they agreed on a period: eighteen months before Marise drowned, something was happening at the inner bay during the low-water days. I put both books open on the table side by side. The generator down at the co-op ran its own sound underneath the quiet, and a dog somewhere on the hill gave up its barking at nothing. Three weeks, Beaumont had said. The final parcel signing in three weeks. I wrote the number twenty-one in my notebook. I drew a line under it. I had twenty-one days before the paper trail on the resort's coastal parcel closed.

Chapter 4

The Elder's Version



Ma Régis's house is above the cemetery road, and you reach it by the path that runs behind the old sugar works, where the mill stack still stands without its mill. The path goes past a mango tree that has been dropping on that path since before either of us was born, and past the standpipe that three families use between them, and up a short steep rise to the yard where Ma Régis keeps her kitchen garden—sweet potato, thyme, two varieties of hot pepper, and the christophene vine that has been eating the back fence since the year it was planted. The kitchen smells of the christophene and of the coconut oil she uses for everything and of the warmth of a wood stove that has been lit since early morning. She was in the yard when I came up the path. She had a bucket and she was watering the pepper plants with the bucket—not with the hose, because she says the hose puts too much water in one place and the pepper wants what the rain gives it, which is distributed and considered. She did not stop watering when she saw me. She turned to water the next plant along and said: "Manje premye," without looking at me. *Eat first.*

This is the offer Ma Régis makes when she has seen something coming that needs talking about and wants to

put the talking in its proper place. You eat, you drink the coffee or the juice or whatever is on the stove, and then you discuss the thing. The eating is not a delay. It is how she establishes that the person across from her is a person and not only a situation. I ate. She had made bakes and salt fish, the kind of salt fish that has been soaked long enough that it comes apart in threads, and there was avocado from the tree behind the house and coffee in the enamel mug she keeps for visitors. I ate without hurrying and she sat across from me with her own coffee and watched the christophene vine and didn't ask me anything. When I finished she took the plate and set it in the basin and came back and said: "Tell me about the boy, then."

"You heard," I said. "I heard before the sun came up. These roads carry things." She settled in her chair. "The police say sea and rum. Aurélien came by here in the morning, asking if I'd seen Edmund in the last week. I told him I had seen him at the market on Wednesday and he looked well. Thin, but well. Thin the way a man gets when he is thinking very hard about something."

"What did he buy at the market?"

She looked at me with the expression that means she is deciding something. "He bought plantain and a piece of salt pork and a tin of condensed milk. And he stopped at the medicine woman's stall—not Odette, the other one, the woman from the village at Laborie who comes Wednesdays—and he stood there a while." She paused. "I don't know what he bought there. I was across the square."

I filed that. "Tell me what you know about Edmund," I said. "From before England. What kind of man he was."

Ma Régis is not old in how people mean when they say someone is old. She is seventy-four and she has all her faculties and she has spent seventy-four years in Bellefond watching how things actually work, which is a different education from anything that is written down. She knows the history of every family in the parish, not the official history—not the baptism records and the land deeds—but the horizontal history, the one that tracks who lent whom money in a hard year, who kept a secret and who did not, who came back from abroad changed and who came back the same person they had always been. "Edmund Calixte," she said. She put her coffee down. "His grandfather was Marcel Calixte, who fished this bay before the co-op existed, before the marina existed, before anyone had the idea of selling a view of the Pitons to a man who would pay four hundred American dollars for a meal. Marcel Calixte could read the water. He could tell you where the fish were by what the water looked like at the surface, which is a skill that has no name in English but has a name in Kwéyòl that I'm not going to say to you because you would write it down and use it wrong."

"I won't write it," I said. She looked at me. "No," she said. "You won't." A pause. "Edmund had that. The reading. Not for fish—he didn't fish, his generation mostly didn't—but for other things. For paper. He could read a document and find the thing in it that didn't agree with another document. He was doing it since he was at school. The teachers were afraid of him." A small sound, almost a laugh. "Not because he was rude. Because he was accurate."

"He was working on the resort land documents," I

said. "I know what he was working on." Her voice was dry. "This parish is not large, Séraphine. Things circulate." She looked at the christophene vine. "The resort has been eating this bay for four years. First the consultation. Then the planning application. Then the caisson work, which they said was to improve the inner anchorage for the co-op—and which the co-op was not asked about before the work started. Then the survey. Then the survey findings, which nobody has seen because they are filed with the fisheries board in Fort-de-France and the fisheries board in Fort-de-France does not share its files with the fishing co-op of Bellefond." She turned to look at me. "And now the parcel signing. Which closes the final piece of the coastal land, the piece that gives them the access they need for the outer extension."

"Three weeks," I said. "Twenty-one days." She corrected me precisely. "And once the parcel signs, the paper trail goes with it. The company changes hands, the consultancy dissolves, the survey files are proprietary business records and no public body has a right to them. That is how it works." She picked up her coffee. "Edmund knew that. He had been working against the clock."

"Did he talk to you about it specifically?"

"He came here in April. He ate." She said it without elaboration, as if this were the significant detail. "He said he had found a pattern. He said the pattern was in the low-water days and in the landings data and in something he hadn't confirmed yet, something under the water. He said he needed to be very certain before he said it to anyone because if he said it before he was certain they would discredit him." She set the coffee down. "He said he had a source who could confirm what was on

paper, but the paper source and the physical evidence had to agree, because the paper alone—" She paused, looking for the words. "He said the paper alone could be made to read the wrong way by someone who knew how to file things."

"He said *they*," I said. "*They would discredit him.*"

"Yes."

"Did he say who they were?"

She was quiet for a moment. "He didn't say a name. He said he knew who stood behind the project. He said he had known for some time—not from evidence, from reading. From how the project moved, which doors opened for it, how the board meetings always seemed to go." She looked at me steadily. "He said sometimes you know a thing and knowing it is not the same as being able to say it."

The christophene vine moved against the fence in a breath of wind. The kitchen smelled of wood smoke and the morning's cooking. Somewhere beyond the cemetery road I could hear the sound of the school at first break, children's voices and the bell. "The fishing co-op's position," I said. "The fight against the resort expansion. How has that gone?"

"Badly." She said it without bitterness. "Not because the co-op men are weak. Because the co-op men have to make their living from the sea every day and the resort has lawyers and time and Lucien Beaumont, who can be charming at every community board meeting and attend every church feast and donate to the school fund and still eat the bay one caisson at a time." A pause. "Beaumont is good. He is the kind of man who does things in the open

and makes the open look like generosity."

I had seen him at the parish square the day before—the warm handshake, the precise number of seconds holding Philippa's hand, the words that were exactly the right words. "He was Marise's story too," I said. "Before she drowned."

Ma Régis looked at me for a long moment. "Yes," she said. "I know that."

"Did you tell Edmund that?"

"I didn't need to. He came to it on his own." She stood, slowly, and went to the stove to add wood to the fire. "Edmund Calixte was careful and accurate and he did not make things up. If he said he had found a pattern, there was a pattern." She did not look at me when she said the next part. "And if they say he drowned drunk in a bay he was afraid of since he was eight years old, they are saying a lie, and in this parish we know the difference, and we are watching to see what you are going to do about it."

It was not a challenge, the way she said it. It was a statement of what was true. "Mwen tann ou," I said. I hear you. The Kwéyòl came up before I chose it, the way it only ever did in her kitchen; I had not spoken it in a newsroom in twenty years and it had been living under the English the whole time. "I'll ask quiet questions," I said. "I won't promise you the answer will be good."

"I know." She turned from the stove. "You have your mother's mouth and Marise's eyes and your grandmother's stubbornness, which is the correct combination for the work." She looked at me with the directness of someone who does not waste warmth on things she does not mean. "Eat again before you go. You

won't remember to eat this afternoon."

I ate again. She was right that I wouldn't remember.—

On the way back down the cemetery path I stopped at the mango tree and stood in its shade and wrote four things in my notebook:

Twenty-one days.

Low-water days + landings data + physical evidence.

Beaumont. Read the community board minutes.

What did Edmund buy from the woman from Laborie.

Then I stood there a moment longer with the notebook open, because the path through the old sugar works looks down to the bay from that angle, and from that angle you can see both parts of it: the co-op landing with the pirogues pulled up, and the marina with its glass-bottom boats and its painted sign, and between them the inner bay, where the caissons of the new breakwater stand in the water and the survey flags have been up for two months and no one from the co-op has been told what the survey found. From this angle the two things are in the same frame. That is not how either of them wants to be seen. I put the notebook away and went down toward the bay.

Chapter 5

The Co-op and the Bay



The co-op landing at seven in the morning smells of brine and motor oil and the sweetness of ice that has been sitting in a warehouse since the previous afternoon. The pirogues are out by then, the last of them gone by six-thirty, and what remains is the residue of the work: the scales on the flat stones, the nets hung to dry on the metal frames, the rubber boots in pairs by the ice house door. Three men were mending net on the concrete bench at the far end of the landing when I arrived—older men, the ones who have graduated from the water to the work of maintaining the equipment that goes in the water. One of them had a radio on the bench beside him, turned low, the morning news from Castries. I knew two of them. The third I didn't. "Bon matin," I said. "Bon matin, Séraphine." The one I knew best—Jocelin, who had been in the co-op since before the marina was built and who kept a account of that transition in his head, a running tally of what had been given and what had been taken—looked up from the net. "You looking for Tibo."

"Yes. And anybody else who talked to Edmund Calixte in the last weeks."

Jocelin looked at the man to his left, who I didn't know, and the man looked at the net, and Jocelin looked

back at me. "Tibo is in the equipment room. He'll be there until nine."

The equipment room is behind the ice house, a long shed with corrugated iron sides and a padlock on the door that only locks from the outside. Inside it holds the gear that belongs to the co-op collectively—the emergency equipment, the spare parts for the motors, the dive gear they keep for the hull inspection diver who comes from Fort-de-France twice a year and sometimes uses co-op equipment and sometimes doesn't. The dive gear was on the rack at the back, and beside it on the bench was Tibo, who was doing the inventory of the regulators with a clipboard and a grease pencil. Tibo is younger than Jocelin, in his late thirties, with the kind of competence you find in the person the co-op trusts with its equipment—careful with his hands, systematic, a man who checks things twice before he signs his name to them. He looked up when I came in and set the clipboard down. "About Edmund," he said, before I could say it. "About Edmund. You told Philippa you saw him at the resort site."

"Two nights before they found him. On the coast road, at night. I was coming back from my cousin's place in the van—my cousin lives on the north road, and the coast road is the shorter way, you know." He looked at his hands. "Edmund was walking on the side of the road, not on the path. Walking fast. I slowed down and called to him and he waved me on. He didn't want a lift."

"What time?"

"Past ten. Maybe ten-thirty."

"Was he carrying anything?"

Tibo thought about it. "A bag. The kind you carry

over one shoulder, the canvas type. It looked heavy." He paused. "He was walking toward the resort site, not away from it. I know because of how the road bends there—you can only be going one direction from where he was."

"And the dive gear," I said. "Walk me through that."

He went to the rack and touched the regulator that was on the far left. "He came on a Tuesday morning—a week before they found him, maybe eight days. He said he had a favour to ask. He was very formal about it, like he was going to take a thing that didn't belong to him and wanted to be clear about it. He said he needed to look at something under the water, at the inner bay. He said it wouldn't take long and he wouldn't damage anything."

"Did he ask about going at night?"

"Yes." Tibo looked at the regulator. "He asked whether the dive gear was usable at night, what you would need additionally. I told him you need a torch—a dive torch, not a regular one—and that the co-op had one. He asked to borrow it. I said yes." He set the regulator back on the rack. "I should have asked him more questions. I know that now."

"You didn't know anything was wrong."

"I should have—" He stopped. Pressed his lips together. "He was afraid," he said quietly. "I could see it. I thought it was about going in the water, because Edmund didn't go in the water. I thought the fear was about the water and not about the other thing." He looked at me. "I was wrong about which fear it was."

I sat down on the bench beside the clipboard. "Tell me what you know about the survey work. The caisson work on the inner bay."

Jocelin had come in while we were talking—I heard his boots on the threshold and turned and he was standing in the doorway, and behind him was the third man from the bench, whose name I still didn't know. "That story is long," Jocelin said. "Tell me the long version," I said. He came in and sat on the work stool near the door. The third man stayed in the doorway—not quite in, not quite out, as if listening from there gave him less responsibility for what he was hearing. "The caisson work was two years ago," Jocelin said. "They said it was to improve the inner anchorage. They had a letter from the fisheries board that said it was approved. The co-op chairman—that was Prosper, who is no longer chairman—he asked to see the full application and they gave him three pages of a twenty-page document." He said it without particular anger, the way you describe a wound that has healed but left a scar. "Prosper pushed, and they said the rest was proprietary engineering specifications. And the coast works authority in Castries said the application was in order. And so it was done."

"What did the work change, specifically?"

"The bottom," Tibo said, from the rack. "The bottom of the inner bay. The caissons are placed differently from the old breakwater—the old one followed the natural formation at the bottom, you understand, the stone shelf that runs from the inner point. The new caissons are on a different line. They moved aggregate from one section to another." He paused. "And the survey results from the survey they did before the caisson work were never published. They were filed with the fisheries board and that was the last anyone saw of them."

"What did the co-op think was under the aggregate?"

"We didn't know exactly," Jocelin said. "We knew the bottom had been different. Prosper's father fished that inner section for thirty years and he said the bottom was different after. Different formation. Something that had been there was gone, or covered." He looked at the floor of the equipment shed. "Edmund asked us about it in April. He asked Prosper's father—the old man, he's not fishing anymore—and the old man drew him a diagram of what it used to look like. On paper. What the bottom formation was in the old man's time."

"Do you have a copy of that diagram?"

He shook his head. "Edmund took the original. He said he was going to compare it to the survey data, if he could get the survey data."

I thought of the books in Edmund's room: *Coastal Rights and Marine Resource Management in OECS States*, the bookmark in the fisheries board reporting chapter. He had been working backward—trying to use the public reporting requirements to get at the survey data the resort had buried in a proprietary filing. "He found something," I said. "Or he thought he found something. That's why he borrowed the gear."

"He told me he wanted to confirm something," Tibo said. "He said he had a theory and he wanted to put eyes on it. He said the paper evidence was not enough on its own. He needed the physical evidence and the paper evidence to agree before he could say what he thought was there."

"He said exactly the same thing to Ma Régis," I said. Jocelin and Tibo exchanged a look, the kind that has the history of two men who have worked together for years in it. Then Jocelin said: "What do you think he found?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going to need someone who can take me out to the inner bay at night. Someone who knows the bottom from the old maps—or someone who knows the water well enough to read it."

The doorway was quiet. The third man, the one I didn't know, shifted his feet. "My uncle," he said. The first thing he had said. He said it to the floor of the doorway, not to me. "He dove that section in the old days. He knows the formation the way the old man described it. He is retired now but he goes out sometimes, not for fish. For the water."

"Can I talk to him?"

The man looked up. He was perhaps forty-five, with a careful face and the hands of someone who has worked on boats. "I can ask," he said. "He is—he is particular about what he does and who he does it for. But he knew Marcel Calixte. He knew Edmund's grandfather." A pause. "I think he'll say yes. If you tell him what it's for."

"What's his name?"

"Joseph Charlemagne. Everybody calls him Jo." He looked at me steadily. "Tell him Edmund borrowed the gear and went in anyway. That will be enough."—

I stayed at the landing until nine o'clock, talking to the men who came back from the morning's work with their catch for the ice house. Not all of them would talk to me directly—a few went quiet and busy with their nets when they saw me coming—but enough did, and what they gave me assembled into a picture. Edmund had been on the landing in the last weeks of his life, asking questions about the survey work, about the caisson placement, about the fisheries board filing. He had been careful about it—not approaching the men in groups,

always one at a time, always on the landing itself rather than at the rum shop where it might look different. He had been writing things down in a notebook. A purple one, a woman named Génie told me. She had seen him from the market stall she keeps on Tuesdays beside the landing, seen him sitting on the wall with the notebook in his lap and one of the older fishermen beside him, not talking, just pointing at the bay. At the water. At the section of the inner bay where the caissons stood. He had been pointing at where something had been. Génie talked while she combed the fringe of her tablecloth, and what she said assembled into the thing the documents could not hold, which was what the bay had been before it was a development site. There was a time, she said, when the inner bay fed nine families through a bad season, when the jacks ran so thick in the channel that a boy could fill a bucket off the co-op stones with a hand line, when the marina end was a mangrove the children were warned out of for the caymans that were not even there. The resort had not taken the fish all at once. It had taken them the way the sea takes a sandbank, a grain at a time, so no single morning was the morning the fishing died, and a man could stand on the landing every day of it and never once be able to say this was the day. That was the cleverness of it, Génie said, not bitterly. You cannot grieve a thing taken a grain at a time. You can only look up one year and find the bucket empty and the marina full and no morning to point at. "He came back to himself, those last weeks," Génie said. She had a comb she was running through the fringe of her stall's tablecloth—not because the fringe needed combing, but because her hands needed something to do. "Edmund when he was

young was—that's a man who was going to be something. Then England, and whatever happened there, and he came back looking like something had been taken from him. But these last weeks he had—" She stopped. "He had a face like a man who has remembered what he is for."

I thought of the passport photographs on his windowsill. The focused calm of a man paying attention to a fixed point. "He knew it was dangerous," I said. Not a question. "I think so." She stopped combing. "He said to me once—this was in May, I think, late May—he said, *Génie, when I'm done with this, we'll know what happened to the bay.* He said *when*, not *if*." She looked at the water. "He had the face of a man who had passed the point of going back."

The sun was over the hill now, the kind of light that turns the inner bay a pale green in the mornings before it deepens into the day's blue. The co-op ice house was running hard. The market stalls were full. Out past the breakwater, two of the pirogues were already heading back in with the morning's work. I had Tibo's number and Joseph Charlemagne's name and the name of the road where he lived, given to me by the man in the doorway whose name I had eventually learned was Felix. I had a clearer picture of what Edmund had been building: the paper evidence from the planning office and the fisheries board filing, the physical evidence of the bay bottom, and something connecting them—something he had not gotten to before he died. I had twenty days left before the parcel signing. I wrote Jo Charlemagne's name in my notebook and underlined it. Underneath I wrote: *night dive. The inner bay. What the caissons covered.*

I needed eyes on what Edmund had gone to see.

You've just read the opening of Saltwater.

SérAPHINE's story is only beginning — and the full
novel arrives October 6.

Want the rest?

Join Elara Kincaid's Reader List and you'll be first to
know the moment Saltwater goes live — plus
new-release alerts, bonus scenes, and early-reader
copies of every Bellefond book.

Join free at

elarakincaid.com

The Bellefond series — five islands, one reckoning.
Saltwater is Book One.

— *Elara Kincaid*