

**KEEPER
OF THE
EAST BLUFF LIGHT**



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Kevin Parham

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*In memory of the
stalwart lighthouse keepers*



KEEPER OF THE EAST BLUFF LIGHT

One

On the evening of June 11, 1951, a dense fog drifted toward Emerald Island and settled over the quaint town of East Bluff. Across the harbor, a lone foghorn moaned a throaty warning of deteriorating conditions at sea.

Most nights, faint lights emanating from small towns on Cape Cod were visible from this vantage point on the island. But not this night; tonight, they had been hidden by a thick, gray mist.

The rotating beacon atop the chocolate brown lighthouse was almost indistinguishable; it was as if it had somehow lost its luminance or been enshrouded by a thick woolen blanket.

Sam Biggs, an ornery, one-armed, sixty-five-year-old retired sea captain, emerged from the keeper's quarters — an old, run-down shack of one tiny room with an outhouse forty feet to the rear — and slowly trudged across the yard carrying a kerosene lamp toward the tall, conical structure. This routine was second nature to him; he had done it for longer than he cared to remember.

Having made his way through the mist to the lighthouse, Sam placed the lamp on the ground and grabbed hold of the rusty door handle as best he could. His stiff, arthritic fingers were barely able to turn the key.

With as much strength as he could muster, Sam tugged on the heavy steel door until it opened. He then he picked up the lamp and walked inside. After closing the door behind him, he held the lamp over his head and peered at the fifty-four iron stairs that spiraled to the top of the lighthouse.

At that moment, Sam had an epiphany; for some reason, he suddenly became more cognizant of his physical limitations. What had once been an effortless climb up the stairs was now more akin to scaling the steep slopes of Mount Everest.

Sam, a dedicated lightkeeper who took his responsibilities seriously, knew he had to wind the wooden clock mechanism to keep the light turning, and he also had to ensure there was enough kerosene in the lamp for the wicks to burn through the night. This was especially important tonight because a nor'easter was expected to hit the island.

Sam inched his way up, one step at a time, until he reached the cramped, smoky tower room where the rotating light was housed. "I must be getting old," he grumbled aloud, as he attempted to wipe the condensation off the circular windows. Lately, Sam had noticed how quickly he became tired.

He finished the window, then sat down on a hard, straight-back chair — his observation perch — and looked out over the dark Atlantic Ocean, though thick fog made it difficult even to see the seven-foot breakers swelling and crashing just below the cliff.

A stiff northeast wind howled past the lighthouse, sounding like a high-pitched whistle on a freight train as it swooped over the bluff, bending tree trunks as if they were made from rubber and snapping branches like Popsicle sticks.

As Sam, resting, gazed through the window, he noticed a vessel apparently in distress, about three miles from shore, due north. Gale force winds and driving rain obscured his view; he could barely make out the running lights on either side of the vessel, but was able to see a white mast light swaying back and forth as the vessel pitched and yawed atop twenty-foot ocean swells.

No doubt its destination was the harbor, several miles away. But the likelihood of making it there safely in such weather conditions was remote at best. All Sam could do was watch ... and hope. Ten minutes later, the vessel was no longer visible; it seemed to have mysteriously disappeared.

Though Sam had witnessed many nights like this, something about this particular one seemed eerily familiar, harkening back to his sea captain days when he had braved the elements and survived countless dangers aboard his fishing trawler, *Lucky Lady*. Harkening back to a night that had changed his life. He stoically put the memories out of his mind.



Sam's gruff exterior made him appear as if he'd been to hell and back and lived to talk about it, though he was, in reality, a man of few words. At five foot ten inches tall, with a muscular physique, salt-and-pepper hair, and a long, scraggly beard reminiscent of Rip Van Winkle's, Sam was quite the specimen, despite his age.

The skin on his face was weathered, and deep lines crisscrossed his forehead and cheekbones like a leather road map, revealing the many years of stress he'd endured as a deckhand on a trawler — a difficult job, demanding hard work and dedication, in one of the most dangerous occupations in the world. Actually, for Sam, deep-sea fishing was not only a job, but a family tradition, one he had been introduced to by his father at fifteen-years-old.



Morning brought with it unusually calm seas and a vivid, magenta sunrise. The storm that had pounded the island during the night had blown out to sea; it was almost as if it had never occurred.

Sam, still seated in the tower room at the top of the lighthouse, looked out over the ocean. Clear to the horizon, the surface of the water was smooth, a sheet of glass. Despite the tranquility, Sam couldn't stop wondering what had happened to the vessel he had seen the night before. Did she make it to port? Was she lost at sea and now sitting on the ocean floor? How many crew members were on board? Through the night, these questions had begun to haunt him.

Looking north again, Sam expected to see something that might offer an explanation as to what had happened, for, when a ship goes down, most times there's a clue left of a mishap having occurred. An item from aboard the ship floating on the water, larger pieces of wreckage, or perhaps an oil slick — there was usually a telltale sign, a remnant of some kind. But, in this case, there was no trace of a shipwreck. Nothing.



Later that morning, Sam — now back in the keeper's quarters — heard a car pull up to the front of the lighthouse. When he peeked out the window to get a glimpse of the unexpected visitor, he noticed "U.S. Coast Guard" stenciled on the side of the vehicle.

A portly gentleman — about five foot seven inches tall, with silver hair and a neatly trimmed beard — stepped out of the car and quickly glanced around the grounds. Sam emerged from the keeper's quarters.

"Captain Biggs," the man said, extending his hand.

Sam shook it and said, "Good morning, Inspector Jones. How may I help you?"

"We're investigating a shipwreck that occurred last night. A small vessel with a crew of five was lost, and I wanted to ask you a few questions that might assist us with the investigation."

"I did see a vessel in distress last night, about three miles due north," Sam said, "but hadn't heard five were lost." He was noticeably disturbed.

“What did you see?” the inspector asked.

“I thought it was a midsized vessel, perhaps a trawler, that appeared to be tacking hard to the starboard side, but all I could really see through the rain and fog was a mast light. A few minutes later, it had disappeared,” Sam answered.

“You said that you were on duty at the time?”

“Yes; I was in the light tower when I spotted the vessel,” Sam said.

“I see,” the inspector replied, as he quickly scribbled on a note pad.

The inspector looked up. “The Coast Guard received a radio transmission that claimed the East Bluff Light was not operating at the time of the accident.”

“That’s not true, Inspector. The light was on and rotating, as required, and I was there all night to be sure it was, as required when there are storms. Granted, weather conditions were bad and visibility almost nonexistent, but, I can assure you, the wick was lit last night,” Sam replied firmly.

“Is it possible you might have inadvertently dozed off and the light went out?”

“No, Inspector. I know for a fact I did not fall asleep on the job. I was awake the entire night.”

“Do you mind if I go up to the tower and take a look around?” the inspector asked.

“Not at all; let me show you the way.”

Sam slowly led the inspector up the stairs to the top of the lighthouse. The inspector checked the mechanisms, oil level, wicks, and logbook. He slipped on a white glove and lightly swiped his hand across the circular windows to see how much dirt was present, all the while taking copious notes of everything he observed.

Sam was as competent a lightkeeper as there was. In fact, he had become one of the best principal lightkeepers the East Bluff Lighthouse had ever had. Among the many items hanging on the tower wall was a Gold Lifesaving Medal he had received

after he helped rescue a crew on a ship that had hit a cluster of submerged rocks, not far from the lighthouse.

“Congratulations on having received the Gold Lifesaving Medal, Captain. That was quite the display of heroics. I remember hearing about that incident. Well done!” the inspector said.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Well, Captain Biggs, I think I’ve seen enough. I appreciate your cooperation; you’ve been very helpful,” the inspector said.

“So, what’s next?”

“I’ll submit a report of the findings to the Coast Guard and you’ll be notified of any issues or recommendations, should there be any.”

After the inspector drove away, Sam was concerned. He couldn’t help thinking there was something else going on. After all, in the thirty years he had worked at the lighthouse, there had never been an investigation by the U.S. Coast Guard, in spite of the fact that several maritime accidents with loss of life had occurred in proximity to the East Bluff Light.

For the rest of the day and into the evening, Sam thought about the shipwreck, the inspector’s visit, and what might come of it. He also continued to mull over the fishing trip that had ended his career as the captain of a doomed fishing trawler.

On that fateful day, decades ago, he and his crew had prepared to set sail on what was supposed to have been a routine fishing trip. The memory was vivid because, at the start of each trip, he had always gotten a queasy feeling in his gut, never knowing for sure whether they’d return safely.

For Sam, there had been no sight more comforting than the guiding beacon of the East Bluff Lighthouse, particularly after having spent many days and nights at sea.

As captain of a fishing vessel, Sam had believed the safety of the crew and the seaworthiness of the vessel were of utmost importance. Having spent his entire life on Emerald Island, Sam was well trained as a fisherman; it was in his DNA.

Sam’s innate knowledge of the sea and maritime protocols

had enabled him to become a competent and respected sea captain, a career from which he'd planned to retire one day when he grew much older. But fate has a way of sidetracking even the best-laid plans, and that proved true for Captain Samuel Biggs.

It is often said that time heals all wounds, and any unpleasant experience we might have endured somehow becomes less traumatic as it gradually fades from memory. However, in Sam's case, a life-altering event that had occurred when he was hardly more than thirty-years-old — one he desperately wanted to forget — would not release him from its torturous grip. It often crept into his subconscious mind in the form of a recurring dream, a constant reminder of the inadequacies that caused him to feel as if he were less than a man.

Two



At 5:00 a.m. on July 20, 1918, *Lucky Lady*, a 108-foot steam-powered vessel equipped with a Granton Otter Trawl, left East Bluff Harbor on what was expected to be an uneventful, three-day fishing trip to the outer shoals of Georges Bank. Haddock, cod, and flounder were the targets, and the crew looked forward to netting a catch that would replenish the coffers.

No one had a clue as to what would occur that voyage for it began just like any other. After a review of the first aid and emergency procedures with the crew of five — an exercise Sam conducted prior to each trip — and a check of the safety equipment aboard the vessel, *Luck Lady* left port and headed southeast. The skies were partly cloudy; light, variable winds were blowing about five knots from the east.

Upon reaching the western edge of Georges Bank, the crew began the task of releasing the nets into the water. For two days, the trawler traveled in a wide circle of approximately fifty miles, as the crew caught a variety of fish, then placed them in an iced storage compartment below deck.

On the evening of the third day, the vessel, en route back to Emerald Island fully loaded, met with rough seas and began to list uncontrollably. Northeast headwinds were blowing at

thirty-five knots, with gusts reaching fifty-seven, and ten-foot waves began to crash onto the deck.

Sam, suspecting something was awry, handed over control of the vessel to one of the deckhands while he scurried below deck to investigate the cause of the vessel's aberrant behavior. What Sam discovered confirmed his greatest fear: the integrity of the hull had been breached. *Lucky Lady* was taking on water.

Sam bolted back to the wheelhouse to inform the crew of the dire situation they were facing. He yelled, "Attention! Attention, everyone! We've got a critical situation; the hull has been breached. We're taking on water. Man your emergency stations!"

Immediately, the crew responded to Sam's orders. A deckhand named Rocco Silva ran to the stern of the vessel to reel in the net, which was his responsibility. While doing so, Rocco was swept overboard by a huge wave that crashed on top of him.

"Man overboard! Stop the engine!" yelled another hand.

Sam immediately stopped the engine and ordered the anchor to be dropped. The four remaining crew members ran to the stern to toss a lifeline into the water.

But the darkness and rough seas made it impossible to locate Rocco. All they could see was the rise and fall of waves and whitecaps; all they could hear was the howl of the wind and crash of water against the side of the trawler. The sting of salt spray pummeled their skin, as they desperately searched for their shipmate amid the churning ocean.

Finally, they were forced to assume he had drowned. Rocco Silva was deemed to have been lost at sea.

The vessel continued to be tossed around like a toy; a deluge of water now gushed through the crack in the hull, causing the vessel to begin to sink. The fishing net, still deployed, contributed to the instability of the vessel, so Sam made his way to the stern to attempt to retract the net.

The force of the wind and the water swirling on the deck pushed him onto the revolving winch. His left arm, caught in the winch's gears, was crushed from the tip of his fingers to just

below the shoulder. When the crew members heard Sam's cry for help, they ran to him and stopped the winch, then rotated it in reverse to free his arm.

Sam — in agonizing pain, his arm nearly severed — somehow was able to bark out instructions to the crew, as one of the men applied a makeshift tourniquet to his arm to slow the bleeding.

“Deploy the life raft and prepare to abandon ship!” Sam yelled.

The vessel, now listing at a 45-degree angle and sinking ever lower, was all but lost. Within minutes, the remaining crew jumped into the raft, lowered it onto the ocean's turbulent surface, and, thirty minutes later, watched the *Lucky Lady* disappear into the sea.

The next morning, a fishing trawler spotted the life raft and rescued the crew of the doomed vessel. Sam was immediately rushed to Emerald Island Hospital. Examination showed that, in order to save Sam's life, what remained of his left arm would have to be amputated. Otherwise, there was a good chance gangrene would develop and spread toxins throughout his body.



During his months of recuperation, Sam wallowed in the depths of depression and self-pity. Not only was he devastated by the loss of a crew member's life, but Sam had also lost his arm and his fishing vessel, *Lucky Lady*.

What will I do now? he repeatedly asked himself.

Sam was in dire straits. For one thing, he lacked health insurance. Second, his vessel was a total loss because he also hadn't been able to afford what it would have cost to insure it. Third, Sam possessed no viable skills to earn a living other than as a fisherman.

There were times Sam contemplated suicide. But, deep down inside, he knew he wasn't really a quitter. On the contrary, he was

very much a survivor, and a resourceful one at that. Though it was often buried during these hard months, Sam always had faith that something good would come of the unfortunate sequence of events that had befallen him.

No longer able to perform the stringent duties of a sea captain, Sam reluctantly accepted the fact that he had no choice but to give up the only profession he had known and loved. So, for the next few years, he survived by working odd jobs, running errands and performing tasks that did not require the use of both hands.

It wasn't long before Sam had become an outcast in this small, seaside town. He was shunned by those he had once considered friends; others treated him as if he were a one-armed freak, a drifter with no useful purpose in life. Experiencing this undeserved denigration was too much for Sam to bear, and so he became a recluse, doing his best to avoid contact with people as much as possible.

Sam had only one friend, John Landry, whom he had known since he was a young boy. John was the keeper of the East Bluff Lighthouse — a job he had had for forty years — and one of the few individuals who had stood by Sam throughout this tumultuous time in his life.

John begun contemplating retirement due to failing health, and, because he was emotionally attached to the lighthouse, he had a vested interest in who would replace him when he retired. At a minimum, the candidate would have to be someone not only competent to do the job, but also willing to bring the same level of dedication John had brought to the job for decades.

The life of a lighthouse keeper is a lonely one; the hours are long and the living conditions are often brutal. It's not a job for the faint of heart.

After giving it much thought, John decided to ask Sam if he'd be interested in the lightkeeper's job. He believed Sam could do the job, even with only one arm. And John had always known Sam to be an honest and dedicated man — someone

you could trust with your life — and he couldn't think of anyone else he'd rather have take his place.

On a crisp October Saturday morning, John traveled by horseback to an old house across town where Sam rented a room in the basement for \$2.50 a week. The house was modest: a three-room, single-story building with a cellar, on a dirt road about ten miles from the lighthouse. John dismounted from his horse, tied it to a wooden post, and walked toward the entrance to the cellar in back of the house.

He knocked on the door, and, when it opened, Sam was standing there, one-handedly rubbing his eyes, as if he had been asleep.

“John! What a surprise — what brings you all the way out here today?”

“Hello, Sam. How are you?”

“Not bad,” Sam answered. “Come in and have a seat.”

“Thanks.”

They sat down at an old wooden table that looked as if someone had discarded it on the side of the road. One of its legs was damaged, causing it to tilt to one side as it stood wedged between the wall and a pile of straw Sam used as a makeshift bed.

“How's your arm?” John asked.

“Which one? The one I still have, or the one I used to have?”

“The one you used to have.”

“Oh, you mean the nub? Well, as you can see, it's not much use, but it feels okay. A little numb at times, but I can deal with that. It's strange, but I still find myself attempting to use my left arm even though it's been amputated. I'd swear there are times when I feel as if it's still there and I could use it to touch something or to pick something up. It's funny how the mind works,” Sam said.

John paused for a moment before continuing. “Sam, as you know, I'll be retiring soon.”

“Retiring? John, please. You and I both know you've been singing that same old tune for years. You'll probably croak up

there in that lighthouse, and they'll have to carry your old, dead carcass out of there on a stretcher one day." Sam laughed.

"No, Sam, I'm serious. I think it's time for me to hang it up. I've been a lightkeeper for much too long; forty years is more than enough," John said, a stoic look on his face.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Sam asked.

"I'm dead serious."

"So, what's that got to do with me?"

"I'd like to know if you'd be interested in the job," John said.

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you'd make a good lightkeeper. I believe you've got what it takes."

"What it takes, John, is a physically fit young man who possesses both arms. In case you've forgotten, I'm one arm short," Sam replied.

"That doesn't matter, Sam. You could do it. In fact, I hope you'll seriously consider it. I'd start you out as my assistant and teach you everything I know. And the keeper's job comes with room and board, so, eventually, you'd be able to move out of this mildew-laden rat's nest."

"I don't know, John. I'm not sure I'm up to the task."

"Listen, Sam. I've known you since you were a young boy. Your father and I became best friends when we were just kids, and I've watched you grow up. I know your character. I have every confidence that you could do this if you want to."

"But I'm not a lightkeeper; I'm a fisherman. Always have been; always will be," Sam said.

"Well, look at it this way. Since you can no longer fulfill the duties of a sea captain, why not assist other sea captains? You could maintain the same lighthouse that has not only guided you on many a night, but also has helped countless other sea captains navigate through the treacherous waters of Emerald Sound for over one hundred years."

"When you put it that way, it does seem like something worth considering," Sam said.

About The Author

Kevin Parham is the author of the award-winning memoir, *The Vineyard We Knew — A Recollection of Summers on Martha's Vineyard*. After an extensive career in the entertainment industry as a professional musician, Kevin decided to pursue his new-found passion for writing. *Keeper of the East Bluff Light* is Kevin's first novel.

Kevin currently resides in Plymouth, Massachusetts with his wife, Olivia.

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