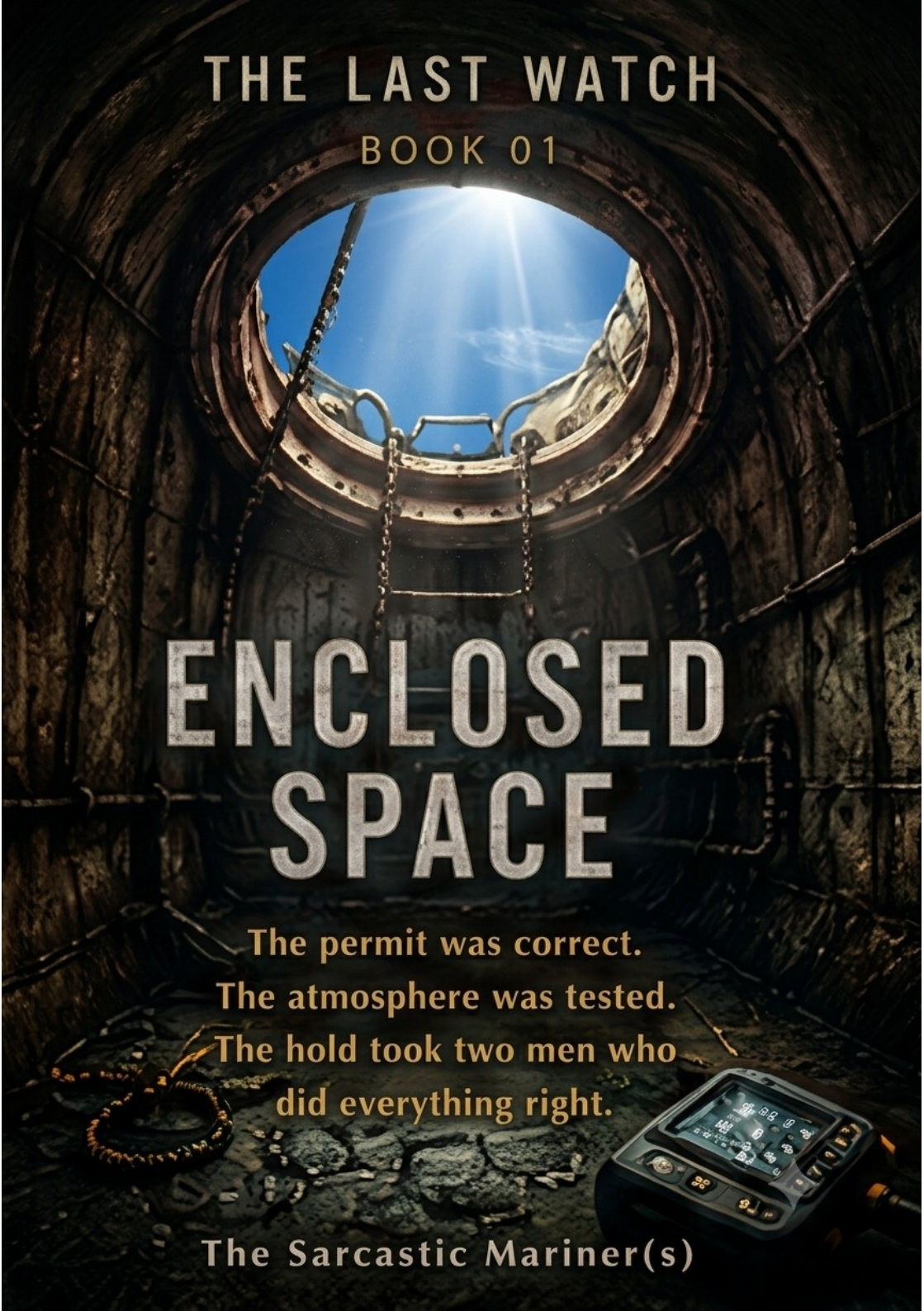




THE LAST WATCH

BOOK 01

ENCLOSED SPACE

The permit was correct.
The atmosphere was tested.
The hold took two men who
did everything right.

The Sarcastic Mariner(s)

THE LAST WATCH ENCLOSED SPACE

*What the permit said. What the space contained. What
happened next.*

Book One of The Last Watch Series

“The space looked fine.”

Last documented thought of too many seafarers.

Tomas Reyes did everything correctly.

So did the people around him.

The gap was not in any one of them.

*It was between all of them — in the space
where a shared understanding should have been.*

This book tries to find that space.

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This work is intended to be read as a complete narrative. Extracting sections without context may alter the meaning the series seeks to explore — the human factor rarely survives fragmentation.

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Disclaimer

This book is a work of fiction.

The characters, vessels, companies, ports, and events portrayed herein are fictitious. Names have been selected at random and are not intended to represent any real individual, ship, organization, or location.

Any resemblance to actual persons — living or dead — actual vessels, companies, or incidents is purely coincidental.

The operational situations described draw upon recurring patterns observed across maritime case histories globally.

However, no single incident is being recreated, and no specific casualty, company, regulator, or individual is the subject of this narrative.

This series is written for entertainment, guidance, and reflection.

Where guidelines appear within the narrative, they are offered as professional reflections — not legal directives — representing distilled experience rather than enforceable instruction.

This series does not seek to assign blame, critique specific practices, or challenge regulatory authority. Instead, it examines the space between compliance and comprehension — where human judgment, assumption, pressure, and silence often intersect.

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How This Book Works

You can read this book as story.

You can read it as professional conversation.

You can read it as reflection.

It is designed to work as all three, because the human factor does not separate neatly into categories.

Maritime safety is rarely undone by ignorance alone but shaped by reasonable people making reasonable decisions within imperfect systems.

This book does not replace procedures; it explores how they are experienced.

Tomas Reyes did everything correctly. So did everyone around him.

The gap was not in any person — it was between all of them, in the space where a shared understanding should have been.

This book tries to find that space and describe it honestly.

PROLOGUE

The Permit

PERMIT TO WORK — ENCLOSED SPACE ENTRY	
Form	SMS-7.4 Revision 3 MV Caledonia Star II
SPACE & PURPOSE	
Space Identification	Cargo Hold No. 3 — Ballast tank access trunk
Purpose of Entry	Structural coating inspection — annual survey
ATMOSPHERE READINGS	
O ₂ Reading	20.8% [Normal: 20.8–21%]
Explosive Gas (LEL)	0% [Clear]
H ₂ S	0 ppm [Clear]
CO	0 ppm [Clear]
CO ₂	NOT MEASURED [Four-gas detector — no CO ₂ sensor]
TESTING & VENTILATION	
Tested By	Chief Officer N. Brennan
Time of Test	08:45
Ventilation	Mechanical — portable blower, running since 08:00
Ventilation reach confirmed	Entry point and first section only

ENTRY TEAM (buddy system — mandatory)	
Person 1 (Entrant)	Bosun T. Reyes
Person 2 (Entrant)	AB R. Domingo
Topside Attendant	AB J. Santos — stationed at access point
SAFETY EQUIPMENT CONFIRMED AT ACCESS POINT	
SCBA Sets	2 × Self-Contained BA — fully charged, serviced
EEBDs	2 × Emergency Escape Breathing Device — in position
Rescue Harness	Rigged — tripod lifting arrangement over trunk
Resuscitation Kit	Present — orange case, access point
Personal Gas Detectors	2 × four-gas — worn by entry team
Communications	Walkie-talkie channel 6 — entry team + attendant
AUTHORISATION	
Permit Valid Until	12:00
Master's Authorisation	Signed — Captain E. Fernandes — 09:00
Entry Team Acknowledgement	Signed — T. Reyes / R. Domingo — 09:47

At 10:03, neither Bosun Reyes nor AB Domingo responded to the attendant's call on channel 6.

The permit was correctly completed.

The equipment was on the board.

The buddy system was in place.

None of it was enough.

This is why.

PART ONE

THE SPACE

*The space looked exactly as it always
looked.*

That was the problem.

PART ONE · CHAPTER ONE

The Bosun's Morning

STORY — 07:00 — MV Caledonia Star II, at anchor, Chittagong

Everything said this would be a normal day.

Tomas Reyes made coffee at 07:00 the way he had made coffee every morning for twenty-eight years at sea: in the small galley adjacent to the bosun's store, with the specific economy of movement of a man who has learned to function in confined spaces without thinking about it.

Fifty-one years old. Bosun for eleven years, AB for nine before that, ordinary seaman for eight before that. Ships that no longer existed under names that no longer appeared in any register. Every cargo type. Every weather system the Indian Ocean, the North Atlantic, and the South China Sea could produce. Rotterdam at minus twelve. Chittagong in August heat that made steel too hot to touch.

Experienced. By every measure the industry used, experienced.

He poured the coffee. He looked at the work plan pinned above the sink.

Hold No. 3. Coating inspection. Survey requirement. Entry after 09:30. Entry team: Bosun Reyes and AB Domingo. Topside attendant: AB Santos.

He had done this before. Not this hold, not this vessel—he had joined the Caledonia Star II in Singapore four months ago—but this task, this type, this sequence. The permit process, the atmosphere test, the entry, the inspection, the exit. Dozens of times. On vessels across three flag states and four trade routes. Always with a partner. That was not negotiable in his understanding of the job. You entered confined spaces with someone alongside you. The someone alongside you was the difference between a recoverable situation and an unrecoverable one.

He knew what a hold smelled like when it was safe. He knew what his body told him in the first seconds of descent when the atmosphere was right. He had this knowledge in his body, not just his head — the specific physical literacy of a man who has worked in confined spaces long enough to trust his own senses.

The trust was real. The senses were reliable.

No one had any reason to doubt them.

He finished his coffee. He rinsed the cup. He went to the morning muster.

He was in good spirits. Three weeks from the end of his contract. His wife Elena had sent a voice note the night before—their daughter Sophia had passed her nursing board examination on the second attempt. Elena's voice in the recording had the specific quality of a woman who had been carrying worry for six months and had put it down.

He had listened to the voice note twice before sleeping and once more when he woke at 06:00.

He went to the muster thinking about Sophia. About going home. About the three weeks that stood between him and the bus stop in Batangas where Elena always waited, regardless of the hour, regardless of how many times he had told her she didn't have to.

She always waited.

It was the last ordinary morning of his career.

GUIDELINE — WHAT THEY MISSED

Between 08:45 and 09:47, something had changed in the aft section of the hold. Changed, or settled—the CO₂ that had been building for days, heavier than air, pooling at floor level below the test probe's reach, finding its depth in the pocket behind the third frame.

No instrument detected it. No alarm sounded. The space looked exactly as it always looked.

That was the problem.

PART ONE · CHAPTER TWO

The Permit Holder

STORY — 08:30 — Bridge and foredeck

Chief Officer Niall Brennan was thirty-seven years old and had been a Chief Officer for four years on three vessels. He was Irish, from Wexford, from a family that had no connection to the sea — his father was a civil engineer, his mother ran a primary school — and he had chosen maritime almost randomly at seventeen, from a careers fair, from a brochure that showed a container ship against a sunset that he later learned was taken off the coast of Oman and had been digitally enhanced.

He was good at the job. Not outstanding — he knew this about himself with the specific clarity of someone who has assessed their own performance honestly over time. He was thorough, organised, conscientious. He followed procedures correctly. He was the kind of Chief Officer who did not cut corners not because someone was watching but because the corners felt important.

He collected the Multi-Gas Detector from the equipment locker at 08:30. The detector was a

standard four-gas instrument: oxygen, explosive gas, hydrogen sulphide, and carbon monoxide. It was calibrated. He knew this because he had checked the calibration record himself on Monday, and today was Thursday, and the calibration was valid for thirty days, and he had noted the expiry date in the equipment log as he had been trained to do.

Everything was correct. It still wasn't safe.

He confirmed the emergency equipment board at the access point before testing. Two self-contained breathing apparatus sets, both fully charged, both serviced within the last six months. Two EEBDs clipped alongside. Rescue harness and tripod lifting arrangement. The resuscitation kit. Channel 6 walkie-talkies. All present. All logged.

He went forward to Hold No. 3. The access trunk cover was already off — AB Santos had opened it at 08:00 to allow the mechanical ventilation to run for forty-five minutes before testing. Niall looked down the trunk. He could see the ventilation hose. He could hear the blower running. He could see the air moving at the base of the trunk — the small disturbance of debris on the tank top that indicated airflow.

He lowered the detector on its extension probe. He waited for the readings to stabilise. Thirty seconds.

Oxygen: 20.8%. Normal. Explosive gas: 0% LEL. Clear. H₂S: 0 ppm. Clear. CO: 0 ppm. Clear.

He logged the readings on the permit form. He signed the form. Time: 08:45.

He went back to the bridge to obtain the Master's signature.

Compliance is not protection.

GUIDELINE — THE ATMOSPHERE TEST AND WHAT IT CAN TELL YOU

What the detector measured was accurate. What the detector did not measure was carbon dioxide. And it did not measure the aft section — the pocket behind the third transverse frame, 4.2 metres from the access point, where the ventilation did not reach and the CO₂ had been quietly building for days.

He did not know this because his SMS had not asked him to know it. His detector measured four gases. Carbon dioxide was not one of them. His test methodology required a reading at entry point and working depth. The aft section was beyond both.

He was thorough. He was correct. He was operating at the edge of what his tools could tell him.

REFLECTION — WHAT FEELS SAFE AND WHAT IS SAFE

There is something worth understanding before the next entry.

Niall's test was accurate. At the probe, the air was safe.

The problem was 4.2 metres away. CO₂ is heavier than air. It pools at floor level, where ventilation doesn't reach and the probe can't see. The probe certifies one column of air. Not the whole space.

Standard four-gas detectors don't read CO₂. They'll say "safe" while the floor of the next bay is lethal. Decomposition consumes oxygen and makes CO₂ silently. The reading at mid-depth can be perfect while a man bends into a pocket of nothing.

Danger doesn't announce itself. It accumulates.

Any hold with frames has multiple atmospheres. If you can't test a section, treat it as untested. If you can't confirm airflow at the furthest point, ventilation is incomplete.

The permit certifies what was tested. What wasn't tested is still in there.

This wasn't carelessness. It was human reasoning working correctly on incomplete data.

What you don't measure doesn't disappear.

This is not about adding boxes to a checklist. It is about understanding what the tools can tell you and where they go quiet. The probe has a reach. The ventilation has a reach. The permit certifies what was tested. What was not tested is still inside the hold.

EPILOGUE

The Quiet Out There

The notebook is closed.

On the last page, before he put the pen down, Elias wrote two sentences. They are the same two sentences he has written at the end of every logbook since the sixth one, in 1998, when he found them in a margin note in his father's handwriting in a book that came to him from the Panjim house after Manuel died. They are not his words. They are Manuel's. Manuel had them from someone else. This is how it works.

He does not share them here. Some things in the logbook are for the logbook.

What is for the logbook:

The year happened. The ship was sound. Tomas and Domingo survived. The crew were seen. Priya became the officer she was always going to become. Santos stayed at the access point and did not move, which is the hardest thing an attendant will ever do, and he did it.

The procedures changed. The equipment changed. The training changed. The round-table room became a place

where four people could say what they had not said before.

Rajan started the knowledge transfer. Diana sends the memo in week one now. Vikram answers the anonymous messages with warmth, not procedure.

Tomas is in Batangas, on the porch, with coffee and Elena. He will not go back to sea. He does not need to. The sea is still there, in the quiet, in the memory of twenty-eight years, in the voice note from Elena that he still has on his phone.

The Caledonia Star II is in the Indian Ocean, running at 15.8 knots, heading toward something.

The watch officer on the bridge is twenty-six years old and is learning, one permit at a time, what it means to be responsible for something you cannot fully control.

Elias is fifty-six. He will hold command for another eight or ten years. He will carry the thirty seconds for all of them.

The sea is the same sea.

The quiet out there — the dark water, the stillness — is the same quiet it has always been.

Somewhere on the bridge of a ship in the Indian Ocean, a navigator is keeping watch.

He hopes they feel seen.

Captain Elias Fernandes
MV Caledonia Star II, Indian Ocean
December

P.S. The permit now requires CO₂ measurement. The frames are labelled. The ventilation reach is confirmed. It took nearly losing two men to learn what should have been obvious. That is how this industry learns. Not through foresight. Through aftermath. This book is the aftermath.

A Note from the Author(s)

Tomas Reyes is fictional. Elena is fictional. Sophia is fictional. Domingo, Santos, Priya, Niall, Elias — all fictional.

The permit is fictional. The CO₂ in the aft section is fictional. The thirty seconds in the Master's cabin are fictional.

The incidents that drove the guidance are not fictional. The patterns that produced these procedures are drawn from real losses, documented across the industry's incident record, investigated by casualty investigators and loss prevention teams, and quietly absorbed into the updated standards that too few people on the vessels they govern have ever read.

The gap is not fictional. The gap between what the permit certifies and what the space contains. The gap between what the detector measures and what the atmosphere is. The gap between what one person knows and what another person needs to know. The gap between information and understanding.

The round-table room is not fictional. It exists in every office where people who have just lived

through an incident sit down together and say what they should have said three weeks earlier. It exists in every corridor conversation after the meeting, every phone call that wasn't required, every message sent at 02:41 that gets answered with warmth.

The quiet out there is not fictional. The middle watch, the dog watch, the watches we once dreaded — they become the most peaceful thing we ever knew. We came ashore and left all of it behind. Or so we thought. Those memories never really go. And on the loud, busy days, just thinking about that quiet out there — the dark water, the stillness — gives a kind of peace that shore life simply cannot.

This book is for the people who know that quiet.

And for the people who still carry the sea.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not exist without the people who were willing to share what they carry. To those who gave their time, their recollections, and their trust — and whose names do not appear in these pages at their own request — our gratitude is genuine and substantial.

To the colleagues, superintendents, claims managers, and seafarers who have, answered our questions, reviewed our conclusions, disagreed with our framings, and occasionally told us, with the directness that the industry at its best manages, exactly what we had got wrong: thank you. The errors that remain are ours alone.

To the families of seafarers who have been lost in enclosed spaces, whose circumstances we have drawn on in the building of this narrative: we hold the weight of that with care. We have tried to be worthy of it.

To the industry — which is, at its best, crewed by people of remarkable skill, resilience, and professionalism, operating under conditions that most of the world does not understand and could not

manage — we offer this book in the spirit in which it was written: not as indictment, but as reckoning. The reckoning that honest professionals apply to themselves when they want to be better.

“The sea asks a great deal.

*The least we can do is think very carefully
about what we ask of the people who answer.”*

THE LAST WATCH Series

**Written by people who have been there. Told for
everyone.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

With over six decades of combined experience in the maritime industry, the Sarcastic Mariner(s) have built careers at the sharp end of shipping's most complex and consequential moments. Having worked both at sea and ashore, they have witnessed the full operational lifecycle of vessels: from running ships to investigating why they did not behave as planned.

They have held the rank. They have signed the paperwork. They have been the person who entered the enclosed space — torch in hand, radio clipped to a boiler suit that was never designed for the temperature inside — and they have been the person who signed the permit authorising someone else to do it. They have tested the atmosphere and trusted the reading. They have also handled the aftermath on the shoreside when the reading was wrong, or the equipment was out of calibration, or the permit was signed by someone who did not fully understand what they were authorising.

They know what it costs. Not in the abstract. In the specific: the career that ended, the family that was not told the full story, the insurer who paid and the operator who quietly revised their procedures and said nothing publicly. They know, because in this industry, silence after an incident is often the first sign that someone is

trying to manage the narrative rather than learn from the failure.

When maritime incidents become expensive, public, and complex, they help bring clarity. Known for remaining steady in crisis, they translate between engineers, lawyers, insurers, and operators — ensuring that technical truth aligns with commercial consequence.

If it floats, sinks, burns, collides, grounds, or ends up on the wrong side of a headline — they usually get the call.

They have been the person who rewrites the email three times and sends the softest version. They have been the person sitting at a desk at 23:47 making a call that could not be delegated. They have been the person with the memo in drafts for three weeks because thoroughness felt like safety.

They know the cost of each of these things. They write this book because the cost is largely unmeasured and the people who carry it are largely unseen. They wanted them seen.

Book 1 of The Last Watch Series
