The Crate at Warehouse 4

Example Author

The Eastern Gate

Mara stopped beneath the quay lamp. Someone had tried the eastern gate of Warehouse 4. Fresh scratches crossed the lock, and an abandoned crate stood beside the wall.

The harbour windows held the last light. Below them, scraps of timber turned in the black water, touching the quay and drawing away again. A cart waited beneath a loading crane, its shafts on the wet cobbles. Someone had covered the driver's seat with a sack, although the office had closed two hours before the rain began.

The night watchman caught her sleeve. Beyond the quay, a small launch slipped into the mist. Its engine kept knocking after its light disappeared. He had sent a boy for customs. He wanted Mara to stay.

He kept his back to the gate while he spoke, and twice she saw him check the gap beneath it. It was the first time she had noticed how little light reached the door.

She still had an unsigned delivery receipt in her pocket. The foreman had told her to leave it on his desk, but his door had been locked. Now she stood beside a crate without a label, listening to the launch, and wished she had pushed the paper underneath.

The Loose Board

A board moved. Mara turned. The crate tipped towards the drain. She caught its corner and pushed. Her boot slipped. Water entered her shoe. The watchman reached the other side. Together they set it flat.

Something rattled inside. A nail stood proud of the lid. Mara pulled her hand away. Blood marked the wood. The watchman lifted his lamp. A strip of blue paper clung beneath the cord. Most of the label had been torn off. Under it, an older number showed through: seventeen. That blue was office stock. She'd copied seventeen last.

Footsteps sounded behind the gate. Mara held up her hand. The watchman stopped. Another step. Then silence. She moved away from the wall. A shadow crossed the lamp. Ivo came round the corner with a coat over his arm.

He put it down. The three of them dragged the crate clear of the water. One plank cracked. The watchman fetched a wedge. Mara kept both hands against the lid. Ivo stared at the paper.

Water ran from the base. He reached for the cord. Mara shifted her foot against the crate. The blue strip lifted, then settled. At its edge she could see another layer of glue, still soft enough to hold his fingerprint. Without it, seventeen was just another old number.

"Don't pull it loose," she said.

He let go of the cord. Across the basin, the engine faded.

Questions on the Quay

"Did you see who left it?" Hansen asked. He had come from customs with a pencil, a small book and a length of sealing cord.

"For the time being, all I can say is that there were two people by the gate," the watchman said. "When I called, they ran towards the basin."

"Were they carrying anything?"

"Not then. The crate was here."

Hansen turned to Mara. "And the launch?"

"For the time being, all I can say is that I saw a light," Mara said quietly. "I could see the lamp, but I could not make out anyone aboard. I was standing under the quay lamp when I lost sight of it, and I thought the light would show again if it came out from behind the crane, but it didn't, and by then the engine was the only thing I could follow, that little knock carrying the whole way across the water long after I could see nothing but the quay lamp's reflection, which is why I called it a launch even though I couldn't have told you where it was going or who was on it."

"So you cannot say they reached it."

"No."

Ivo lifted his coat. "The foreman needs this gate. There's a cart waiting at the other end."

"For the time being, all I can say is that it can wait," Hansen said.

"He told me to keep it clear."

"When?"

"Before he left."

"Before there was a crate in the way?"

Ivo pulled his coat on. One sleeve caught at the elbow. He worked it free without looking at the officer. Mara knew the driver at the other gate was paid by the trip. Through the bars she could just make out the sack over his seat. No one had told him he was waiting on customs now.

Hansen bent over the torn label. Mara showed him her hand.

"The blood is mine. That happened when we moved it."

"And this number?"

"Seventeen. We reuse the boards. It could be an old mark."

"I asked whether you recognised it."

Mara touched the folded paper through her coat. "Perhaps. I need the office book."

Ivo looked from her pocket to the crate.

"I'll get the key," he said.

Hansen straightened. "Stay here. The watchman has one." Ivo stopped with his hand on the latch. Beyond him the waiting horse scraped a shoe on the cobbles.

The Customs Note

At approximately ten ten on the evening of 14 October 1923, the night watchman reported an attempted entry at the eastern gate of Warehouse 4. Fresh abrasions were recorded on the external lock. The seals on the inner warehouse doors were intact.

No implement was recovered. The watchman could not describe either person's face in the available light.

A wooden crate was moved clear of the drain. A lid plank cracked during handling. Mara attributed the blood on the wood to a cut on her hand. A fragment of blue label and a board bearing the number seventeen were retained for inspection.

The watchman reported two people leaving towards the basin. Mara reported a launch light and an engine. Neither witness identified passengers or saw a crate loaded aboard.

The damaged lid was bound before transport. The crate was first opened at the customs station at six ten. Forty bundles of untaxed tobacco were counted there. The preliminary entry stating that Hansen inspected the contents on the quay was amended. No receiving signature had yet been identified for the delivery receipt supplied by Mara.

The Blank Line

The office stove had gone cold. Mara held her wet boot towards it while Hansen laid the torn label on the desk. The blue strip curled as it dried. Seventeen was written in a different hand beneath the printed border.

"Your receipt," he said.

She unfolded it. Same blue stock, same narrow border. Her own figures filled the dispatch column. The receiving line was empty. Last winter the foreman had docked a clerk a whole week's wages when a load went missing under his initials. Mara's rent was due on Friday.

It was only when she looked at it again that she began to think that there might have been a reason for the space that he had left on the form.

She brought the torn edges together. They did not fit. Hansen watched her try the other corner, then take her hand away. She had wanted the paper to settle it. Instead, there were two forms and only her handwriting to connect them. On the receipt she could prove what she had entered. That was less than she had come to the office hoping to prove.

The foreman had dictated the number while putting on his coat. At eight, she had been thinking about the last ferry and the bread she still needed to buy. She remembered the scratch of her pen, his hand reaching for the key, the office door closing between them.

"You signed for a crate you didn't see?"

"I copied a number."

Hansen said nothing. Mara noticed that the paper rasped against the desk. She could hear Ivo moving about outside, stamping his feet against the cold. She felt the wet leather press against her toes.

Hansen said that he might have to check the time with the watchman. He took the label and left the office.

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In the passage outside, a draught moved under the door. Mara waited by the door. Mara watched the clock. Mara waited for Hansen. Then she turned to her notebook.

Mara opened her notebook. She had written that the smugglers escaped by boat. She crossed out the sentence. Beneath it she wrote what she had heard after the light had gone, then the number and the time the foreman had given her. Under the notebook leaf, the receipt's empty line made a faint grey rule.

Morning Handover

By morning, the customs cart had left pale tracks through the mud. A new seal hung from the gate. The foreman arrived carrying a hot drink, stopped at the sight of Hansen and set the cup down without tasting it.

Mara gave him the receipt. She had checked it so often that the fold was beginning to split.

"An old board," he said. "They get used again. Put your name in the other column and I'll close the dispatch before the men come in."

"Then show us the book," Hansen said.

The foreman fetched the ledger. Mara watched him turn past yesterday's entries and turn back. His thumb rested on the receiving column.

Cart seventeen: returned, six forty in the evening. Below it, the same number stood against the dispatch she had copied at eight.

The foreman had brought the book, and she had waited for him, and the clock had struck twice. She is standing there now, she has the receipt in her hand, and she looks down at the return time. Then she drew the book closer.

The earlier entry was squeezed into the margin. Its ink had spread along a crease in the paper; the entries above it had dried cleanly. Mara moved the cup away before the foreman could set it over the figures. Whatever the old board meant, signing the receipt now would put her name under an arrival she had never seen.

Outside, Ivo called that the waiting driver was leaving. The foreman made to close the book.

Mara put her hand on the page.

"Who brought it back?"

He lifted his thumb. There was no signature on that line either. Mara tore the leaf from her notebook and signed beneath the account of what she had entered at eight. She pushed it towards Hansen, together with the receipt. The receiving line stayed blank.