

In the early evening sunlight, the old converted mill building gave off a warm glow, its tall chimney a rusty red against the copse of oaks and chestnut that surrounded it.

Looking at the outside, this historic flour mill, just a mile from Cherringham, would appear to have hardly changed in centuries.

Inside, well, it was still historic, but those medieval flour millers wouldn't recognise it, that's for sure!

Back in the nineteenth century, the grinding stones and hoppers had been ripped out, to be replaced with copper stills, storerooms for spices, giant tanks for water and alcohol.

All thanks to the Rawlinson family, who'd seen that alcohol could become a much more profitable business than bread, and set up the Cherringham Gin Company.

And never looked back.

And — of course now — well, there was more change on its way. Not that he had much

say in it.

“Evening Arnold!” came a voice, disturbing Arnold’s thoughts. He turned, to see Steve Shriver, the portly security officer standing by one of the rear fire doors, tugging on a cigarette.

Normally Arnold would have made a comment (and only half joking): *cigarettes polluting the atmosphere, filthy habit, lack of respect!*

But these days, it seemed, he no longer had the energy.

“Steve,” he said, noting that at least Shriver had the good manners to drop the offending cigarette to the ground and grind it out with one large black boot. “Anyone around?”

Shriver dusted cigarette ash from his faded security uniform, his fingers brown from a lifetime’s nicotine. “Think Bill’s in the warehouse, checking the latest shipment. Your

Kirsty clocked off bang on five, shot out of here on that flashy bicycle.”

“No surprise there,” said Arnold, raising his eyebrows.

He and Steve had a ritual running joke going about how the younger workers — especially his assistant — couldn’t wait to leave at five on the dot.

*Work-life balance*, Kirsty had called it when he’d remarked upon it after her first week at the distillery.

*Running off home at the end of the day — it even had a name!*

*Doesn’t “work” for me*, he always told her. *Work is my life!*

He’d hoped that she’d laugh at his little wordplay but she hadn’t — just nodded politely.

As the months had gone by, Arnold had accepted that although she seemed to laugh at other people’s — in his opinion — feeble

jokes quite readily, she never laughed at his wry comments.

Had he done something wrong? Said something he shouldn't? Maybe, just because he was now an old man, representing old ways. Was that it?

If so, he didn't know what. Nor, he now realised, did he really care.

“What about upstairs?” he said, nodding towards the higher floors of the building where management lights were glowing.

“Oh, sales, admin, all gone home too,” continued Steve, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his nose. “You know that lot!”

“And no sign of Mr Kavanaugh?” said Arnold.

“The vulture?” said Shriver, rolling his eyes and using the nickname for the new CEO that everyone claimed credit for inventing. “Oh, he's here all right.”

“Shame,” said Arnold, under his breath.

He saw Shriver grin. Arnold knew that his feelings about Dirk Kavanaugh were no secret. And likewise, Kavanaugh's feelings about him.

“Think from the looks of things he's having another of those long meetings with the young Mr Rawlinson,” said Shriver, leaning in confidentially. “All afternoon, they've been at it. The two of them'll go off together as usual. To some fancy restaurant. That posh spa place, on the road to Chippy? I hear they're regulars.”

Arnold nodded at that. The Managing Director and the new CEO, plotting and planning ... *all the changes to come!*

“Yes, well, I'm sure you have plenty to do, Steve,” he said, suddenly uncomfortable with this *familiarity*, this *gossiping*. All a little ... *unseemly*. “Mustn't hold you up any longer.”

He gave Shriver a polite smile, then turned to head towards his office and the Dry Room.

“Shall I bring you round a cuppa later, sir?” said Steve.