

The days gone by

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Word from the authors

“The Days Gone By” is a story set in a fictional town in the north of the Netherlands. The town is called “Amerleef”. It’s a small village and a pleasant center for shopping. The community is tight-knit, and people looking out for one another is the norm. Solidarity plays a major role here.

This sense of community is particularly pronounced in the present day. How it was in the past, during World War II, remains to be seen. This story paints a picture of that time.

All persons in this story are fictitious, and any resemblance is entirely coincidental.

The names used in the manuscript have been adapted to the English language for this translation.

This is a story that speaks of courage, hope and resilience.

A story that we hope is a fitting tribute to mark **80 years of freedom in The Netherlands**.

Sophie Ester and Carolyn Nicholas



Geef vrijheid door!

Pass on Freedom!

THE PRESENT

CHAPTER 1

The Domaine of Amerleef

April does as he pleases. An old adage that's proven itself true once again. The temperature suddenly dropped from twenty degrees the week before to a mere eight degrees on April 20th. Even the spring blooms seem to be suffering from the cold. But the pansies in my window boxes are pushing up their flowers, as if to say, don't worry, this is just a brief dip. It'll be fine! I turn the thermostat up a notch. It's cold and bleak outside. Being inside at work and being cold is the worst.

"It's miserly," my mom would say. "It's just being unkind to yourself. It's false economy. It's better to economize on other things than on heating. When you're cold, your body has to work hard to get warm again, and the energy that takes is better spent on other things. In your case, you have plenty of things to do, and you'll need all the energy you have left..."

I've already moved in upstairs and I've told myself that I'm not being 'miserly'. I'm being practical. I asked my handyman to combine the three rooms into one big room and, when that was done, I cleaned everything thoroughly. I set up my bed, the linen closet, a sofa, a chair, and so on. I also installed my little dining area and made sure I had TV and Internet. I've got the stove burning in the room. My bathroom is still cold but I keep that door closed. There's a heater in there but it's only on when I shower. Like I said, practical.

The four guest rooms, together with the dining room and kitchen, and the larger storage rooms downstairs, all feel warm. The bushes around the hotel must be helping to retain the heat. Ok. I know. *I know!* The gardens need a lot of TLC. It's on my list. I'm going to dedicate more time to it soon. I've already looked online and found a company that does garden maintenance for businesses.

They say on their website that they, ‘can turn wasteland into something beautiful’. It sounds perfect. Exactly what I need. I’ve written down the phone number and put it on the bulletin board in my office. I’m going to tackle that this summer. Right now, my beautiful hotel still looks lonely, desolate, and... it’s cold. In some parts of the building, for a person like me who feels the cold, it’s often too cold, but the work still needs to be done.

I think back to my life before I moved into this hotel. Mallorca with 28 degrees and a gentle breeze. Why didn’t I start a hotel there? Well, what’s done is done. This opportunity came my way ten weeks ago and I grabbed it. One should be grateful for what you get, right? I’ve been working tirelessly for six weeks now and I’m finally starting to get the hang of it.

I’m staying positive that, one day, this rain will stop. Then, in the middle of spring, the snow will have gone and it’ll be sunny and warm. All the things I long for. But we’re not there yet. This weather still frustrates me. It’s hardly conducive to business, and I’ve only got a few days left to get ready. A little sunshine would be better for what’s to come. It’s time for better weather, cheerfulness, and optimism. I’m going to do everything possible for that. I’m a born optimist, and you won’t get me down with rain and wind. Ok. Not very convincing. Something else I need to work on, I guess.

The mailman delivered my business cards today; another step forward in the process toward what’s to come. I grab a card and take a closer look.

There it is:

*Marley Domaine, proprietor and manager of the hotel
‘The Domaine of Amerleef’*

Actually, it should also have said receptionist, cook, hostess, cleaning lady... But, that’s okay. I’ll keep that to myself. I put some of the cards in the drawer behind the reception desk and I put some in the business card holder.

I rub my hands together again. They're already getting warmer. I have plenty of work to do, but first I'll get a cup of coffee to warm me up. After all, you can't tackle things with cold hands and feet. First warm up, then move on. I have a few minutes for myself and I walk back to my office, the reception desk. There I sit down, put my hands in front of the heater. The radiant heater is warm, and it makes me a little languid, but the coffee keeps me on track. It's been a quiet day so far. If the next two days are like this, I'll finish my last chores before the first of May. The day of the hotel's reopening. I've dubbed it the 'grand re-opening'. It's cost me a pretty penny to restore the place to its current state. My uncle called it 'a dilapidated shack' on his deathbed. He'd given up on it years ago, after Auntie's death, and only came every now and then to see if it still looked tidy. The original plan was for one of my cousins and his wife to take over, but they decided against it when they saw the building and realized what it would take to make it habitable again. There were quite a few potential candidates, but they, too, were put off by the amount work needed. Amerleef isn't close to any big schools or universities, so it isn't a good base for school or residential traffic. This put off most potential buyers. There were some young people who lived there as squatters for a while, but they left. For the last few months, it's been vacant again. Uncle Charlie went with me to see it one more time. It was the last thing he could do before he became permanently bedridden. He begged me to give it a chance, otherwise it would have to be demolished. That was what the municipality had agreed with him after the squatters finally moved out. If he couldn't find a new owner, the municipality would demolish the building after he passed. They had another use for the property. Uncle Charlie using terms like 'pearl of the village' and 'the history of Amerleef' didn't convince me, but the combination of those beautiful words and the absurdly low purchase price of € 2,500 did.

I acquired a hotel with a significant maintenance backlog, but it's mine and everything, including the parking lot, is on its own land.

The deed was drawn up and I signed the papers. That was the first expense. One that I regretted almost immediately after opening the front door and taking a good look. It was going to cost a lot more than I thought and I should have known that. I'm no stranger to the place. I should've thought more objectively. But, it does have great potential. I'm confident that, with a little effort, this place can be transformed into something worthwhile. I just have to take care of the inside... and the outside. The outside of the hotel, the side the public sees first, has to look good. First impressions count, especially in business.

My first project, though was upstairs. I needed a place to live while I was getting the place ready. Taking the two small rooms and turning them into one, large apartment was the perfect solution. For now, that's all I've done upstairs. That floor isn't going to be open to the public so it can wait.

Now, I have to take care of removing the shrubbery. The holly is surprisingly well maintained, so it looks pretty but there's just so much of it. And it stings. Then, I need to find a specialist company to remove the ugly siding on the side of the building where the parking lot is and repair the masonry behind it, which I'm sure is crumbling.

Despite all the work I've already done, and all the work ahead of me, I'm very pleased with my little hotel and I'm more curious than ever about its past. I wasn't able to find that much about it on the internet. I tried to request a blueprint from the land registry but all the old blueprints were destroyed when the old town hall was hit in the 1944 bombings.

When I came here, together with my contractor, he looked at the hotel, then at me and he sighed. "Marley, don't take on more work than you can handle. You'll have your hands full with a project like this. When your aunt and uncle started here together, your aunt did keep things up pretty well but that all stopped when she got too ill to look after things.

Your uncle never concerned himself with looking after things after she passed. It's clear that nothing's been done to maintain it in years. It wasn't listed to be demolished for nothing. The authorities have been warning for years that they will take over the property. You're being hailed as a savior for honoring your aunt and uncle's memory and taking over this property.

Then he made an offer, which I accepted without hesitation. And naturally, that wasn't the end of it. The initial offer was so generous but I decided to push further. He wasn't just a contractor and handyman, he was my neighbor and a family friend. I wanted more, I wanted better, and I wanted it to be more elaborate. I didn't want a place for a few people who suddenly needed a bed. It had to become an inviting hotel, a place that attracted passers-by. For people who wanted to see more of this beautiful area. I had this bed and breakfast idea, but I wanted just a *little* more than that, a few, luxury extras that could be paid for from the small legacy left by Uncle Charlie and Aunt Annie. The legacy was secured after Uncle Charlie saw that I bought the property. It was a 'thank you' for saving his dream. Having that little bit of extra money to work with helps a lot when you have a property that's been so badly neglected.

I've come a long way, and it's working out just as I hoped. It should now become a place where you can completely unwind for a few days. It will have a sauna and a dining room. I'm actually still not very satisfied with the dining room. It's boring and ordinary, and it doesn't 'radiate' anything. I don't really know what I want either. It's a small room on the side of the hotel, facing the street. Most people probably wouldn't notice the traffic on the road, but I do. I laugh at myself when I think about the busyness... or lack of. Do cars ever pass by this way? If five to ten cars a day pass over it, that's peak traffic, here in this stretch of Amerleef. And in the evening, there's only the odd scooter or cyclist.

I blow into my still-steaming coffee for a moment. The smell is so inviting, it makes me happy. I'm a caffeine addict. Coffee gives me energy, which makes me want to get everything done.

Just a little longer, and then I can welcome the first guests. They have a lot of confidence in me; they booked without having seen pictures of the hotel. Of course, it's just mainly family members to start with. My parents are coming and my sister has promised to come. Some of my parents' friends, two couples, who seem to know me from when I was a toddler, are coming too. Whether they actually want to try the hotel, or are only coming out of curiosity, remains to be seen. But, I've got all four rooms full right away for that first night. And acquaintances are always less scary than complete strangers. I set aside the week after to see what went well and what didn't. A week to reflect, so to speak. I've deliberately taken no bookings for that week. I'm hoping for bookings in the following weeks, and my friends have all booked for the coming months. I'm incredibly lucky, I say to myself. And I really don't know why they all trust me to do this right.

I look up when I hear a car approaching the parking lot. I have to admit, that gravel has its advantages, no one can get in unnoticed. You can hear them coming from miles away, I chuckle. But resurfacing that driveway is high on my list. I want to get rid of that gravel before someone twists an ankle, or worse.

It must be Abel, my handyman neighbor. Abel Diver, Abe to his friends. Abe's building the sauna for me, in addition to all the other work I've lumbered him with. I'm thrilled. A sauna? Cool, right? Well, not literally of course, but you know what I mean. That little touch of luxury I want my hotel to have. I'll be the first to use it. Hopefully, having a sauna will also make me some extra money. I've got big plans for it. For starters, I can probably make a deal with the new beauty farm that's recently opened not far from here. I think we can help each other. First, I'll go there and have a treatment so I can meet the owners and check out the facilities. If it's as nice as it looks online, then I can speak to them about doing the whole referring my guests to them and vice versa. After a day of facials and pampering, their clients can round it all off by treating themselves to the luxury of a nice sauna.

Maybe work out a weekend away package where they visit the beauty farm then come for a sauna and spend a night at the hotel. Lots of ideas swirl around in my head. But I'm getting ahead if myself. For now, I can't wait to be the first to try out the sauna.

The day has been a gift so far. Despite the cold, I'm making wonderful progress on the renovation. I've finished almost all of it, except for the installation of the sauna. Now it's time for the big clean. This can't just be a quick dusting here and there. It's going to be a thorough scrubbing, from top to bottom, a method I learned from my mother: tidy up the upstairs first and then continue downstairs. 'Dust settles downstairs,' as Mom always says. 'If you clean everything downstairs first, you just end up having to vacuum again afterwards.' I still do it that way, and I'm very satisfied with the results. The place is neat, with all four rooms in tiptop condition. The curtains have all been replaced. They looked tired and faded. The new ones are bright and fresh. Even the dining room, which still needs some atmosphere, is a cozy space in the making with many large windows. It looks a lot better than it did during the key exchange.

The notary confirmed that the hotel had been virtually empty for years before the young people squatted there to protest fracking. In the days when my Aunt Annie was still well enough to manage it, whenever a guest came in, she pulled out all the stops to make it more attractive. I believe that towards the end, when it was just Uncle Charlie, it failed miserably. Which is why he wanted to pull the plug but didn't have the courage to do it. Then my cousin and his wife thought about trying to make it work, as did several others, until they saw what it would take. When those young people were squatting there, no one bothered to try and kick them out. Why Uncle Charlie didn't green light the municipality immediately after the initial rejection is a big question mark for me. Okay, it takes quite a bit of courage to do that. All the memories of the past would be lost, as would all the savings he had ever put into it.

It's unfortunate, but that's why, as I heard from the notary, he saw it as his life's goal to try to revive the hotel. He'd only allow the demolition after his death if he couldn't find anyone who'd dare to 'resurrect' the hotel. I'm not sure who the little angel on Uncle Charlie's shoulder was who whispered my name in his ears, but it would have been better if they'd done it a few years earlier. Then the renovation would have been less expensive, and I would've discovered less junk throughout the property.

But enough daydreaming. Back to the order of the day, there's work to be done. I have to order tables, chairs, and lamps for that dining room in a hurry. I'm going to get something nice on the wall and on the tables. The home furnishings store has a great website. Their wooden furniture has a clean, simple style. Swedish-looking, yet just a little bit different. I like that style. It's practical, neat, and they deliver quickly.

My dislike of the cold Dutch weather has made me think the whole sauna thing through carefully. The sauna's being built in one of the little outbuildings next to the hotel. It was one of the two sheds I have. I immediately pegged it as a potential sauna the moment I saw it. The idea is to connect the main building to the shed with a short hallway. At the moment the entry to the corridor is just a hole in the wall, but it's easy enough to put a door in. Or... Abe will, of course. At least, he's working on it. One of the many things still to be fixed before we're both satisfied with the result. All the dust from installing that sauna could go directly into the hotel. That's why I started working last week with large pieces of plastic covering everything to stop the dust as much as possible. Once the sauna is finished, I'll remove it and start cleaning. Then I'll decide whether or not to install a door.

I open the front door for Abe, who walks in with his phone tucked between his ear and shoulder and his arms full of material. He winks at me as if to say he knows where to go. We understand each other without words. He's already made all the preparations to finish the sauna today. Finally!

That's another real check on my to-do list. I quickly realize that with his hands full and his ear to the phone, there's no way the man can get through the plastic sheeting, so I run past him and clear an opening. Abe removes the phone from his ear. "Kid, there's something else we need to talk about. I've noticed something upstairs, and I think we have to see to it. It's definitely a problem," he says, but he immediately has his phone back to his ear and continues talking to the person on the other end. Before I can ask him about it, I hear the hotel phone ringing.

"Good morning, Hotel Domaine of Amerleef." I answer as warmly as I can.

"Hey Marley, how are you today?" I hear a female voice. I recognize my sister, Tessa's, voice. What could be going on? Tessa never calls me. I can't blame her. I didn't call her for a long time either. Not for several years, in fact. Recently, I've been trying to catch up again. And, I think I'm succeeding. But then, I'm the one making an effort, not Tessa. At least not like this. Tessa calling me first, that's new. Tessa never calls. She writes letters. I can even see it happening in my mind: Tessa in her home, at the table in the hall, where an old-fashioned gray telephone stands. One of those old ones, with a cord. She's not exactly into 'vintage,' she just isn't interested in 'modern stuff' as she calls it.

"Tessa, how nice of you to call. Things are going fine here. I'm getting along nicely," I answer cheerfully, but even a stranger would notice that I'm feeling awkward. I fail horribly at being enthusiastic. "What's going on?"

It remains silent for a moment on the other end. That annoys me. Big time. Jeez, I have so many things to do now, I don't have time for this. She's calling me; surely she must have something to say, right? But Tessa seems to have changed her mind and doesn't want to reveal why she's suddenly seeking contact.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," she says finally. Her attempt at a casual tone is as awkward as mine. "Just thought I'd call... you know... see how things are going. You busy?"

Do you have any bookings yet? Have you had any news from Jonah? How's his hotel doing? He's in Norway, right?"

I hold my breath and count to ten. Of course I'm busy, and yes, *of course*, I've had a lot of bookings. And what the hell does *Jonah* have to do with this? You mean my *ex-boyfriend*? The one I haven't seen, or spoken to, in years? Is he in Norway? I guess he's still there. It's none of *my* business where he is. But Tessa doesn't understand that, because she's always had a soft spot for him. When he was mine, that is. Oh, not romantically - Tessa isn't the type to get 'too involved' with men. She's not wedding material. That doesn't mean she doesn't like men – or women – but she's not the type to want to settle down with someone. Though she won't skip a conversation without mentioning Jonah... We talked about that just a week ago when I called her. I call Tessa regularly to update her on the latest news. This is partly due to my years of neglecting my family and myself. I also call them all to let them know how things are getting on with my hotel. But now, it's Tessa calling me and she's not saying why.

"Tessa, I'm sorry. This's really not good timing. I'm extremely busy... My handyman is working, and I'm helping him as much as I can. I have a lot to do, so, if you need anything, just say so. Otherwise, I'll call you back later. I have to get back to work. You know the grand opening is in two days? You'll be here, right?" I ask and, suddenly, I know why she's calling. Tessa isn't going to come. I wouldn't be surprised. I asked her to come to Mallorca when I lived there, several times, and she never came.

But Tessa gives no hints of not wanting to come. She wishes me good luck and ends the call with a chirpy "see you soon." A strange phone call. A strange remark from Abe. His can't be serious; he would've come back to me about it. I'll deal with it later. I don't want to think about the fact that anything in this hotel is wrong. I just can't deal with that at the moment. I don't have the time, the money, or the interest to figure out what it is. I've already spent enough money. I want to get started, I want to host guests.

I don't have time to overthink everything. There are boxes from Amazon in the kitchen that need to be unpacked. They – hopefully – contain my new dishes, table linens, and new pans. A fresh start also includes new stuff for the kitchen, so everything also has to go into the dishwasher first. I'm in the kitchen, about to cut open the first box with a paring knife when I hear a banging on the door.

Who can that be?

CHAPTER 2

Unexpected guests

I walk quietly from the kitchen to the entrance of the hotel, unperturbed by the loud banging on the door. Someone's pounding on the door like they're trying to break it down. They seem in a hurry to get in. The hotel hasn't even opened yet.

I unlock the door quietly, having locked it again after Abe arrived earlier. Even though Amerleef is 'a village of less than a man and a half and a horse's head,' as the local saying goes, you can't be too sure. You can't be too careful.

To my surprise, it's my neighbor from down the road. I expected him to be red faced, sweating, and panicking, judging by the force he used on my front door, but nothing could be further from the truth. He's calm and expectant.

"Mr. Elkhart, why the panic?" I ask him as calmly as possible.

There are two farms near the hotel, Gerrits across the road and one further down on this side of the road, whose land adjoins the hotel property. Elkhart owns the latter. You can just make out the farmhouse where he lives set back a good kilometer away. It looks like he must have gotten into his car directly after leaving the field as there's mud still covering his clogs. Conscious of my already fairly clean hall, I think to myself that there's no way I'm going to let him go dragging in all that muck. It feels a bit awkward, even though he's my age, I don't know his first name.

"I have a woman in my car. Her car's just crashed into a tree. Almost in my yard. She's not from around here and I can't understand a word she's saying except that she wants to come here. She had this piece of paper with her, and it has this address on it. I didn't know what else to do except... bring her here." He says with a small shrug.

As he turns around, I grab him by the arm. "Wait a minute. I don't understand. What are you talking about?" He looks at me blankly and shrugs again.

I look over at his car and I can see someone sitting in the passenger seat. I can hear her screaming something even though the windows are closed. "Is she hurt? Is the woman hurt?" I ask in surprise.

"No. No. She's just panicking. That's why she's screaming like that. I have no idea what she wants." He attempts to walk away, but I stop him again.

"If she's panicking after driving into a tree, you call the police! Did you at least call them? Or send for an ambulance?" I ask. But instead of answering me, he walks to the car and opens the door. Fortunately, it's the passenger door. At least he's not planning on just leaving. I want to yell, but I see that he's squatting down to talk to the woman in the car. I watch the scene with interest. Who is she? She doesn't look familiar at all. What could she want here? What language is she speaking? Is it another Dutch dialect or a different language altogether?

And *why* didn't he just call the police to handle it? I'm totally in the dark and I don't like it.

Two minutes later, total chaos breaks out. He must have said something that makes things suddenly escalate. Elkhart approaches me with a stumbling woman beside him. He's got a grip on her elbow and he's talking to her in a low angry voice. Gone is any trace of the calm, almost indifferent person from earlier. He's pushing her forward and the woman's movements indicate that she doesn't like what's happening. I wonder if she understands what's happening. Did he finally manage to speak to her in her own language? As they get closer, I can see that the woman is only young, maybe not much older than her late teens. I'm also feeling uneasy because of the way she's staring at me and insisting on approaching me. I can feel my knees tremble. It just feels like something bad is about to happen.

I move quickly over to her and support her on her other side. We go into the hotel, and I gesture to a chair where she can sit. My gaze can't help but wander to the mud trail left by my neighbor. I scold myself for being so worried about a floor when there's obviously more important things to think about and I look at the young girl. She's staring at me helplessly and questioningly.

I put an arm reassuringly around her shoulders and snap at him, "Why on earth did you insist on bringing her to me? It's obvious that she needs to go to the hospital. You shouldn't have taken her out of the car. Who knows what damage you've done to her. You should have waited for the police and ambulance instead of putting her in a car and driving here. What am I supposed to do now? I have no idea who she is."

He just shrugs. His indifference and annoyance are clear.

I check her over carefully and it's clear that she's in a bad way. I don't have much medical knowledge, but everything in me tells me this was a stupid move by my neighbor. He should've left her in the car and called for help. The girl is sobbing now and gasping for air.

Elkhart seems totally unimpressed.

"How do I know? Get a doctor to examine her and then send her away, for all I care. Try finding out where that man is who was in the car with her. He probably knows something. I suggested calling the police but she made it *very* clear that she didn't want me to. She got out of the car *on her own*, started to walk to my house, but got frightened by our dog. Next thing I know, she started screaming and ranting that she wanted to go to a hotel. I didn't have any idea what she was on about. We have a baby and a toddler in the house. Why should they be upset by some hysterical stranger? She refused to go to the police, didn't want to get back in the car, or go with that guy of hers. I did my civic duty and brought her here. Now I have to go back. Those cows won't milk themselves. Good luck," he snaps back and walks away without looking back, I can hear him driving quickly away.