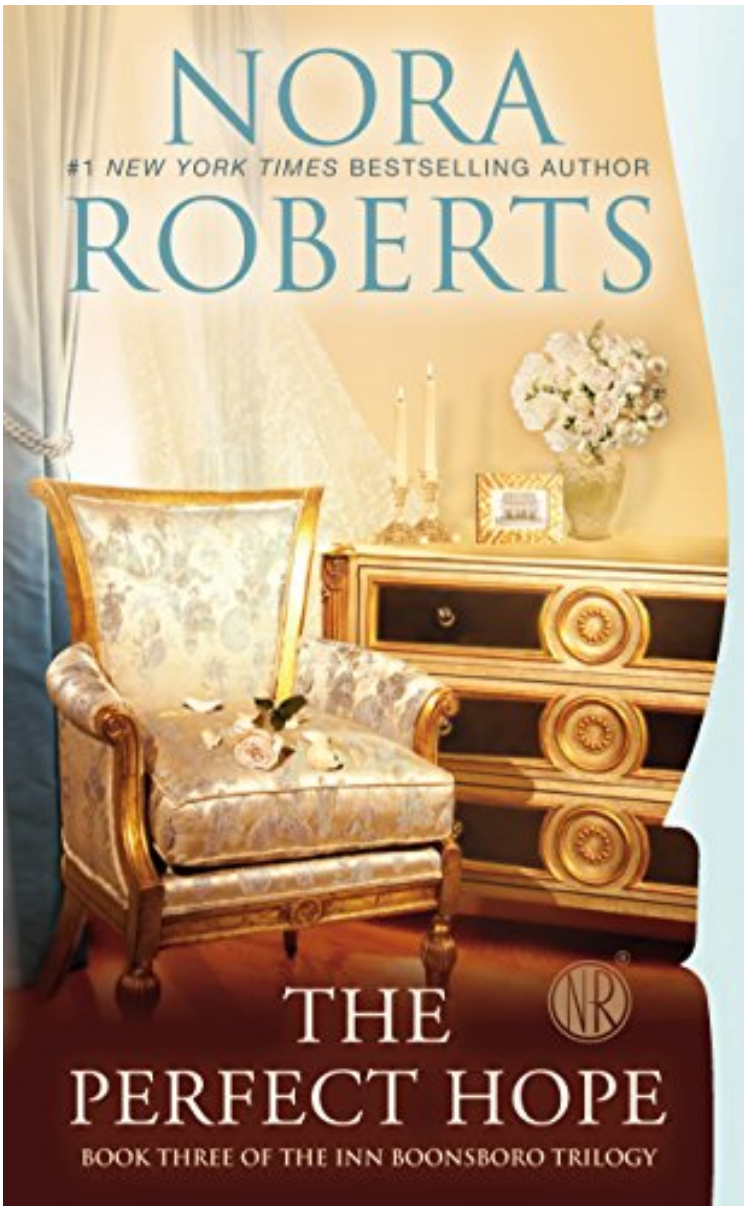


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The Perfect Hope



Par Nora Roberts
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur#1 New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts completes the Inn BoonsBoro trilogy with a novel of starting over and star-crossed love. Ryder is the hardest Montgomery brother to figure out with a tough-as-nails exterior and possibly nothing too soft underneath. Hes surly and unsociable, but when he straps on a tool belt, no woman can resist his sexy swagger. Except, apparently, Hope Beaumont, the innkeeper of his own Inn BoonsBoro. The former manager of a D.C. hotel, Hope is now where she wants to be except for in her love life. Her only interaction with the opposite sex has been sparring with the infuriating Ryder, who always seems to get under her skin. Still, no one can deny the electricity that crackles

between them a spark that ignited with a New Years Eve kiss. While the inn is running smoothly, thanks to Hope's experience and unerring instincts, her big-city past is about to make an unwelcome and embarrassing appearance. Seeing Hope vulnerable stirs Ryders emotions and makes him realize that while Hope may not be perfect, she just might be perfect for him. Don't miss the other books in the Inn Boonsboro Trilogy: *The Next Always*, *The Last Boyfriend*. From the Paperback edition.

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EPILOGUE

Special Excerpt from *The Next Always*

WITH A FEW GROANS AND SIGHS, THE OLD BUILDING settled down for the night. Under the star-washed sky its stone walls glowed, rising up over Boonsboro Square as they had for more than two centuries. Even the crossroads held quiet now, stretching out in pools of shadows and light. All the windows and storefronts along Main Street seemed to sleep, content to doze away in the balm of the summer night. She should do the same, Hope thought. Settle down, stretch out. Sleep. That would be the sensible thing to do, and she considered herself a sensible woman. But the long day had left her restless, and she reminded herself Carolee would arrive bright and early to start breakfast. The innkeeper could sleep in. In any case, it was barely midnight. When she'd lived and worked in Georgetown, she'd rarely managed to settle in for the night this early. Of course, then she'd been managing the Wickham, and if she hadn't been dealing with some small crisis or handling a guest request, she'd been enjoying the nightlife. The town of Boonsboro, tucked into the foothills of Maryland's Blue Ridge Mountains, might have a rich and storied history, it certainly had its charms among which she counted the revitalized inn she now managed but it wasn't famed for its nightlife. That would change a bit when her friend Avery opened her restaurant and tap house. And wouldn't it be fun to see what the energetic Avery MacTavish did with her new enterprise right next door and just across The Square from Avery's pizzeria. Before summer ended, Avery would juggle the running of two restaurants, Hope thought. And people called her an overachiever. She looked around the kitchen clean, shiny, warm, and welcoming. She'd already sliced fruit, checked the supplies, restocked the refrigerator. So everything sat ready for Carolee to prepare breakfast for the guests currently tucked in their rooms. She'd finished her paperwork, checked all the doors, and made her rounds checking for dishes or anything else out of place. Duties done, she told herself, and still she wasn't ready to tuck her own self in her third-floor apartment. Instead, she poured an indulgent glass of wine and did a last circle through The Lobby, switching off the chandelier over the central table with its showy summer flowers. She moved through the arch, gave the front door one last check before she turned toward the stairs. Her fingers trailed lightly over the iron banister. She'd already checked The Library, but she checked again. It wasn't anal, she told herself. A guest might have slipped in for a glass of Irish or a book. But the room was quiet, settled like the rest. She glanced back. She had guests on this floor. Mr. and Mrs. Vargas Donna and Max married twenty-seven years. The night at the inn, in Nick and Nora, had been a birthday gift for Donna from their daughter. And wasn't that sweet? Her other guests, a floor up in Westley and Buttercup, chose the inn for their wedding night. She liked to think the newlyweds, April and Troy, would take lovely, lasting memories with them. She checked the door to the second-level porch, then on impulse unlocked it and stepped out into the night. With her wine, she crossed the wide wood deck, leaned on the rail. Across The Square, the apartment above Vesta sat dark and empty now that Avery had moved in with Owen Montgomery. She could admit to herself anyway she missed looking over and knowing her friend was right there, just across Main. But Avery was exactly where she belonged, Hope decided, with Owen her first and, as it turned out, her last boyfriend. Talk about sweet. And she'd help plan a wedding May bride, May flowers right there in The Courtyard, just as Clare had been this past spring. Thinking of it, Hope looked down Main toward the bookstore. Clare's Turn The Page had been a risk for a young widow with two children and another on the way. But she'd made it work. Clare had a knack for making things work. Now she was Clare Montgomery, Beckett's wife. And when winter came again, they'd welcome a new baby to the mix. Odd, wasn't it, that her two friends had lived right in Boonsboro for so long, and she'd relocated only the year not even a full year yet before. The new kid in town. Now, of the three of them, she was the only one still right here, right in the heart of town. Silly to miss them when she saw them nearly every day, but on restless nights she could wish, just a little, they were still close. So much had changed, for all of them, in this past year. She'd been perfectly content in Georgetown, with her home, her work, her routine. With Jonathan, the cheating bastard. She'd had good, solid

plans, no rush, no hurry, but solid plans. The Wickham had been her place. She'd known its rhythm, its tones, its needs. And she'd done a hell of a job for the Wickhams, and their cheating bastard son, Jonathan. She'd planned to marry him. No, there'd been no formal engagement, no concrete promises, but marriage and future had been on the table. She wasn't a moron. And all the time or at least in the last several months they'd been together, with him sharing her bed, or her sharing his, he'd been seeing someone else. Someone of his more elevated social strata you could say, she mused, with lingering bitterness. Someone who wouldn't work ten- and twelve-hour days, and often more to manage the exclusive hotel, but who'd stay there, in its most elaborate suite, of course. No, she wasn't a moron, but she'd been far too trusting and humiliatingly shocked when Jonathan told her he would be announcing his engagement to someone else the next day. Humiliatingly shocked, she thought again, particularly as they'd been naked and in her bed at the time. Then again, he'd been shocked, too, when she'd ordered him to get the hell out. He genuinely hadn't understood why anything between them should change. That single moment ushered in a lot of change. Now she was Inn BoonsBoros innkeeper, living in a small town in Western Maryland, a good clip from the bright lights of the big city. She didn't spend what free time she had planning clever little dinner parties, or shopping in the boutiques for the perfect shoes for the perfect dress for the next event. Did she miss all that? Her go-to boutique, her favorite lunch spot, the lovely high ceilings and flower-framed little patio of her own town house? Or the pressure and excitement of preparing the hotel for visits from dignitaries, celebrities, business moguls? Sometimes, she admitted. But not as often as she'd expected to, and not as much as she'd assumed she would. Because she had been content in her personal life, challenged in her professional one, and the Wickham had been her place. But she'd discovered something in the last few months. Here, she wasn't just content, but happy. The inn wasn't just her place, it was home. She had her friends to thank for that, and the Montgomery brothers along with their mother. Justine Montgomery had hired her on the spot. At the time Hope hadn't known Justine well enough to be surprised by her quick offer. But she did know herself, and continued to be surprised at her own fast, impulsive acceptance. Zero to sixty? More like zero to ninety and still going. She didn't regret the impulse, the decision, the move. Fresh starts hadn't been in the plan, but she was good at adjusting plans. Thanks to the Montgomerys, the lovingly and effortfully restored inn was her home and her career. She wandered the porch, checking the hanging planters, adjusting minutely the angle of a bistro chair. And I love every square inch of it, she murmured. One of the porch doors leading out from Elizabeth and Darcy opened. The scent of honeysuckle drifted on the night air. Someone else was restless, Hope thought. Then again, she didn't know if ghosts slept. She doubted if the spirit Beckett had named Elizabeth for the room she favored would tell her if she asked. Thus far, Lizzy hadn't deigned to speak to her inmate. Hope smiled at the term, sipped her wine. Lovely night. I was just thinking how different my life is now, and all things considered, how glad I am it is. She spoke in an easy, friendly way. After all, the research she and Owen had done so far on their permanent guest had proven Lizzy or Eliza Ford when she'd lived was one of Hope's ancestors. Family, to Hope's mind, ought to be easy and friendly. We have newlyweds in WB. They look so happy, so fresh and new somehow. The couple in NN are here celebrating her fifty-eighth birthday. They don't look new, but they do look happy, and so nice and comfortable. I like giving them a special place to stay, a special experience. It's what I'm good at. Silence held, but Hope could feel the presence. Companionable, she realized. Oddly companionable. Just a couple of women up late, looking out at the night. Carolee will be here early. She's doing breakfast tomorrow, and I have the morning off. So. She lifted her glass. Some wine, some introspection, some feeling sorry for myself circling around to realizing I have nothing to feel sorry for myself for. With a smile, Hope sipped again. So, a good glass of wine. Now that I've accomplished all that, I should get to bed. Still she lingered a little longer in the quiet summer night, with the scent of honeysuckle drifting around her. WHEN HOPE CAME down in the morning, the scent was fresh coffee, grilled bacon and, if her nose didn't deceive her, Carolee's apple-cinnamon pancakes. She heard easy conversation in The Dining Room. Donna and Max, talking about poking around town before driving home. Hope went down the hall, circled to the kitchen to see if Carolee needed a hand. Justine's sister had her bright blond hair clipped short for summer, with the addition of flirty bangs over her cheerful hazel eyes. They beamed at Hope even as she wagged a finger. What are you doing down here, young lady? It's nearly ten. And your morning off. Which I spent so far sleeping until eight, doing yoga, and putzing. She helped herself to a mug of coffee, closed her own deep brown eyes as she sipped. My first cup of the day. Why is it always the best? I wish I knew. I'm still trying to switch to tea. My Darlas on a health kick and doing her best to drag me along. Carolee spoke of her daughter with affection laced with exasperation. I really like our Titania and Oberon blend. But... it's not coffee. Nothing is but coffee. You said it. She can't wait for the new

gym to open. She says if I don't sign up for yoga classes, she's signing me up and carting me over there. You'll love yoga. Hope laughed at the doubtful anxiety on Carolee's face. Honest. Hmm. Carolee lifted the dishcloth again, went back to polishing the granite countertop. The Vargases loved the room, and as usual the bathroom starring the magic toilet got raves. I haven't heard a peep out of the newlyweds yet. I'd be disappointed in them if you had. Hope brushed at her hair. Unlike Carolee, she was experimenting with letting it grow out of the short, sharp wedge she'd sported the last two years. The dark, glossy ends hit her jaw now, just in between enough to be annoying. I'm going to go check on Donna and Max, see if they want anything. Let me do it, Hope said. I want to say good morning anyway, and I think I'll run down to TTP, say hi to Clare while it's still my morning off. I saw her last night at the book club. She's got the cutest baby bump. Oh, I've got plenty of batter if the newlyweds want more pancakes. I'll let them know. She slipped into The Dining Room, chatted with the guests while she subtly checked to be sure there was still plenty of fresh summer berries, coffee, juice. Once she'd satisfied herself her guests were happy, she started back upstairs to grab her purse and ran into the newlyweds as they entered from the rear porch. Good morning. Oh, good morning. The new bride carried the afterglow of a honeymoon morning well spent. That's the most beautiful room. I love everything about it. I felt like a princess bride. As you wish, Hope said and made them both laugh. It's so clever the way each room's named and decorated for romantic couples. Couples with happy endings, Troy reminded her, and got a slow, dreamy smile from his bride. Like us. We want to thank you so much for making our wedding night so special. It was everything I wanted. Just perfect. That's what we do here. But... we wondered. We know we were supposed to check out soon... If you'd like a later checkout, I can arrange it... Hope began. Well, actually... We're hoping we can stay another night. Troy slid his arm around April's shoulders, drew her close. We really love it here. We were going to drive down into Virginia, just pick our spots as we went, but... we really like it right here. We'll take any room that's available, if there is one. We'd love to have you, and your rooms open tonight. Really? April bounced on her toes. Oh, this is better than perfect. Thank you. It's our pleasure. I'm glad you're enjoying your stay. Happy guests made for happy innkeepers, Hope thought as she dashed upstairs for her bag. She dashed back down again, into her office to change the reservation, and with the scents and voices behind her, hurried out the back through Reception. She skirted the side of the building, glancing across the street at Vesta. She knew Avery's and Clare's schedules nearly as well as her own. Avery would be prepping for opening this morning, and Clare should be back from her early doctor's appointment. The sonogram. With luck, they'd know by now if Clare was carrying the girl she hoped for. As she waited for the walk light at the corner, she looked down Main Street. There Ryder Montgomery stood in front of the building. Montgomery Family Contractors was currently rehabbing. Nearly done, she thought, and soon the town would have a bakery again. He wore jeans torn at the left knee and splattered with drips of paint or drywall compound or whatever else splattered on job sites. His tool belt hung low, like an old-time sheriff's gun belt at least to her eye. Dark hair curled shaggily from under his ball cap. Sunglasses covered eyes she knew to be a gold-flecked green. He consulted with a couple of his crew, pointed up, circling a finger, shaking his head, all while he stood in that hip-shot way of his. Since a dull wash of primer currently covered the front of the building, she assumed they discussed the finish colors. One of the crew let out a bray of laughter, and Ryder responded with a flash of grin and a shrug. The shrug, like the stance, was another habit of his, she mused. The Montgomery brothers were an attractive breed, but in her opinion, her two friends had plucked the pick of the crop. She found Ryder a little surly, marginally unsociable. And, okay, sexy in a primitive, rough-edged sort of way. Not her type, not remotely. As she started across the street, a long, exaggerated wolf whistle shrilled out. Knowing it to be a joke, she tipped her face back toward the bakery, added a smoldering smile then a wave to Jake, one of the painters. He and the laborer beside him waved back. But not Ryder Montgomery, of course, she thought. He simply hooked his thumb in his pocket, watched her. Unsociable, she thought again. He couldn't even stir himself for a casual wave. She accepted the slow kindling in her belly as the natural reaction of a healthy woman to a long, shaded stare delivered by a sexy if surly man. Particularly a woman who hadn't had any serious male contact in Goda year. A little more than a year. But whose counting? Her own fault, her own choice, so why think about it? She reached the other side of Main Street, turned right toward the bookstore just as Clare stepped out onto its pretty covered porch. She waved again as Clare stood a moment, one hand on the baby bump under her breezy summer dress. Clare had her long sunny hair pulled back in a tail, with blue-framed sunglasses softening the glare of the bold morning sun. I was just coming over to check on you, Hope called out. Clare held up her phone. I was just texting you. She slipped the phone back in her pocket, left her hand there a moment as she came down the steps to the sidewalk. Well? Hope scanned her friends

face. Everything good? Yeah. Good. We got back just a few minutes ago. Beckett... She glanced over her shoulder. Hes driving around to the back of the bakery. Hes got his tools. Okay. Mildly concerned, Hope laid a hand on Clares arm. Honey, you had the sonogram, right? Yeah. And? Oh. Lets walk up to Vesta. Ill tell you and Avery at the same time. Becketts going to call his mother, tell his brothers. I need to call my parents. The babys all right? Absolutely. She patted her purse as they walked. I have pictures. I have to see! Ill be showing them off for days. Weeks. Its amazing. Avery popped out the front door of the restaurant, a white bib apron covering capris and a T-shirt. She bounced on purple Crocs. The sun speared into her Scots warrior-queen hair, sent the short ends to glimmering. Are we thinking pink? Are you opening alone? Clare countered. Yeah, its just me. Frans not due in for twenty. Are you okay? Is everything okay? Everythings absolutely perfectly wonderfully okay. But I want to sit down. With her friends exchanging looks behind her back, Clare walked in and went straight to the counter, then dropped onto a stool. Sighed. Its the first time Ive been pregnant with three boys fresh out of school for the summer. Its challenging. Youre a little pale, Avery commented. Just tired. Want something cold? With my entire being. As Avery went to the cooler, Hope sat down, narrowed her eyes at Clares face. Youre stalling. If nothings wrong. Nothings wrong, and maybe Im stalling a little. Its a big announcement. She laughed to herself, took the chilled ginger ale Avery offered. So here I am, with my two closest friends, in Averys pretty restaurant that already smells of pizza sauce. Youll have this in a pizzeria. Avery passed Hope a bottle of water. Then she crossed her arms, scanned Clares face. Its a girl. Ballet shoes and hair ribbons! Clare shook her head. I appear to specialize in boys. Make that baseball gloves and action figures. A boy? Hope leaned over, touched Averys hand. Are you disappointed? Not even the tiniest bit. She opened her purse. Want to see? Are you kidding? Avery made a grab, but Clare snatched the envelope out of reach. Does he look like you? Like Beck? Like a fish? No offense, but they always look like a fish to me. Which one? Which one what? There are two. Two? Hope nearly bobbed the water. Twins? Youre having twins? Two? Avery echoed. You have two fish? Two boys. Look at my beautiful boys. Clare pulled out the sonogram printout, then burst into tears. Good tears, she managed. Hormones, but good ones. Oh, God. Look at my babies! Theyre gorgeous! Clare swiped at tears as she grinned at Avery. You dont see them. No, but theyre gorgeous. Twins. Thats five. You did the math, right? Youre going to have five boys. We did the math, but its still sinking in. We didnt expect we never thought maybe I should have. Im bigger than Ive ever been this early. But when the doctor told us... Beckett went white. She laughed, even as tears poured. Sheet white. I thought he was going to pass out. Then we just stared at each other. And then we started to laugh. We laughed like lunatics. I think maybe we were both a little hysterical. Five. Oh, sweet Jesus. Five boys. Youll be great. All of you, Hope told her. We will. I know it. Im so dazzled, so happy, so stunned. I dont know how Beckett drove home. I couldnt tell you if we drove back from Hagerstown or from California. I was in some sort of shock, I think. Twins. She laid her hands on her belly. Do you know how there are moments in your life when you think, this is it. Ill never be happier or more excited. Ill never feel more than I do right now. Just exactly now. This is one of those moments for me. Hope folded her into a hug, and Avery folded them both. Im so happy for you, Hope murmured. Happy, dazzled, and excited right along with you. The kids are going to get such a kick out of this. Avery drew back. Right? Yeah. And since Liam already made it clear if I had a girl he wouldnt stoop so low as to play with her, I think hell be especially pleased. What about your due date? Hope asked. Earlier with twins? A little. They told me November twenty-first. So, Thanksgiving babies instead of Christmas, New Years. Gobble, gobble, Avery said and made Clare laugh again. You have to let us help set up the nursery, Hope began. Planning was in her blood. Im counting on it. I dont have a thing. I gave away all the baby things after Murphy. I never thought Id fall in love again, or marry again, or have more children. Can we say baby shower? A double-the-fun theme, Hope decided. Or what comes in pairs, sets of two. Something like that. Ill work on it. We should schedule it in early October, just to be safe. Baby shower. Clare sighed. More and more real. I need to call my parents, and I need to tell the girls, she added, referring to her bookstore staff. She levered herself up. November babies, she said again. I should have shed the baby weight by May and the wedding. Oh yeah, Im getting married. Avery held out her hand, admired the diamond that replaced the bubble-gum-machine ring Owen had put on her finger. Twice. Getting married, and opening a second restaurant, and helping plan a baby shower, and redecorating the current single guys master suite into a couples master suite. Hope poked Avery in the arm. We have a lot of planning to do. I can take some time tomorrow. Good. Hope took a moment to flip through her mental list, rearrange tasks, gauge the timing. One o'clock. I can clear the time. Can you make that? she asked Clare. I can fix us a little lunch and we can get some of the planning worked out before I have check-ins. One o'clock tomorrow. Clare patted her belly. Well be there. Ill be over, Avery

promised. If I'm a little later, we had a good lunch rush. But I'll get over. Hope walked out with Clare, grabbed another hug before separating. And imagined Clare telling her parents the happy news. Imagined, too, Avery texting Owen. And Beckett slipping off to check on Clare during the day, or just stealing a few minutes to bask with her. For a moment she wished she had someone to call or text, or slip away to, someone to share the lovely news with. Instead she went around the back of the inn, up the outside stairs. She let herself in on the third floor, listening as she walked down to her apartment. Yes, she thought, she could just hear Carolee's voice, and the excitement in it. No doubt Justine Montgomery had already called her sister to share the news about the twins. Hope closed herself into her apartment. She'd spend a couple hours in the quiet, she decided, researching their resident ghost, and the man named Billy she waited for. HIS MOTHER WAS DRIVING HIM CRAZY. IF SHE POPPED UP with another project before he finished one of the half dozen currently on his plate, he might just take his dog and move to Barbados. He could build himself a nice little beach house. Maybe a lanai. He had the skills. Ryder pulled his truck into the lot behind the inn, major project, finished thank God but never really done because there was always something. The inn shared that lot with what would be, according to the ever-plotting Justine Montgomery, a pretty, clever, state-of-the-art fitness center. Right now it was an ugly, green, flat-roofed, leaky lump. And that was just the outside. Inside currently boasted a rabbit warren of rooms, a basement full of water, staircases out of a horror movie, and falling-down ceilings. Not to mention the abysmal state of the wiring and plumbing, which he wouldn't since they'd just gut the whole fucking mess. Part of him wanted to sneak in some night on a giant machine and bulldoze the whole fugly building. But he knew better, and could admit he enjoyed a challenge. He had one. Still, as the always reliable Owen had texted him the demo permit was in, at least they could start tearing in. Ryder sat a moment with his homely and sweet-natured dog, Dumbass, beside him while Lady Gaga seduced the edge of glory. Chick was pretty weird, Ryder thought, but she sure had the pipes. Together Ryder and his dog studied the ugly green lump. He liked demo. Beating the shit out of walls never failed to satisfy. So that was something. And the work, transforming the ugly bastard, would be interesting. A fitness center.

He didn't understand people who plugged themselves into a machine and went nowhere. Why not do something constructive that made you sweat? A gym, yeah, he could see a gym with speed bags, a sparring ring, some serious weights. But fitness center said girly to him. Yoga and that Pilates stuff. And women in those snug little outfits, he reminded himself. Yeah, there was that. Like demo, who wouldn't enjoy that? No point brooding about it anyway, he decided. It was a done deal. He got out of the truck, and D.A. hopped out faithfully beside him. He couldn't figure out why he was in such a broody mood anyway. The bakery project was down to punch-out and paint, Avery's MacTs was coming right along and he looked forward to sitting down on a bar stool in her new pub and having a beer. He had a kitchen remodel all but wrapped, and Owen was handling some built-ins for another client. A lot of work was better than no work. He could build a beach house in Barbados when he was old. Still, he felt edgy and annoyed, and couldn't quite figure out why. Until he glanced over at the inn. Hope Beaumont. Yeah, that might account for some edgy. She did a good job, no question about that. The fact that she was anal, obsessively organized, and a chewer of details didn't bother him especially. He'd lived and worked with that type all his life, in the form of his brother Owen. Just something about her got under his skin, and tended to burn there from time to time since they'd locked lips on New Year's Eve. It had been an accident, he told himself. An impulse. An accidental impulse. He didn't intend to repeat it. But he could wish she was a plump, homely, middle-aged woman with a couple of grandkids and a knitting hobby. One day she could be, he muttered to D.A., who obligingly thumped his tail. With a shrug, he walked down, crossed over, and opened the door of the future MacTs Restaurant and Tap House for the crew. He liked the space, liked it particularly now that they'd rejoined the two buildings, opening the wall between with a wide doorway so the restaurant and bar patrons, and the staff, could move from one side to the other. Avery knew what she wanted, and how to make it happen, so he knew MacTs would be a good place to eat and drink, to socialize if socializing was your thing. Good dining for grown-ups she called it, as opposed to the casual family style of Vesta. He had a soft spot for Vesta and a softer one for their Warriors Pizza, but as Avery had been trying out recipes on them for months, he figured he'd be able to choke down a meal or two in her new place. He crossed over to the opening, studied the bar space. A lot of work yet, he judged, but he could envision it finished, with the long bar he and his brothers were building in place. Dark woods, strong colors, some brick on the walls. And all those beers on tap. Yeah, it wouldn't hurt his feelings to spend some time there, and hoist a beer in satisfaction of a job well done. When it was done. He heard voices, crossed back over. Once he got the crew going, he walked down to the bakery to check on the men there. If he'd had a choice, he'd have strapped on his tool belt, gotten to the real work. But

he had a morning meeting scheduled back at the new job site, and he was already running late. He started back around, saw both of his brothers trucks in the lot. He assumed Owen had picked up coffee and donuts as well as the demo permit. You could count on Owen in the everyday and in a nuclear holocaust. He thought of Beckett, married to Clare the Fair, instant father of three, and now the expectant father of twins. Jesus, twins. But maybe the thrill of upcoming twins would distract their mother from thinking up a new project. Probably not. He went through the open doors on St. Paul, smelled the coffee. Yeah, you could count on Owen. He plucked out the single go-cup left, the one with an R written with a Sharpie by his anal brother. Glugged even as he flipped up the lid on the donuts. His dogs tail immediately sent out a tattoo on the floor. He heard his brothers voices, somewhere in the rabbit warren, but took his coffee and, after tossing D.A. a chunk of his jelly-filled donut, walked over to the plans spread out on the plywood and sawhorses. Hed seen them before, of course, but they knocked him out. Becketts concept gave their mother everything she wanted, and more. Yeah, he thought, better than bulldozing it. Better to gut what needed gutting and build on what could be built on. It didnt look like a gym to Ryder at least not the speed-bag, sweat-soaked locker room type he might frequent, but it was a beauty. And enough work, enough complications to make him curse Becketts name for weeks, months. Possibly years. And still... Lifting and pitching the roof was practical as well as aesthetically pleasing. Taking the flat-roofed jut off the parking lot side and making it into a deck, also smart. Plenty of glass for plenty of light with new windows and doors. God knew the place needed them, even if it meant cutting into the cinder-block walls. Fancy locker rooms with steam rooms and saunas. His keep-it-basic mind balked at that, but he had to admit, he liked a good, long steam. He ate his donut, tossing bits to the tail-thumping D.A., while he studied the first floor, the second floor, the mechanicals. Beautiful work, he thought. Beckett had the talent and the vision, even if invariably some of the vision was a pain in the ass on a practical work level. He washed down the donut with coffee as his brothers walked out of the maze. Demo permit. Check, Owen said. Good morning to you, too. His sunglasses hung from the neck of his spotless white T-shirt. Since Beckett intended for him to join in the demo, the spotless wouldnt last long. You press those jeans, Sally? No. Owens quiet blue eyes flicked toward the donuts before he broke a cruller in half. Theyre just clean. I have a couple meetings later. Uh-huh. Hey, Big Daddy. Beckett grinned, raked fingers through his mop of chestnut brown hair. The boys want to name them Logan and Luke. Wolverine and Skywalker. Amused, Ryder considered. Melding X-Men and Star Wars. Interesting choice. I like it. Clare laughed it off at first, then the idea got a hook in. Theyre good names. Good enough for Wolverine and Skywalker. I think were going with them, which is cool. My ears keep ringing though. You know, like they do after an explosion. Twos just one more than one, Owen pointed out. Its about planning and scheduling. Because you have so much experience with rug rats, Ryder said with a snort. Everythings about planning and scheduling, Owen countered. Speaking of which, lets check the plans and schedules. He pulled his phone off his belt. Ryder decided on another donut, let the sugar and fat soothe him through the volley of details. Inspections, permits, material orders and deliveries, rough-ins, finals, shop work, site work. Ryder kept it all in his head as well, just maybe not as precisely columned and tallied as Owen. But he knew what had to be done and when, which men to assign to which job, and how long the steps should take. On the inside, and given the vagaries of construction the outside. Moms looking at equipment, Beckett put in when Owen paused. You know, treadmills and cross-trainers and all that happy shit. Im not going to think about that. Ryder looked around. Crap walls, he thought, crap floors. Just crap. Cross-trainers and dumbbells and freaking yoga mats were a hell of a long way off. We may want to think about the parking lot. Now Ryders eyes narrowed on Owen. What about the parking lot? Now that weve got it all, instead of patching we should tear the bitch up, level it, add drains, resurface. Hell. He wanted to object, just on general principles, but they needed the damn drainage. Fine. But Im not thinking about that now either. What are you thinking about? Rather than answer, Ryder just walked out. Is he bitchier than usual? Owen wondered. Hard to tell. Beckett looked down at the drawings again. Its going to be a pain in the ass and mostly in his but its going to work. Ugliest building in town. Yeah, it wins that prize. The good news is anything we do is an improvement. As soon as the Dumpster gets here, we can He broke off as Ryder came in with a sledgehammer and a crowbar. Get your own, Ryder told them and, setting the crowbar aside, chose a wall at random. Swung away. The hard, undeniably satisfying thwack send drywall chips flying. The Dumpster... Owen began. Its on its way isnt it? Putting his back into it, Ryder swung again. According to the holy word of your sacred schedule. We should bring in some of the crew, Beckett considered. Why should they have all the fun? When the sledgehammer arced again, D.A. crawled under the sawhorses for a nap. Hes got a point. Beckett glanced at Owen, got a shrug and grin. We ought to start on the second floor. This ones not load-bearing. Another

couple swings and Ryder had the flimsy interior wall in rubble. But yeah. He leaned on the hammer, grinned back at his brothers. Lets gut this bitch. AFTER A FEW days of listening to bangs and crashes, Hopes curiosity won. With Carolee on duty the honeymooners were now into their fourth day of their wedding-night stayshe crossed the lot toward the newest Montgomery family project. She had a legitimate reason for seeking them out, but could admit her primary motive was curiosity. Shed heard plenty of banging throughout the day, and every glance out the window showed her some grubby guy hauling debris out, and into a huge green Dumpster. A text from Avery netted her the intel that demolition had begun on the projected fitness center. She wanted to see for herself. The banging booms increased as she approached, and she heard a burst of manic male laughter through the open windows. Grinding, guitar-heavy rock rolled out with it. She walked up to the side entrance what was left of it peeked in. Her eyes widened. Shed never been in the building, but shed looked in the windows, and she was pretty sure there had been walls, and ceilings. Now barely a skeleton remained, along with the tangled wire intestines and massive amounts of gray dust. Cautious now as the thuds, thumps, and bangs seemed to shake the entire structure, she went around to the front. The door stood open. To air it out? she wondered. Who knew? Another door, one that led up to what had been second-level apartments, stood open as well. Music, men, bangs echoed down. She considered the narrow stairs, the grimy stairwell, the noise. Not that curious, she decided, and backed away. As she circled back around, two men coated with gray dust, all but anonymous in their safety goggles, work gloves, and grimy faces, hauled out another load of what must have once been a wall. It landed in the Dumpster with a muffled thump. Excuse me, she began. She recognized Ryder by the way he turned his head, angled his body. He shoved up his goggles, aimed one of his mildly annoyed stares with those impatient green eyes. Youre going to want to stay back. I can see that. It looks like youre taking the building down to the shell. Thats about it. You need to stay clear. Yes, so you said. Need something? Actually, yes. Im having a problem with some of the lights the wall sconces. I thought if your electrician was here, he could He left. Ryder gave his helper a head jerk to send him back inside, then dragged off his safety goggles. Now he looked a little like a reverse raccoon, Hope thought, and couldnt quite hold back the smile. Its dirty work. And a lot of it, Ryder replied. What kind of problem? They wont stay on. They Have you changed the bulbs? She just stared at him. Gee, why didnt I think of that? Okay. Somebody will come check it out. Is that it? For the moment. He gave her a nod, boosted himself back through the opening, and disappeared. Thanks so much, Hope muttered to empty air, and walked back to the inn. It usually lifted her mood, just walking inside. The way it looked, the way it smelled especially now as Carolees chocolate chip cookies sweetened the air. But she strode straight into the kitchen, irked everywhere. What is that mans problem? Carolee, face flushed from baking, slid a batch of cookies in the wall oven. Which man, honey? Ryder Montgomery. Is rudeness his religion? He can be a little abrupt, especially when hes working. Which is, I guess, almost always. What did he do? Nothing. He was just himself. You know how weve had those sconces keep burning out, or not coming on? I went over to tell him or one of them, and drew him. He actually asked if Id changed the bulbs. Do I look like a moron? With a smile, Carolee held out a cookie. No, but they did actually have a tenant once that reported a problem, and Ry went all the way over to find out the problem with the light was a burned-out bulb. The woman, and I guess she was a moron, was stunned to realize she had to change the lightbulb. Hmm. Hope bit into the cookie. Still. So whats going on over there? Banging and crashing and a lot of crazed laughing. Demo. Its fun. I suppose. I didnt realize they were taking the whole place down to the bones. No great loss, but I didnt realize. And she fretted a little how the noise factor would affect her guests. You should see the plans. I got a peek at them. Its going to be wonderful. I dont doubt it. They do good work. Justines already started looking at light fixtures and sinks. The cookie, and Carolee, shifted Hopes mood. Shes in heaven. Shes going all modern and sleek and shiny. Lots of chrome, she said. Its one look, you know, rather than a lot of them like here, but its still a lot to figure out. Itll be fun to watch it all come together. It will. Yes, it would, she realized. She hadnt been in on the renovations here from the start. Now shed see another building done from beginning to end. Im going to get some work done before check-in. Im going to run to the market when the cookies are done. Anything you want to add to the list? I think we covered it. Thanks, Carolee. I love my job. So did she, Hope thought as she settled into her office. One difficult Montgomery couldnt spoil it. She checked her email, smiled at the thank-you note from a previous guest, wrote a memo to fulfill an upcoming guests request for a bottle of champagne to surprise his parents on their visit. She checked reservations a full house for the weekend reviewed her own personal calendar. When the florist arrived, she took the fresh arrangements upstairs to Titania and Oberon. Though shed already done so, she did a last check of the room to make certain everything was perfect for the new

guests. Following habit and routine, she went into The Library, checked the lights her daily list included checking all lights and lamps for burned-out bulbs, thank you, Ryder Montgomery. Using her phone, she emailed herself when she found one, added a directive to bring up more coffee disks for The Library's machine. She continued downstairs to run the same check on The Lounge, The Lobby, The Dining Room. Then she turned into the kitchen, and had to bite back a yelp when she spotted Ryder in the kitchen helping himself to the cookies. I didn't hear you come in. How did he move that quietly in those big, clunky boots? I just got here. Good cookies. Carolee just baked them. She must still be at the market. Okay. He just stood, eating his cookie, staring at her with his dog at his feet, grinning. The doggie grin led her to conclude he'd also enjoyed a cookie. The man had cleaned up mostly. At least he hadn't tracked demolition dust in with him. Well. There's one on two, and another on three. She turned away, assuming he'd follow. Anybody in the place? We have guests in WB, but they're out, and we have guests coming in for TO. See, now it's on. She gestured toward the second wall sconce when they topped the stairs. I was just up here, and it wasn't. Uh-huh. Look, you can ask Carolee if you don't believe me. I didn't say I didn't believe you. You act like you don't.

Fuming a little, she walked up to three. There! It's off, as you can see for yourself. Yeah, I can see that. He went over, lifted off the globe, unscrewed the bulb. Got a fresh one? I keep some in my apartment, but it's not the bulb. She pulled out a key, unlocked her apartment door. Ryder put a hand on it before it could close in his face. He stayed out of her space, but hey, he was right here. So he pushed the door all the way open, took a look inside. Neat and tidy, like the rest of the place. Smelled good, too, like the rest of the place. No clutter. Not a lot of girly fuss either, and he'd expected that. A lot of pillows on the sofa, but he knew few women who wouldn't load a couch and bed with pillows. Strong colors, a couple of plants in pots, fat candles. She swung out of her kitchen, stopped short so he knew he'd given her another jolt. Then she held out the new bulb. He strolled down, screwed it in. It burned bright. It's not the bulb, Hope insisted. I put the other in this morning. Okay. D.A. sat by Ryder's feet, eyes on The Penthouse door. His tail wagged. Don't okay me. I'm telling you, it's there! Her voice held a note of triumph as the bulb went dark. It did it again. There has to be a short, or something wrong with the wiring. No. What do you mean, no? You just saw for yourself. As she spoke, the door to The Penthouse eased open. Hope barely glanced back. Then it hit her. She smelled the honeysuckle, of course, but she'd gotten so used to it. Why would she play with the lights? How would I know? His shoulders lifted as his thumbs hooked in his front pockets. Maybe she's bored. She's been dead awhile. Or maybe she's pissed at you. She is not. There's no reason. Hope started to close The Penthouse door, pushed it open instead. There's water running. She clipped down the short hall into the big elaborate bathroom. Water ran into the double vessel sinks on the counter, in the generous jet tub, from the shower and body jets. Oh, for God's sake. Does this happen often? It's a first. Come on, Lizzy, she muttered, turning off the sink faucets. I have guests coming. Ryder opened the glass door, turned off the showerhead, the body jets. I'm doing the research. Impatient now, Hope turned off the tub. I know Owen is, too, but it's not exactly a snap to find someone named Billy who lived, we assume, during the nineteenth century. If your ghost is acting up, I can't do anything about it. Ryder swiped his wet hand on his jeans. She's not my ghost. It's your building. She's your ancestor. With his habitual shrug, he went out, walked to the parlor door. He tried the knob, glanced back. How about telling your great-great-whatever to cut it out. Cut what out? He jiggled the knob again. That's just She nudged him aside, tried the knob herself. This is ridiculous. Out of patience entirely, Hope continued to rattle the knob. Then she threw up her hands, jabbed a finger at it. Do something. Like what? Take off the knob, or the whole door. With what? She frowned, glanced down. You don't have your tools? Why don't you have your tools? You always have your tools. It was a lightbulb. Temper merged with just a touch of panic. It wasn't a lightbulb. I told you it wasn't a lightbulb. What are you doing? I'm going to sit down a minute. No! At her near-shout, D.A. moseyed to a corner and curled into it. Out of the line of fire. Don't you dare sit on that chair. You're not clean. Oh, for Christ's sake. But he went around the chair, opened the window. And considered the logistics of the roof. Don't go out there! What am I supposed to do when you fall? Call nine-one-one. No. Seriously, Ryder. Call one of your brothers, or the fire department, or I'm not calling the fire department because the damn door won't open. She held up her hands, took a breath. Then sat down herself. I'm just going to calm down. Good start. There's no call to be snotty with me. She pushed at her hair and yes, the in-between length definitely annoyed. I didn't jam the door. Snotty? It might've been a smirk, might've been a sneer, but it hit just between the two. I'm being snotty? You take snotty to a new level. You don't have to like me, and I keep out of your way as much as possible. But I run this inn, and damn well. Our paths have to cross occasionally. You could at least pretend to be polite. Now he leaned back against the door. I don't pretend to be anything, and who says I don't like you? You do. Every time you're

snotty.Maybe thats my response to snooty.Snooty! Sincerely insulted, she goggled at him. Im not snooty.Youve got it down to a science. But thats your deal. He moved over, looked out the window again.Youve been rude to me since the first minute I met you. Right in this room, before it was a room.She remembered the moment perfectly, the dizziness, the powerful surge inside her body, the way the light had seemed to burst around him.She didnt want to think about it.Irritated, he turned around. Maybe it had something to do with you looking at me like Id punched you in the face.I did not. I just had a momentary... I dont know.Maybe because you charge around on stilts.Seriously? Now youre criticizing my shoes?Just commenting.She made a sound in her throat that struck him as feral, leaped up, and banged a fist on the door. Open this damn door!Shell open it when shes ready. Youre just going to hurt yourself.Dont tell me what to do. She couldnt say why his matter-of-fact reaction increased her own temper, and that hint of panic. Youyou dont even use my name. Its like you dont know it.I know your name. Stop banging on the door. Hope. See, I know your name. Stop it.He reached up, covered her fisted hand with his.And she felt it again, that surge, that strange dizziness. Cautiously, she braced against the door, turned her head to look at him.Close again, as theyd been on New Years. Close enough to see those gold flecks scattered across the green of his eyes. Close enough to see the heat, and the consideration in them.She didnt think about leaning in, but her body did. To stop it, she pressed a hand on his chest. Was his heart a little unsteady? She thought it might be. Maybe she only hoped it, so she wouldnt be alone.She trapped Owen and Avery in ED, Hope remembered. She wanted them to... Kiss. To discover each other. Shes a romantic.Ryder stepped back, and the moment broke like glass. Right now shes a nuisance.The window hed opened closed quietly on its own.Id say shes making a statement. Calmer now, steadier as he seemed less so, Hope pushed at her hair. Oh for Gods sake, Ryder, just kiss me. It wont kill you, and then shell let us out of here.Maybe I dont like having womendead ones or live onesmaneuver me.Believe me, kissing you isnt going to be the highlight of my day, but I have guests arriving any minute. Or. She pulled out her phone. Im calling Owen.Youre not calling Owen.She got him now. Having one of his brothers come over to let them out? Mortifying. Kissing her, she calculated, was the lesser of two evils. Amused, she smiled at him. You can close your eyes and think of England.Funny. He stepped over, braced a hand on either side of her head. This is because Ive wasted enough time, and I want a cold beer.Fine.He leaned down, hovered a moment, a breath from her lips.Dont think, she ordered herself. Dont react. Its nothing.Its nothing.It was heat and light, and oh, that surge again from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head. He didnt touch her, but for that mouth against mouth, and she had to curl her hands at her sides to stop herself from reaching out. Grabbing on, dragging him in.She let herself slide, couldnt resist it, as the kiss spun out.Hed meant to do no more than brush his lips to hers. As he might to a friend, an aunt, a plump middle-aged woman with a couple of grandkids.But he sank into it, too deep. The taste of her, the scent, the feel of her lips yielding to his.Not sweet, not sharp, but something mysteriously between. Something uniquely Hope.Itshestirred him more than it should. More than he wanted.Stepping back from her cost brutal effort.He stared back at her for a beat, for two. Then she let out a breath, uncurled her hand, tried the knob.There. She opened the door. It worked.Get moving before she changes her mind.The minute they were in the hall, he walked straight to the now cheerfully burning light, lifted the globe from the floor, fixed it on.Done. He stood where he was, gave her another long look.She started to speak, and the doorbell pealed.My guests are here. I need toRevue de presse"[An] emotionally engaging, exceptionally entertaining contemporary trilogy."Booklist "With stellar pacing, humorous flair, and unerring insight into what makes families tick, Roberts wraps up another winning trilogy."Library Journal Leaves the reader feeling blissfully satisfied yet wishing this romantically paranormal story would go on indefinitely.New York Journal of Books