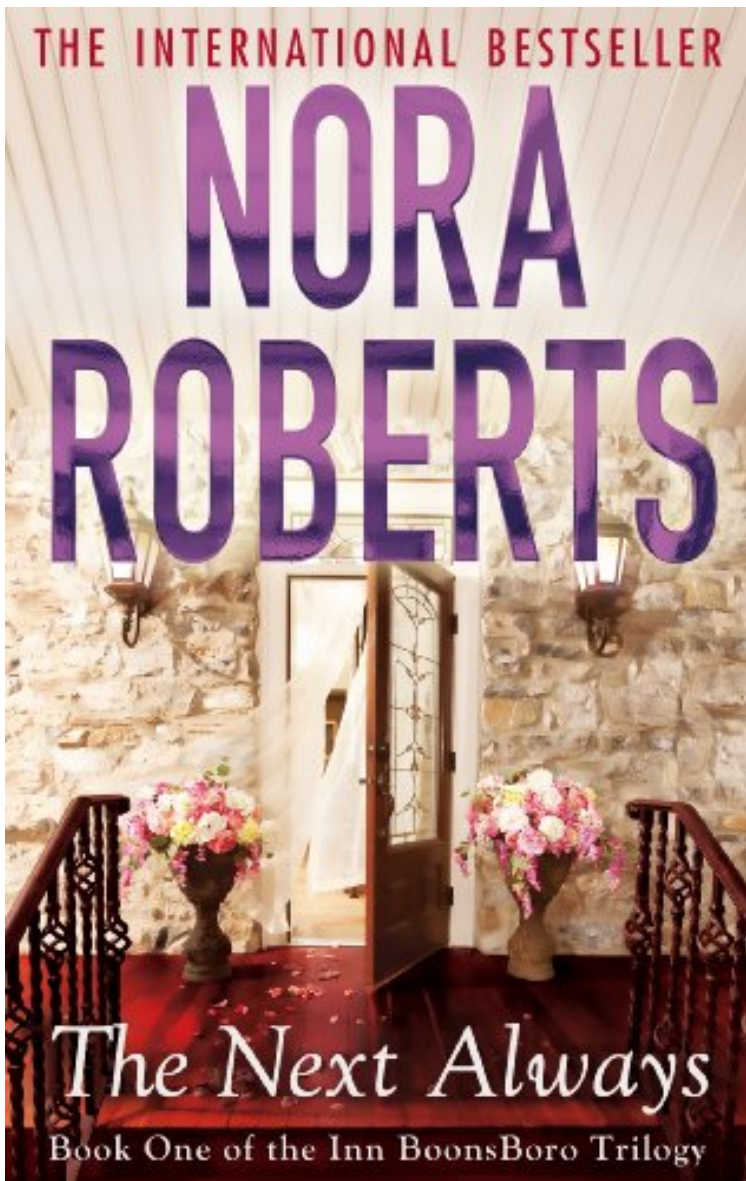


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## The Next Always:



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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe historic hotel in Boonsboro has endured war and peace, changing hands, even rumored hauntings. Now it's getting a major facelift from the Montgomery brothers and their eccentric mother. Beckett is the architect of the family, and his social life consists mostly of talking shop over pizza and beer. But there's another project he's got his eye on: the girl he's been waiting to kiss since he was fifteen.After losing her husband and returning to her hometown, Clare Brewster soon settles into her life as the mother of three young sons while running the town's bookstore. Busy, with little time for romance, Clare is drawn across the street by Beckett's transformation of the old inn, wanting to take a closer look . . . at the

building and the man behind it. With the grand opening inching closer, Beckett's happy to give Clare a private tour - one room at a time. It's no first date, but these stolen moments are the beginning of something new - and open the door to the extraordinary adventure of what comes next . . .

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The song and the silence in the heart, That in part are prophecies, and in part Are longings wild and vain. LONGFELLOW CHAPTER ONE THE STONE WALLS STOOD AS THEY HAD FOR MORE THAN two centuries, simple, sturdy, and strong. Mined from the hills and the valleys, they rose in testament to mans inherent desire to leave his mark, to build and create. Over those two centuries man married the stone with brick, with wood and glass, enlarging, transforming, enhancing to suit the needs, the times, the whims. Throughout, the building on the crossroads watched as the settlement became a town, as more buildings sprang up. The dirt road became asphalt; horse and carriage gave way to cars. Fashions flickered by in the blink of an eye. Still it stood, rising on its corner of The Square, an enduring landmark in the cycle of change. It knew war, heard the echo of gunfire, the cries of the wounded, the prayers of the fearful. It knew blood and tears, joy and fury. Birth and death. It thrived in good times, endured the hard times. It changed hands and purpose, yet the stone walls stood. In time, the wood of its graceful double porches began to sag. Glass broke; mortar cracked and crumbled. Some who stopped at the light on the town square might glance over to see pigeons flutter in and out of broken windows and wonder what the old building had been in its day. Then the light turned green, and they drove on. Beckett knew. He stood on the opposite corner of The Square, thumbs tucked into the pockets of his jeans. Thick with summer, the air held still. With the road empty, he could have crossed Main Street against the light, but he continued to wait. Opaque blue tarps draped the building from roof to street level, curtaining the front of the building. Over the winter it had served to hold the heat in for the crew. Now it helped block the beat of the sun and the view. But he knew how it looked at that moment, and how it would look when the rehab was complete. After all, he designed it, he, his two brothers, his mother. But the blueprints bore his name as architect, his primary function as a partner in Montgomery Family Contractors. He crossed over, his tennis shoes nearly silent on the road in the breathless hush of three a.m. He walked under the scaffolding, along the side of the building, down St. Paul, pleased to see in the glow of the streetlight how well the stone and brick had cleaned up. It looked old, he thought, and that was part of its beauty and appeal. But now, for the first time in his memory, it looked tattered. He rounded the back, walked over the sunbaked dirt, through the construction rubble scattered over what would be a courtyard. Here the porches that spanned both the second and third stories ran straight and true. Custom-made pickets designed to replicate those from old photographs of the building, and the remnants found during excavation hung freshly primed and drying on a length of wire. He knew his eldest brother, Ryder, in his role as head contractor, had the rails and pickets scheduled for install. He knew because Owen, the middle of the three Montgomery brothers, plagued them all over schedules, calendars, projections, and ledgers and kept Beckett informed of every nail hammered. Whether he wanted to be or not. In this case, he supposed as he dug out his key, he wanted to be usually. The old hotel had become a family obsession. It had him by the throat, he admitted as he opened the unfinished and temporary door to what would be The Lobby. And by the heart and hell, it had him by the balls. No other project theyd ever worked on had ever gotten its hooks in him, in all of them, like this. He suspected none ever would again. He hit the switch, and the work light dangling from the ceiling flashed on to illuminate bare concrete floors, roughed-in walls, tools, tarps, material. It smelled of wood and concrete dust and, faintly, of the grilled onions someone must have ordered for lunch. He'd do a more thorough inspection of the first and second floors in the morning when he had better light. Stupid to have come over at this hour anyway, when he couldn't really see crap, and was dog tired. But he couldn't resist it. By the balls, he thought again, passing under a wide archway, its edges of stone still rough and exposed. Then, flipping on his flashlight, he headed toward the front and the work steps that led up. There was something about the place in the middle of the night, when the noise of nail guns, saws, radios, and voices ended, and the shadows took over. Something

not altogether quiet, not altogether still. Something that brushed fingers over the back of his neck. Something else he couldn't resist. He swept his light around the second floor, noted the brown-bag backing on the walls.

As always, Owens report had been accurate. Ry and his crew had the insulation completed on this level. Though he'd intended to go straight up, he roamed here with a grin spreading over his sharply boned face, the pleasure of it lighting eyes the color of blue shadows. Coming along, he said into the silence in a voice gravelly from lack of sleep. He moved through the dark, following his beam of light, a tall man with narrow hips, the long Montgomery legs, and the waving mass of brown hair with hints of chestnut that came down from the Riley's maternal side. He had to remind himself that if he kept poking around he'd have to get up before he got to bed, so he climbed up to the third floor. Now that's what I'm talking about. Pure delight scattered thoughts of sleep as he traced a finger down the taped seam of freshly hung drywall. He played his light over the holes cut out for electric, moved into what would be the innkeeper's apartment, and noted the same for plumbing in the kitchen and bath. He spent more time wandering through what would be their most elaborate suite, nodding approval at the floating wall dividing the generous space in the bath. You're a frigging genius, Beck. Now, for God's sake, go home. But giddy with fatigue and anticipation, he took one more good look before he made his way down the steps. He heard it as he reached the second floor. A kind of humming and distinctly female. As the sound reached him, so did the scent. Honeysuckle, sweet and wild and ripe with summer. His belly did a little dance, but he held the flashlight steady as he swept it down the hall into unfinished guest rooms. He shook his head as both sound and scent drifted away. I know you're here. He spoke clearly, and his voice echoed back to him. And I guess you've been here for a while. Were bringing her back, and then some. She deserves it. I hope to hell you like it when she's done because, well, that's the way it's going to be. He waited a minute or two, fanciful enough or tired enough to imagine whoever, or whatever, inhabited the place settled on a wait-and-see mode. Anyway. He shrugged. Were giving her the best we've got, and were pretty damn good. He walked down, noted the work light no longer shone. Beckett turned it on again, switched it back off with another shrug. It wouldn't be the first time the current resident had messed with one of them. Good night, he called out, then locked up. This time he didn't wait for the light, but crossed diagonally. Vesta Pizzeria and Family Restaurant spread over another corner of The Square, with his apartment and office above. He walked down the sloping sidewalk to the back parking lot, grabbed his bag from the cab of his truck. Deciding he'd murder anyone who called him before eight a.m., Beckett unlocked the stairwell, then climbed past the restaurant level to his door. He didn't bother with the light, but moved by memory and the backwash of streetlights through the apartment. He stripped by the bed, letting the clothes drop. He flopped facedown on the mattress, and fell asleep thinking of honeysuckle. THE CELL PHONE he'd left in his jeans pocket went off at six fifty-five. Son of a bitch. He crawled out of bed, over the floor, dug his phone out of the pocket. Realized he was holding his wallet up to his ear when nobody answered. Shit. Dropped the wallet, fumbled out the phone. What the hell do you want? Good morning to you, too, Owen responded. I'm walking out of Sheetz, with coffee and donuts. They've got a new clerk on the morning shift. She's pretty hot. I'll kill you with a hammer. Then you won't get any coffee and donuts. I'm on my way to the site. Ry should be there already. Morning meeting. That's at ten. Didn't you read the text I sent you? Which one? I'm gone two days and you sent me a million freaking texts. The one that told you we rescheduled for seven fifteen. Put some pants on, Owen suggested and hung up. Hell. He grabbed a two-minute shower, and put some pants on. The clouds that rolled in overnight had managed to lock the heat in, so stepping outside was like swimming fully dressed through a warm river. He heard the thump of nail guns, the jingle of music, the whine of saws as he crossed the street. From inside, somebody laughed like a lunatic. He turned the corner of the building as Owen pulled his truck into the parking lot behind the projected courtyard. The truck gleamed from a recent wash, and the silver toolboxes on the sides of the bed sparkled. Owen stepped out. Jeans, a white T-shirt tucked into his belt and on the belt the damn phone that did everything but kiss him good night (and Beckett wasn't taking bets against that) marginally scuffed work boots. His bark brown hair sat tidily on his head. He'd obviously had time to shave his pretty face, Beckett thought resentfully. He shot Beckett a grin, and Beckett imagined the eyes behind those bronze lenses were cheerful and alert. Give me the damn coffee. Owen took a tall go-cup, marked with a B, from its slot in the tray. I didn't get in till three. Beckett took the first, deep, lifesaving gulp. Why? I didn't get out of Richmond until close to ten, then I hit a parking lot on 95. And don't, just do not tell me I should've checked the traffic report before getting on. Give me a fucking donut. Owen opened the enormous box, and the smell of yeast, sugar, and fat oozed into the thick air. Beckett grabbed a jelly, wolfed half of it, washed it down with more coffee. Pickets are going to look good, Owen said in his easy way. They're going to be worth the time and

money. He cocked his head toward the truck on the other side of his. Drywalls up on the third floor. Theyre going to get the second coat of mud on today. Roofers ran out of copper, so theyre going to fall a little behind schedule on that, but theyre working on the slate until the material comes in. I can hear that, Beckett commented as the stone saws shrilled. Owen continued the updates as they crossed to the lobby door, and the coffee woke up Becketts brain. The noise level spiked, but now that Beckett had some sugar and caffeine in his system, it sounded like music. He exchanged greetings with a couple of the crew hanging insulation, then followed Owen through the side arch and into what would be the laundry, and currently served as an on-site office. Ryder stood scowling down at blueprints spread over a table of plywood on sawhorses. Dumbass, his homely and purehearted mutt and constant companionsprawled snoring at his feet. Until a whiff of donut had his eyes popping open, his scruffy tail thumping. Beckett broke off a bite of donut, tossed it, and the dog nipped it neatly out of the air. D.A. saw no logical purpose in the fetching of sticks or balls. He concentrated his skills on fielding food of any kind. If youre going to ask for another change, Ill kill you instead of Owen. Ryder only grunted, held out a hand for coffee. We need to move this panel box, then we can box in this space here, use it for second-floor utility. Beckett took another donut, considered as Ryder ran through a handful of other changes. Little tweaks, Beckett thought, that wouldnt hurt and would probably improve. Ryder was, after all, the one of them who lived most intimately with the building. But when Ryder moved to eliminating the coffered dining room ceiling a thin bone of contention between them Beckett dug in. It goes in, just as on the plans. It makes a statement. It doesnt need to make a statement. Every room in this place is going to make a statement. The dining room makes one with among other things, a coffered ceiling. It suits the room, plays off the panels were making for the side of the windows. The depth of the windows, the ceiling, the arch of stone on the back wall. Pain in the ass. Ryder scanned the donuts, opted for a cinnamon twist. He didnt so much as glance toward the madly thumping tail as he tore off the end, flipped it into the air. D.A.s teeth snapped together as he caught it. Howd it go down in Richmond? The next time I volunteer to design and help build a covered deck for a friend, knock me unconscious. Always a pleasure. Ryder grinned around the donut. His hair, a deep dense brown that edged toward black, sprang out from under his paint-stained MFC gimme cap. His eyebrows lifted over eyes of gold-flecked green. I thought you were mostly doing it to get into Drews sisters pants. It was part of the motivation. Howd that go for you? She hooked up with somebody a couple weeks ago, a detail nobody bothered to pass on to me. I never even saw her. So Im bunked down in Drews spare room trying to pretend I cant hear him and Jen fighting every damn night, and listening to him complain how shes making his life hell every damn day. He drained the coffee. The deck looks good though. Now that youre back I could use some help on the built-ins for The Library, Owen told him. Ive got some catching up to do, but I can give you some time after noon. Thatll work. Owen handed him a file. Moms been down to Basts, he said, speaking of the furniture store down the street. Copies of what shes after with dimensions, and the room theyre for. She wants you to draw it up. I just did the last batch before I went to Drews. How fast can she shop? Shes meeting Aunt Carolee there tomorrow. Theyre talking fabrics, so she wants to see if and how what shes got going fits ASAP. Youre the one who took off a couple days hoping to get laid, Owen reminded him. Struck out, too. Shut up, Ry. Beckett tucked the file under his arm. Id better get started. Dont you want to go up, take a look? I did a walk-through last night. At three in the morning? Owen asked. Yeah, at three in the morning. Its looking good. One of the crew stuck his head in. Hey, Beck. Ry, the drywallers got a question up in five. Be there in a minute. Ryder pulled a handwritten list off his clipboard, passed it to Owen. Materials. Go on and order. I want to get the front porch framed in. Ill take care of it. Do you need me around here this morning? Weve got a few million pickets to prime, a mile or two of insulation to hang, and were decking the second-story porch, front. What do you think? I think Ill get my tool belt after I order this material. Ill swing back through before I head out to the shop this afternoon, Beckett told them, then got out before he ended up with a nail gun in his hand. AT HOME, HE stuck a mug under his coffee machine, checked the level of the water and beans. While it chomped the beans, he went through the mail Owen had stacked on the kitchen counter. Owen had also left sticky notes, Beckett thought with a shake of his head, listing the times hed watered the plants. Though he hadnt asked Owen or anyone to deal with those little chores while hed been gone, it didnt surprise him to find them done. If you were dealing with a flat tire or a nuclear holocaust, you could depend on Owen. Beckett dumped the junk mail in the recycle bin, took what mail needed attention and the coffee through to his office. He liked the space, which hed designed himself when the Montgomery family bought the building a few years before. He had the old desk a flea market find hed refinished facing Main Street. Sitting there, he could study the inn. He had land just outside of town, and plans for a house hed designed, barely started, and kept fiddling with. But other

projects always bumped it down the line. He couldn't see the hurry, in any case. He was happy enough with his Main Street perch over Vesta. Plus it added the convenience of calling down if he wanted a slice while he worked, or just going downstairs if he wanted food and company. He could walk to the bank, the barber, to Crawfords if he wanted a hot breakfast or a burger, to the bookstore, the post office. He knew his neighbors, the merchants, the rhythm in Boonsboro. No, no reason to hurry. He glanced at the file Owen had given him. It was tempting to start right there, see what his mother and aunt had come up with. But he had other work to clear up first. He spent the next hour paying bills, updating other projects, answering emails he'd neglected when in Richmond. He checked Ryders job schedule. Owen insisted they each have an updated copy every week, even though they saw or spoke to each other all the damn time. Mostly on schedule, which, considering the scope of the project, equaled a not-so-minor miracle. He glanced at his thick white binder, filled with cut sheets, computer copies, schematics all arranged by room of the heating and air-conditioning system, the sprinkler system, every tub, toilet, sink, faucet, the lighting, tile patterns, appliances and the furniture and accessories already selected and approved. It would be thicker before they were done, so he'd better see what his mother had her eye on. He opened the file, spread out the cut sheets. On each, his mother listed the room the piece was intended for by initials. He knew Ryder and the crew still worked by the numbers they'd assigned to the guest rooms and suites, but he knew JR's second floor, rear, and one of the two with private entrances and fireplaces stood for Jane and Rochester. His mother's concept, and one he liked a lot, had been to name the rooms for romantic couples in literature with happy endings. She'd done so for all but the front-facing suite she'd decided to dub The Penthouse. He studied the bed she wanted, and decided the wooden canopy style would've fit nicely into Thornfield Hall. Then he grinned at the curvy sofa, the fainting couch she'd noted should stand at the foot of the bed. She'd picked out a dresser, but had listed the alternative of a secretary with drawers. More unique, he decided, more interesting. And she apparently had her mind made up about a bed for Westley and Buttercup their second suite, rear as she'd written THIS IS IT!! in all caps on the sheet. He scanned the other sheets; she'd been busy. Then turned to his computer. He spent the next two hours with CAD, arranging, adjusting, angling. From time to time, he opened the binder, refreshed himself on the feel and layout of the baths, or took another look at the electrical, the cable for the flatscreens in each bedroom. When he was satisfied, he sent his mother the file, with copies to his brothers, and gave her the maximum dimensions for any night tables, occasional chairs. He wanted a break, and more coffee. Iced coffee, he decided. Iced cappuccino, even better. No reason not to walk down to Turn The Page and get one.

They had good coffee at the bookstore, and he'd stretch his legs a little on the short walk down Main. He ignored the fact that the coffee machine he'd indulged himself in could make cappuccino and that he had ice. And he told himself he took the time to shave because it was too damn hot for the scruff. He went out, headed down Main, stopped outside of Sherry's Beauty Salon to talk to Dick while the barber took a break. How's it coming? We've got drywall going in, Beckett told him. Yeah, I helped them unload some. We're going to have to put you on the payroll. Dick grinned, jerked a chin at the inn. I like watching it come back. Me, too. See you later. He walked on, and up the short steps to the covered porch of the bookstore, and through the door to a jangle of bells. He lifted a hand in salute to Laurie as the bookseller rang up a sale for a customer. While he waited he wandered to the front-facing stand of bestsellers and new arrivals. He took down the latest John Sandford in paperback how had he missed that one? scanned the write-up inside, kept it as he strolled around the stacks. The shop had an easy, relaxed walk-around feel with its rooms flowing into one another, with the curve of the creaky steps to the second-floor office and storerooms. Trinkets, cards, a few local crafts, some of this, a little of that and, most of all, books and more books filled shelves, tables, cases in a way that encouraged just browsing around. Another old building, it had seen war, change, the lean and the fat. Now with its soft colors and old wood floors, it managed to hold on to the sense of the town house it had once been. It always smelled, to him, of books and women, which made sense since the owner had a fully female staff of full- and part-timers. He found a just-released Walter Mosley and picked that up as well. Then glancing toward the stairs to the second-floor office, Beckett strolled through the open doorway to the back section of the store. He heard voices, but realized quickly they came from a little girl and a woman she called Mommy. Clare had boys three boys now, he thought. Maybe she wasn't even in today, or not coming in until later. Besides, he'd come for coffee, not to see Clare Murphy. Clare Brewster, he reminded himself. She'd been Clare Brewster for ten years, so he ought to be used to it. Clare Murphy Brewster, he mused, mother of three, bookstore proprietor. Just an old high school friend who'd come home after an Iraqi sniper shattered her life and left her a widow. He hadn't come to see her, except in passing if she happened to be around. He'd have no business making a point to see the widow of a boy he'd gone to school

with, had liked, had envied. Sorry for the wait. How's it going, Beck? What? He tuned back in, turned to Laurie as the door jingled behind the customers. Oh, no problem. Found some books. Imagine that, she said, and smiled at him. I know, what are the odds? I hope they're as good for me getting an iced cappuccino. I can hook you up. Iced everything's the order of the day this summer. Her honey brown hair scooped up with a clip against the heat, she gestured to the cups. Large? You bet. How's the inn coming? It's moving. He walked to the counter as she turned to the espresso machine. Pretty little thing, Beckett mused. She'd worked for Clare since the beginning, shuffling work and school. Five years, maybe six? Could it be that long already? People ask us all the time, she told him as she worked. When, when, when, what, how. And especially when you're going to take down that tarp so we can all see for ourselves. And spoil the big reveal? It's killing me. With the conversation, the noise of the machine, he didn't hear her, but sensed her. He looked over as she came down the curve of the steps, one hand trailing along the banister. When his heart jumped, he thought, Oh well. But then, Clare had been making his heart jump since he'd been sixteen. Hi, Beck. I thought I heard you down here. She smiled, and his heart stopped jumping to fall flat. CHAPTER TWO HE HANDLED IT. HE SMILED BACK AT HER, QUICK AND casual, as she walked down the stairs with her long, sunny ponytail swaying. She always reminded him of a sunflower, tall and bright and cheerful. Her gray eyes held hints of green that gave them a sparkle whenever her mouth, with its deep center dip, curved up. Haven't seen you in a couple days, she commented. I was down in Richmond. She'd gotten some sun, he thought, giving her skin just a hint of gold. Did I miss anything? Let's see. Somebody stole the garden gnome out of Carol Teckers yard. Jeez. A crime spree. She's offering a ten-dollar reward. I'll keep my eye out for it. Anything new at the inn? We started drywall. Old news. She flicked that away. I got that from Avery yesterday, who got it from Ry when he stopped in for pizza. My mother's putting another furniture order together, and she's moving on to fabrics. Now that's a bulletin. Green sparkled in the gray; it just killed him. I'd love to see what she's picking out. I know it's going to be beautiful. And I heard a rumor there's going to be a copper tub. Beckett held up three fingers. Her eyes widened; the green deepened in the smoky gray. He'd need oxygen any minute. Three? Where do you find these things? We have our ways. *Revue de presse* Paints a charming picture of small-town life. *Publishers Weekly* Touching, funny, sweetly sexy, slightly paranormal, and just plain satisfying. *Library Journal* Leaves you celebrating love with a warm [and] cozy touch. USA Today From the Paperback edition.