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## The Last Coincidence

A Nero Wolfe Mystery

Robert Goldsborough

To John McAleer, for his consistent support and encouragement

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## ONE

OKAY, SO THE TIMES CALLED it the best Broadway musical of the year; this wasn't the first instance where that esteemed journal and I found ourselves on opposite sides of the fence. I had gone only because Lily Rowan was aching to see the The Last Coincidence (The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4) show, and as it turned out, she didn't enjoy it all The Last Coincidence (The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4) that much either.

The way Lily The Last Coincidence (The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4) was acting that night, though, she probably wouldn't have enjoyed Caruso at his peak. She'd been uncharacteristically quiet all through a superb dinner at Rusterman's—we each had the trout Montbarry that Nero Wolfe introduced to the menu years ago when he was overseer of the The Last Coincidence (The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4) restaurant following his old friend Marko Vukcic's death. And even during what I thought were the show's few good moments, the best

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she could generate was halfhearted applause or a weak chuckle. She never even gave my ribs a *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) gentle jab with her elbow, which is one of her trademarks when she's having fun at the theater.

"At the risk of stating the obvious, you're a long *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) way from the vivacious and scintillating companion I have grown to respect, revere, and, yea, even adore," I told her in the taxi headed for her apartment on East Sixty-third just off Park. The response I got was a faint smile.

"Oh ... I know, Archie, I'm out of sorts. I was hoping the show would jolt me out of it—no such luck. Sorry."

"Whoa, you don't *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) have to apologize to me, of all people. Think of the many times when I've been preoccupied because of some case the Great Man and I were buffaloes by. Do you want to talk about it?"

She screwed up her face and shrugged. "No, I ... Oh, why not, for Lord's sake? Come on up for a nightcap."

I paid the driver and we breezed into the lobby of Lily's building, which looks like it was furnished by somebody with a brother who owned a white-marble quarry. *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) The hallman, who's been working there for all of a hundred years, gave his usual salute and his usual "'Evenin', Miz Rowan ... 'evenin', Mr. Goodwin," making a big flourish out of running over and punching the elevator button for us. A clear-cut example of Lily's lavish Christmas tip paying off.

As many times as I've been in Lily's palace, I still find myself gawking like a rube *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) at the artwork and the rest of the decor. Lily Rowan and I are what the gossip columnists would probably term "old friends," which is true as far as it goes. The fact is, we *are* old friends, although that's never stopped either of us from enjoying the company of other members of the opposite sex. If you're looking for any more details about our relationship, you've *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) come to the wrong place. And if you think she'll give you any more details than I will, forget it.

Anyway, *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) to get back to Lily: Her late father ventured over from Ireland long before I'd left Ohio in search of fame and fortune in Manhattan, and *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) he quickly got *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) himself involved in both Tammany Hall—that's the old Democratic organization—and the construction business. As I've pieced it *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) together from Lily and from Lon Cohen of the *Gazette*, Rowan made a mint building sewers in New York. A sizable chunk of that fortune dropped on Lily, who has shown she knows how to use it. A few examples are her weekend hideaway up in Katonah, her ranch in Montana, and some pricey pieces of French Impressionist art in her New York apartment. To give you an idea what I mean, before I knew Lily, names like Monet, Renoir, and Cézanne meant about as much to me as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

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One more thing: Despite Lily Rowan's money, however much that is, when she's out with me, I pay. Just so that's on the record.

I got myself settled on one of the three white couches in her living room with the Scotch and water I'd mixed at the bar in the corner of the room, while Lily sat opposite me, tucked her luscious legs under her, and took a deep breath, contemplating her own Scotch. Then she looked up with those dark blue eyes.

"Escamillo," she said, using a nickname that dated to when she watched me make *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) the acquaintance of a bull in a pasture, "I need to talk to somebody—you, really—but it means breaking *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) a confidence."

"That's got to be your call, but I think you know that I'm walking around with a lot of secrets that never got any further than here." I tapped the side of my head.

"I know, and I can't tell you why I'm hesitating except that this involves Noreen."

"Your niece?"

Lily nodded, chewing on her lower lip. Noreen James *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) is the daughter of Lily's half-sister, Megan James. I'd only met her a few times, but that was enough for me to form a very positive impression of the young woman, who was now a couple of years out of college.

"Drugs?" I asked.

"No—at least not that I'm aware of. Please let me ... go slowly with this," she said, stopping to take a healthy swallow of her drink. She contemplated the Renoir on the opposite wall before going on. "I think you know Noreen and I are pretty close. For one thing, she's nicer by miles than her mother, but then, you're well aware of how I feel about *her*."

I am indeed. Lily and her somewhat-older half-sister have never made a pretense of relishing each other's company, and it's easy to see why. While Lily is outgoing, free-spirited, *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) flip, irreverent, and—by her own admission—lazy, Megan is brittle, tense, bustling, and generally disapproving of others. I have been around the lady just enough to know that she's about as much *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) fun as being stuck *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) in traffic with a New York cabbie who has opinions about everything and is determined to share them.

"Anyway, Archie, Noreen and I get together every so *The Last Coincidence* (*The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4*) often, just to talk. She's always confided in me more than in her mother, which hasn't improved what's left of my relationship with Megan—not that I much care, of course. We usually meet about once a month."

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“So you’ve mentioned before—at the Plaza, right?”

Lily The Last Coincidence (The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4) allowed herself the slightest shadow of a smile. “Noreen loves the Palm Court. But the last two times we’ve had lunch, she’s been a different person than anything I’ve ever seen before. You know how bubbly and alive and rosy-cheeked she is, or rather, was. When I saw her a month ago—it was the last Saturday in June—I couldn’t believe it. She looked ... haggard—that’s the only word I can think of. Like she hadn’t been sleeping. And she was distracted. She usually loves to hear the latest dirt about what you insist on referring to as the ‘chichi crowd’—actually, I think The Last Coincidence (The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4) she looks to her good old Aunt Lily as comic relief. We usually laugh our way through the Chablis and salad. But not that time. She didn’t seem to want to talk at all, and when I asked her if anything was bothering her, she just said the job was unusually hectic.”

“At the publishing house, isn’t it?”

“Melbourne Books, The Last Coincidence (The Nero Wolfe Mysteries Book 4) yes. She’s always loved being an editor. But when I questioned her on what was wrong there, all she would say was that she didn’t want to go into it, so I backed off. She gets more than enough prying from her mother.

“But when I saw her again last Saturday, it was a repeat of the month before. She looked just as bad as she had before—maybe even a little worse. She wasn’t the least bit interested in my stories, and believe me, at least a couple of them were dandies. For that matter, she wasn’t inclined to do any talking herself. This time, though, I decided to press her. At first, she stuck to her earlier story about job pressures, but I wasn’t buying any more of that. I have to confess that I really bore in on her—like her mother might have done if she hadn’t been vacationing on the Riviera for the last six weeks. In fact, Megan is due home today, although I haven’t heard from her. Anyway, then it came out like a flood, and with lots of tears.”

Lily leaned back and closed her eyes. I refilled both our drinks, then sat down, ready to give her all the time she wanted.

“At this rate, I’ll keep you here till dawn waiting for me to finish,” she said ruefully, blinking. “Well, you’ve probably figured it out by this time, but Noreen was ... she got ... attacked.” She shook her head and ran a hand through her dusty-blond hair. “And the worst part, it was somebody she knew—she was out with him when it happened, for God’s sake!”

“Date rape,” I said quietly.

She cringed. “What a hideous term.”

“For a hideous act. Who the hell did it?”

“She wouldn’t tell me. I had enough trouble getting as much out of her as I did, but I can make

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a pretty good guess. She's been seeing at least a couple of guys. One's a nice boy—at least I

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