



## **The Case of the Sneezing Accountant**

by N. J. Lindquist

Marilou Cannelli, a reasonably attractive woman in her late twenties, dressed to match the thousands of other professional women in Toronto, strode purposefully along Danforth Avenue, briefcase in her left hand.

Suddenly she felt a sneeze coming.

After suffering from allergies for many years, covering her mouth while sneezing was a reflex action for Marilou. But as she raised her right hand, a knife thrown from a near-by alleyway embedded itself in the fleshy part of her forearm.

Marilou Cannelli was fortunate. If not for her good manners while sneezing, the knife point would have penetrated her heart.

While there was a lot of blood, the pitch and intensity of Marilou's screams proved to anyone within several blocks that she was still very much alive.

Passers-by came to her aid. A former nurse grabbed a proffered gym towel and applied pressure to the wound: a few people offered suit jackets for warmth in case of shock: several pulled out cell-phones to alert ambulance and police: a few bravely ran down the alley-way in search of the assailant. They found no one suspicious.

Detective-Inspector Paul Manziuk was, as usual, working overtime. And, as usual, he was tired. Too many late nights. Too much work, period. Worst of all, he was writing reports.

Despite the specially-designed chair, his six-foot-five, 235 pound body never felt comfortable in a seated position, perhaps because he detested writing anything. He could still remember school teachers telling him he had to keep practicing to make his handwriting legible. And while he appreciated the marvels of computers, he was all thumbs when he had to use one.

The call came through. Attempted murder.

He leapt from his chair.

As he passed Detective-Constable Jacqueline Ryan's desk, he made a quick hand motion. With a sigh, she closed her computer program, reached for her purse, and caught up with him at the elevator door.

"What's up?" Ryan asked as they went down.

He told her all he knew, which wasn't much.

Ryan didn't say anything more until they were in the car. As usual, Manziuk drove. And as usual, Ryan was annoyed. It was normal for the junior officer to drive. But not with Manziuk. He claimed it wasn't that he didn't want a woman to drive him, but that driving was less stressful for him than sitting while someone else drove. Just another little annoyance she had to put up with.

Of course, being twenty-eight years old and a brand new female member of the homicide squad, not to mention a woman of colour, meant lots of annoyances, and more than a few challenges.

"Women are at men's mercy," Ryan said. "You know that? It's amazing to me that more women aren't killed."

"You're prejudging the case."

"Just going with the statistics."

Manziuk didn't answer. Listening to Ryan was about as useful as listening to round-table talk shows. The people could say anything they liked, but it was all idle speculation. All sound and fury, signifying nothing.

They pulled up behind several patrol cars. There were lots of uniforms, lots of metres of yellow tape, and lots of onlookers.

Manziuk looked for the man who had called him, Simon Chen, a short, muscular man about thirty-five. Ryan followed meekly.

"Not much to see," Simon said as they came together. "Who's the dame?"

"New partner," Manziuk said tersely. "Is the victim talking?"

"Talking fine. But she says no one in her life would do this."

"Married?"

"No."

"Ex?"

"No."

"Boyfriend?"

"None who would do this. Or so she says."

"She covering for someone?"

"She seemed genuinely puzzled. Says it must have been a disgruntled squeegee-kid or a homeless person."

"Oh, sure," Ryan said. "Blame a minority."

Chen laughed. "You're a minority, too."

"Let me count the ways. But so are you," she countered.

"Depends. There are millions back in China who look just like me. Or so I've heard."

“He was born in Kingston,” Manziuk said. “His great-grandfather was born in Toronto. If you want to talk minorities, what about me? Do you know how many times a day I bump my head on ceilings and door frames and light fixtures?”

Chen flashed a grin at Ryan before saying, “They took the victim to Sunnybrook.”

“All right. We’ll pay her a visit. Meanwhile—” Manziuk gestured toward the area surrounded by yellow police tape “—what have we got here?”

“Eight million fingerprints on the walls of the buildings. Nothing on the ground that looks suspicious. Only the woman’s blood on the sidewalk.”

“Witnesses?”

“Nobody saw it happen. Several people came to her aid, but no one saw anything.”

“Knife?”

“I sent it to the lab. I doubt very much if it will have fingerprints. A funny kind of knife, though: not a switchblade nor a kitchen knife. It’s small. Wooden handle. About seven inches, with a two and a half inch blade. Might be something there.”

“Okay. So we’ve got no leads other than maybe the knife.”

His eyes on Ryan, Chen said, “He catches on real fast, doesn’t he?”

Marilou Cannelli was on a stretcher in the hallway of the crowded emergency ward. Her arm was encased in bandages, her face pale, but she was awake and voluble.

“...ruined my favorite suit—” she was saying to a wide-eyed Filipina nurse’s aid as the police duo appeared.

Marilou stared at them. “Do you want something?”

“Homicide.” Manziuk flashed his badge.

“You don’t look like cops. Where are your uniforms?”

“We’re plainclothes. We don’t wear uniforms.”

“Then how are people supposed to know you’re cops?”

“Do you know who stabbed you?” Ryan asked. “Boyfriend, maybe?”

Marilou turned her eyes from Manziuk and studied Ryan. She looked back at Manziuk.

“All I know is I was walking down the street thinking about the meeting I was going to, and the next thing I know there’s a knife in my arm. As for thinking I could possibly know anyone who would throw a knife at a person walking on the street, isn’t that libel or something? Can’t I sue?”

“You can’t sue the police for trying to find out who stabbed you.”

“Not even for thinking I could know someone who runs around stabbing people?”

“Somebody stabbed you,” Ryan pointed out. “Do you want us to find out who?”

“It’s nobody I know—”

“Can you really be sure of that?” Manziuk asked gently. “You must know quite a few people.

“I don’t know any stabbers.”

“Look, let’s cover some basics,” Ryan said. “Who would benefit from your death?”

“I don’t have money or art or anything like that.”

“Nobody angry with you?”

“Only my mother.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I turned down a marriage proposal.”

Ryan rolled her eyes at Manziuk.

He took over. “Ms. Cannelli, we have to try to find the person who did this to you. Before we can assume it’s random, we have to make sure it wasn’t. Can you tell us where you work, where you live, who you’ve been dating, and the names of anyone who might have any reason to feel resentment, jealousy, or anger with you? If that knife had gone into your chest instead of your arm, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, you know. We’d be down in the morgue watching the coroner do an autopsy.”

Marilou’s large brown eyes filled with tears and her body shivered under the thin hospital gown. “When you put it like that—” she said.

Marilou gave them the names of every member of her large family: her employer, all the people in the accounting office, and the clients she worked with; her former boyfriends, current boyfriend, and the guy down in the next office who always whistled at her; her priest and the members of the small congregation her parents attended regularly and she dropped by now and then; and her girlfriends, both married and single. When she had exhausted those names, she told them where her apartment was and ticked off the names of the landlady and all the people who had apartments on her floor, the grocer where she shopped, the restaurants she frequented, and the names of her high school and college teachers.

A week later, after several more conversations with Marilou and visits with almost every person in her part of the world, plus a lot of basic legwork, they had narrowed the list of suspects to four people who knew Marilou, had

no alibi for the time of the incident, and had some link, no matter how fragile, with knives.

The first was Jake O'Connell, a co-worker of Marilou's from Seldon Accounting. Jake's potential motive was that Marilou had been promoted ahead of him.

Jake was a tall man with a paunch, thirty-two years old, divorced, with tawny skin and heavy-lidded eyes. He reminded Ryan of a camel.

When they interviewed him in his office for the second time, he was not amused.

"What are you back here for? I don't know anything."

"You might know something without realizing you know it," Manziuk said as he set his bulk down in the empty chair in front of Jake's extremely messy desk.

Ryan wandered around the small cubicle as if checking it out.

"What?" Jake asked. "You don't really think I stabbed her, do you?"

"If you didn't, you have nothing to worry about," Ryan mused aloud.

"Then I don't have anything to worry about, do I? Except you two are keeping me from my work."

"The bartender at the Thorn and Whistle says you throw a dart very well," Manziuk offered. "Won the local championship a while back, didn't you?"

"What if I did?"

"A dart, a knife—not much difference."

"Except I can win good money throwing darts. I have no reason to throw a knife at anyone."

"I understand Marilou got a new account that you wanted?" Manziuk's voice was still conversational.

"So what if she did?"

Ryan spun away from the wall where she had apparently been reading Jake's college diploma. "So you might not have been very happy about it."

"Maybe I wasn't happy. I may have even mentioned it to a few people. So what?" He stood up. "I've answered all the questions I'm going to. Either get out of my office or charge me so I can get my lawyer busy filing a wrongful arrest suit."

Manziuk's eyebrows went up, but he stood and smiled and said, "Thanks for your cooperation."

Ryan threw Jake a dirty look before following Manziuk from the room.

The second suspect was Steven Carruchi. Steven was the man Marilou had deep-sixed in favor of accounting.

In Ryan's words, Steve was a gorgeous hunk of a man. Over six foot two, with black hair, blue eyes, and a number of well-placed muscles, he could have entered a Pierce Brosnan look-a-like contest and won.

Steve was home when they knocked on the door of his narrow, three-story house in the Beaches area. A ginger tabby and a greying German shepherd accompanied him to the door. "You again?" he sighed.

"Us again," Ryan echoed.

"Well, I suppose you want to come in, don't you?" As they stepped forward, he moved back, the dog and cat staying at his side.

They paraded through the narrow hallway to his kitchen, where it was obvious he had been doing some plumbing. Tools and pipes were scattered around the floor near the sink.

"Still blocked up?" Manziuk asked sympathetically. He'd been in a similar situation more than once.

Steve nodded. "I'll have to call a ruddy plumber. No trouble getting it apart, but I can't seem to get it back together."

Ryan placed her hand in front of her mouth as laughter threatened.

"I assume you didn't come to talk about plumbing," Steve said as he moved to a square wooden table and sat on one of the four chairs.

This time, Ryan sat across from him while Manziuk wandered about.

"What's he doing?" Steve asked, his eyes following Manziuk.

Ryan shrugged.

"So what do you want?"

"We're still investigating the attempted murder of Marilou Cannelli."

"And what? I'm a suspect?" His voice was incredulous.

Ryan pulled a piece of paper out of her purse. "We found something interesting. Apparently you were pulled in at age sixteen for threatening someone with a knife."

Steve's jaw dropped. "How on earth did you get hold of that?"

"Hard work," she said. "And the help of one of your old teachers."

"And just because of that, you think—"

Manziuk had quietly walked up behind Steve. "Because of that, we wonder," he said.

"But that's ridiculous!"

Ryan leaned toward him, folding her hands on the smooth table top. "Why is it ridiculous?"

Steve slammed his palm on the table. "Because—because—it's ridiculous!" he sputtered.

"You'll have to convince us." Manziuk was in the far corner of the kitchen again, looking at a picture on the wall.

“Okay. Okay, I can do that. Just give me a minute.”

The minute stretched out, becoming two.

“Can’t think of anything?” Ryan asked.

“Okay. Let me explain. That old charge. It’s true. I did have a knife. A kitchen knife. Some other guys—a gang, really—had been hassling me and I was fed up. I told a friend I wanted to stop them. He said to take a knife to school and show them. So I did. I was scared stiff I was going to cut myself on it. And then the stupid thing fell on the floor during first period. My teacher saw it, and I got in trouble. When I told the principal why I had it, he called the cops. My parents had a fit. The school had a fit. But the guys who had been bothering me—”

“Yes?”

“They quit. So it worked. But as for me throwing a knife at Marilou—no way! I wouldn’t have a clue how to throw it. And anyway, I didn’t want to throw it.”

“We understand you were very angry when Marilou decided not to marry you.”

He wiped his brow with a handkerchief. “Sure, I was angry. But that was a year ago. I’m not angry now. And I never got angry enough to try to kill her. I was disappointed, hurt—” he looked away “—but I’ve never stopped loving her. No way would I try to hurt her.”

“Not even if she were planning to marry someone else?”

“Who? Did that—?” He shook his head. “No. Don’t tell me. I just hope it’s someone who will make her happy.”

They spent a few more minutes with him, but he stuck to his story. He would never harm the woman he had once asked to marry him. If she changed her mind, great. If not, he simply wanted her to be happy.

“A bit overly altruistic, don’t you think?” Ryan said as they got into the car.

Manziuk looked at her. “A bit what?”

“You know. Self-sacrificing.”

“Martyr complex. Still, there are people like that.”

Suspect number three was Pamela Krischenko. She was twenty-seven years old, a petite woman with well-tanned skin, a tattoo of a butterfly on her left shoulder, and long blonde hair. She lived in an apartment three doors from Marilou’s. For four years, between the ages of 18 and 22, Pamela had been the assistant to a man who had a knife-throwing act in Las Vegas. The coincidence of her proximity both to Marilou and to an expert knife-thrower made her a perfect suspect, though her motivation was a question mark.

She was at work when they found her, in a bar on Danforth four blocks from where Marilou had been knifed. Her working costume was a spandex, lace, and sequin number that would have worked well in a chorus line in some off-Broadway production, or more likely a knife-throwing act in Las Vegas, but looked rather too large for life in the small bar on Danforth.

“What’ll it be?” she asked. Then she did a double-take. “Hey, I know you from some place, don’t I?”

“We interviewed you a week ago,” Ryan said. “About a stabbing. Your neighbour, Ma—”

“The Cannelli dame. Right.” Pamela pushed a large wad of gum to one side of her mouth so she could talk more easily. “And youse two are cops.” She looked quickly toward the bartender before adding. “I’m working now, see. If you wanna talk to me, you’re gonna hafta order something.”

Manziuk ordered a Coke with lime, Ryan a virgin Pina Colada. Pamela hung around the table.

“We need to ask you a few questions,” Manziuk said. “How well can you throw a knife?”

“Ya found out about Marty, didn’t ya?” She snapped the gum, then broke out in a smile.

“I assume he taught you to throw a knife.”

“Marty was good. Real good. Until he took to drinking too much. Made a girl nervous, ya know? Hard enough to stand still with somebody throwing knives all around you without having to worry if he could see you. When he nicked me—here, see, on the ear—?” Pulling her hair back, she leaned toward them and sure enough, you could see a small notch in her edge of her left ear. “That was it! I took off. I liked the glamour of Vegas, you know. But I wasn’t gonna take a chance of getting killed just so I could be there.”

“Not to mention the absence of a green card,” Ryan said dryly.

Pamela stuck out her tongue. “Yeah, well. That’s right. The cops said I had to come back to Canada. So I did. And now I’m stuck in this dump.” She stole a quick glance toward the bar as if to satisfy herself that the bartender hadn’t heard her comment.

Manziuk doggedly continued, “So you admit to knowing how to throw a knife?”

She shrugged. “Sure, I know how. So what?”

“Why throw one at Marilou?”

“You think I threw a knife at her? Not on your life. Why would I do that?”

“You were neighbours. Perhaps...”

She stood up like a soldier at attention. “Perhaps nothing. I never threw no knife at anybody. Marty taught me how, but I only ever threw at a dummy. I’m not crazy. This place is bad enough.” Another quick peek over her shoulder. “Think I want to go to jail? Not on your life. Soon as I save up enough money, I’m going to Vegas for a holiday and maybe—well, we’ll see how it goes after that. And no, I ain’t going down there to work, so you don’t have to get into a flap. Just a little holiday. And maybe to see if Marty’s really dried out like he claims.”

She walked away.

The fourth and final suspect was Marilou’s current boyfriend, Georgio Concord. Six feet of skin and bone, with sunken eyes and a Byronesque forehead, he opened the door of his loft apartment only after they had buzzed three times and knocked twice. They knew he was inside because his music—which seemed to be made from only percussion instruments--was very loud.

“Yeah?” he said.

“We’d like to talk to you some more.”

“I’m busy right now. Maybe later.”

Manziuk said, “Now.

Georgio rubbed the back of his hand against his forehead, pushing the skin around and rearranging the lock of hair that hung down over his eyes.

“I’m working.”

“We can talk while you work.”

“Not hardly.”

“Aw, come, on Georgio,” Ryan urged, her voice plaintive. “You don’t want us to have to get a warrant or anything nasty like that, do you?”

He stamped his foot like an angry child, then moved back to let them enter. The loft was large and open, except for a small area to the right that held what presumably was a bedroom and bath. To the left were kitchen counters and appliances, a small round metal table and two love seats. The rest of the spacious room was taken up by the signs and implements of Georgio’s work, which was woodcarving.

Wooden three-dimensional human figurines as well as scenes covered the 12 foot high walls. Figurines and statues of many sizes covered several large tables and the floor. In the center of the room, bathed by well-placed track lighting, was the work in progress, a giant Amazon with a sword gripped in one hand and a baby in the other.

On a wooden table were some of the implements of his trade, including several sets of knives, some very similar to the one that had pierced Marilou.

“Nice knives,” Ryan said.

“Don’t touch them!” Georgio moved quickly toward her.

“Okay, okay.” She moved away.

The music was even louder inside.

“Can you turn it down!” shouted Manziuk. That done, he said, “You use knives all the time. Marilou was struck by a thrown knife. And not just any knife. A woodcarving knife. You say at the time it happened you were here working. No one saw you. Can you give me a good reason for not arresting you right now?”

Georgio looked at Manziuk, his mouth working, eyes bulging. “You can’t carve in jail,” he said finally.

“What?”

He repeated the words slowly and clearly, then added. “I would never do anything to jeopardize my work.”

“That’s it?” Manziuk said.

“Why would I want to hurt her? She understands my work better than anyone. I have no reason to harm her. No reason at all.”

“Who else would have a woodcarving knife?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know her friends or the people she works with. We met by accident one day when I fell and dropped the figure of Hera I was carrying. Marilou helped me up and bought me some coffee and . . . we became friends. She comes here to watch me carve and she doesn’t bother me. I have no reason to wish her harm.”

Manziuk and Ryan left within a few minutes. There was nothing more to be learned from Georgio. At least nothing he was going to reveal.

“So,” Manziuk said when they were back in the car, “which one? Or was Marilou right—was it just somebody throwing a knife at random?”

Marilou and her cat had moved into her parents’ home temporarily, and she was doing her job with the aid of a laptop computer and a connection to the Internet. The downside was her mother’s cooking, which Marilou claimed had already added five pounds and was threatening to throw her wardrobe into disarray.

When presented with the four suspects and the evidence against each, Marilou first looked shocked and then began to laugh.

“This is what we pay taxes for? So you can dig up stuff about innocent people? Look at me, for goodness’ sake. Maybe if I was rich enough or nasty enough or sexy enough, someone might want to kill me, but I’m just an ordinary working girl. I’m not worth killing!”

“It’s that Georgio,” her mother said wisely. “Carving wood 18 hours a day. Never leaving his studio. He’s loony.”

“Mother!”

“And you, wanting to have a career instead of getting married to a good man and giving me grandchildren! Serves you right! If you’d been home with your children, you never would have been hurt.”

“Mother, the police people don’t want to hear all this.”

In complete agreement, Manziuk and Ryan left a few minutes later.

“Who stood to benefit from Marilou’s death?” Ryan asked once they were in the car.

“No one. Unless possibly Jake. Maybe he’ll be given some of her accounts, or he’ll get the next promotion.”

“Too vague.” Ryan thought for a moment and then sat up straighter.

“Wait a minute. I just had a weird thought. What if the intention wasn’t to kill Marilou but merely to frighten her? True, if she hadn’t raised her arm, the knife likely would have killed her. But what if it wasn’t supposed to? What if the assailant was better than he or she thought? What if the plan was only to frighten her? Or get her to break off with Georgio? Then who would benefit?”

“Steven, if he thought she would go back to him.

“And her mother, who wants grandchildren. She wants to get Marilou out of her job and into a relationship with a man. Almost any man, except Georgio.”

Manziuk narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “Of all the crazy ideas...”

“Think about it,” Ryan argued. “We’ve been looking for somebody who knows how to throw a knife, but what if it was an amateur? Somebody who just wanted to frighten her? Or maybe to make her think Georgio was crazy?”

“Her mother?” Manziuk shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“But if the knife was supposed to miss? Just scare her?”

“Even if you’re right, which I’m not saying you are, what proof do we have?”

“None. But we could pull her mother in, talk to her. Maybe she’ll confess if she thinks we’ve guessed.”

An hour later, Mrs. Cannelli sat and stared at them while they voiced their suspicions. “You’ve got to be kidding,” she said. “Or else you’re crazy. Get me a lawyer!”

“Mrs. Cannelli—” Ryan smiled “—why would you need a lawyer if you didn’t do it?” “Because you people don’t care who you arrest as long as you arrest somebody, that’s why!”

They got nothing more from Marilou's mother. And half an hour after they released her, Marilou phoned to let them know they were complete idiots to think her mother—her mother!—would harm a single hair on her head.

“Now what?” said Ryan. “Start arresting squeegee kids?”

Manziuk drummed his fingers on his desk. “Nope.”

“You have an idea?”

He stood up. “I do.”

Steve Carruchi was still home working on his kitchen sink.

“What are you doing?” he asked as Manziuk and Ryan pushed past him, followed by a man wearing green coveralls and carrying a tool kit.

“Looking for the other knives,” Manziuk said. “Nice try, by the way. You almost got away with it.”

Stephen's face blanched. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“It occurred to me that someone learning how to throw a knife would want several to practice with, plus some instructions. We had no luck in talking to the stores around here, but on the internet it was a different story. Didn't you realize they kept track of sales?”

“I never bought a knife.”

“No,” Ryan said, moving to look straight into his eyes. “But Mrs. Cannelli did.”

“Got one of them,” said the man in coveralls who had been digging around in the drain pipe with a plumber's snake. His gloved hand held up a knife. It was a perfect match for the murder weapon.

Stephen moved over to a chair and sank onto it, covering his face with his hands. “I never meant to hurt her.”

“Just make her think Georgio did it?” Ryan said. “Make her stop trusting him?”

He looked up. “Make her wake up! You've met him. He doesn't deserve her. Ruddy woodcarver. Worse than a poet! I would have taken care of her, seen that she never lacked for anything, cherished her. And what does she do? Fall for a woodcarver who knows nothing about the needs of a flesh and blood woman—he only wants women he's carved from wood!”

Manziuk sat in a chair opposite Steven's. “When did you put the spare knives down the kitchen pipe?”

He shut his eyes. “When you cops came to my house the first time. My sink had been plugged up for a couple of days and I had taken it apart to get it working. I needed a place to put the knives for a while so you wouldn't find them if you searched the house. So I tossed them down the pipe. Only I

couldn't reach them to pull them out and I couldn't get the pipes to fit back together properly.”

“And you couldn't call a plumber, because he would find the knives.”

He bowed his head. “I never meant to hurt her.”

“Whose idea was it?”

“Mrs. Cannelli's. But I agreed. I did it.”

“You sure did.” Ryan pulled out her handcuffs. “And I don't believe one word about your not wanting to hurt her. I think you found out you were pretty good with the knives. And you started thinking how Marilou had rejected you. You remembered how the knife gave you power when you were sixteen. And you got caught up in having power over her. You meant to kill her.”

“Not kill her. Just maybe hurt her a little. The way she hurt me.”

Marilou was at Georgio's loft when Manziuk informed her that her former boyfriend had been arrested and her mother was an accessory, even though she had never intended Marilou to be harmed.

Georgio was appalled. “If they had succeeded in framing me, what would it have meant to my work?”

“What a waste,” Marilou said. “They did it all for nothing, too.”

Manziuk and Ryan both looked at her.

She grinned. “We've been keeping it under wraps, but Jake and I got married last month. I pretended to fall for Georgio and Jake pretended to hate me so nobody would suspect what was really going on. We're setting up our own accounting firm, Cannelli and O'Connell. We're taking a lot of clients with us. Why let old man Seldon skim off the gravy from our hard work?”

Georgio continued to carve the baby, showing no concern over Marilou's deception.

Manziuk and Ryan prepared to leave.

Marilou held out her hand to stop them. “Hey, I just had a thought. You cops must have to keep track of your finances too, with all those under-the-table bribes and all. What do they call it? Graft? If you ever need a good accountant, look us up.”



**N. J. Lindquist is the award-winning author of two Manziuk and Ryan mysteries, *Shaded Light* and *Glitter of Diamonds*.**

[Read the first chapter of \*Shaded Light\*](#)

[Read the first chapter of \*Glitter of Diamonds\*](#)