

BOOK TOUR MADNESS by SJ Slagle

EXCERPT

Shit on a shingle!

It all happens at once, doesn't it?

The good news is that my book hit the New York Times Bestseller's list.

The bad news is that my agent expects me to go on a book tour to promote it and I don't want to go.

I just can't.

My name is Jaynie Floyd and I'm an author who lives and works in Reno, Nevada. I didn't start out in Reno, but through a series of life's miscalculations, I ended up here, minus the first husband I'd married too young and minus the desire to become a writer because I needed money to live.

I became a teacher instead. Hard to tell if that was really a miscalculation, because sometimes I liked teaching and sometimes I didn't.

Stay with me. I digress now and then, but I promise I'll come to the point. Let me tell you the story as it unfolded two weeks ago.

The reason I don't want to go on a book tour right now is because my husband of many years just died of cancer. Man, the emotions swirling through my head are too many to count. Laurence was such a good man. He'd been in the Navy and I gave him a military memorial. I remember the honor guard finished its twenty-one-gun salute causing my gut to clench like an iron vise with every shot.

No one ever tells you what life is like after your husband dies. Maybe people were afraid I'd ask for money. Nope. We made our own and planned for what might happen. Cancer can give you foresight when it comes to living and dying. Laurence was a good man; he didn't want me to suffer financially after he was gone.

I considered myself fortunate to have survived public school teaching to become a published author. I retired early from teaching when Laurence was first diagnosed with cancer, and began my writing career in earnest. Some of my early work wasn't particularly noteworthy, but I kept at it, and my latest book hit the bookstores a month ago. My agent, Ahmed, was already telling me about rumors he had heard in the trades. I might have more marketing to do for this book, maybe even a book tour. Reminding him that I was recently widowed didn't clue him in to whatever I might be feeling. He saw

dollar signs instead of sympathy cards. Maybe he was right. Maybe being out on the road was better than wallowing on my couch in front of the TV. Maybe.

Ah, a bestseller.

I was due a victory dance. Certain moments in your life are to be celebrated, and this was surely one.

I'd worked hard on *Thanksgiving Storm*, a murder mystery ranking right up there with Agatha Christie's work, if I say so myself. I felt Christie was the quintessential mystery writer and *Murder on the Orient Express* was one of her best. Maybe one day, my book would be thought of as highly as hers. Grandiose thoughts perhaps, but they were necessary to keep me going as an author, a mystery writer and, let's face it, a grieving widow.

Such words conjure a woman dressed in black with a long, black veil obscuring her face, a face awash with tears. I glanced down at what I was wearing: plaid sweats with a bright red sweater. With my blondish hair tied back in a messy ponytail, my grieving widow-look didn't cut it. Thinking of the clothes in my closet, I had only one black dress that didn't fit me anymore—those pesky pounds have a way—and not one veil. Zilch. My mental widow-look needed a makeover.

But the bestseller. I could handle that thought.

I read the text from Ahmed, my agent, again.

And once more for good measure.

Ahmed insisted on the book tour. All right, already. I could possibly do that, but not for a couple of weeks. That would give me time to get the trees trimmed off my roof and for my handyman to finish the shower in the rental house.

"How about the first week of June?" he asked in a confident tone. "I really don't mean to sound unsympathetic, Jaynie. I know you just lost your husband, but June is still a few weeks away. Could you be ready by then?"

I smiled at the clock in the kitchen. Ahmed had said he would call at ten and here it was twelve. He was a good agent and I liked him, most of the time, but punctuality wasn't one of his strong points. He wasn't big on sympathy either, but maybe that was what I needed—a carrot to move me forward. Or was it a stick?

"I'm fine, Ahmed. June will be a good time."

"Excellent!" His exuberance spilled into the phone line. "I'll make all the arrangements. All you have to do is show up, look happy and sign some books."

"You coming with me?"

“Nah. I can’t this time.”

“Why not?”

“I have a new client who needs more hand-holding than you do.”

“Gee thanks, Ahmed.” I wasn’t sure if I was flattered or insulted.

He laughed. “Don’t get pissy, Jaynie. You’ll do fine out on the road without me. I may be able show up for the last stop on the tour, but that’s it.”

“Where am I going?” Glancing back at the clock, I had to get a move on. The tree trimmers I hired were arriving any minute.

“I’ll email the itinerary.”

“Who’s on the tour with me?”

“I’ll have their names on the itinerary.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Maybe.”

“Ahmed.” I frowned at the phone. “Don’t be so cryptic. You’re not sending me out with that horrible romance writer again, are you?”

His chuckle wasn’t subdued. “You’re not going to get pissy again, are you? She’s a nice woman and does well on book tours.”

“I’m not suggesting her books are bad, well, they are, but that’s a different story. It’s her personality I object to.”

He sighed audibly. “Let’s not get into this argument again. You two did well together on the last tour. Sold lots of books and entertained the crowd winningly.”

I snorted. “I think her skimpy blouse and ample cleavage won the day. Some entertainment.”

“I’d have to agree with that. She is a looker.”

“But Ahmed, seriously. She’s trouble.”

“How so?”

“Not sure, but my gut is telling me to be careful around her. She likes to stir things up. If there’s another author on the tour, well, I just hope they get along. She had a fight with the last one, not to mention how many times I had to swallow a comment or two.”

“Jaynie, Jaynie.” His tone opted for soothing, but failed. “You’re reading too much into this. It’s a simple book tour. You’ll be fine.”

“Can I quote you on that?”

He laughed again. “Sure. Gotta go. Look for my text. Any questions, call me, all right?”

“Sure, but...” I should have held my breath. Speaking to a dial tone once again did nothing to soothe my anxiety. Marliss Kendall, the author I was concerned about, was serious trouble. With a capital T.

The book tour was relatively short: stops at bookstores in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Las Vegas. With travel logistics, the tour would take a complete week and I’d be back in Reno to begin preparations for the wedding cake I was supposed to make for my son’s wedding. Heaven only knew if I could pull that one off.

Ahmed deserved a pat on the back for landing such a great bookstore for our first stop. We were nestled in a nice little bed and breakfast hotel in North Beach, the northernmost point of the peninsula that is San Francisco. The bookstore was right next door, an old San Francisco icon called City Lights. It had been founded years ago by a few members of the Beat generation and carried books way more sophisticated than mine. “Beat” meant weary in the context of writers from this generation who wrote poetry and prose about their alienation from conventional society. I was thrilled that the store willing to host the first leg of our book tour was such a grand literary tradition. And with a mystery writer, a romance writer and a horror author, I was doubly thrilled that our books were for sale. Ahmed must have done some fast-talking to book this location and my confidence in him as an agent rose a notch.

I’d barely cleared the doorway of my room in the B & B when there was a knock at the door.

“Hi Jaynie! It’s great that we’re on tour again this year. Congrats on the New York bestseller list! That’s so fabulous.”

Marliss Kendall’s teeth shone whiter than last time. Her blouse was properly buttoned but the top one was tugging to be free. My tongue lightly poked the inside of my cheek.

“Hi Marliss. Thanks. Come on in. I’m just unpacking.”

“Oh, pooh.” She waved perfectly manicured fingers in my direction. Her bright red polish caught the sun from a nearby window and nearly blinded me.

“Come on downstairs. Hilda’s here. Let’s get a drink together and get acquainted.”

“Hilda who?”

“Hilda Richenboch. You know...” She waved her hand again. “She writes that ghastly horror stuff, but apparently it sells all right.” Marliss shrugged a shoulder, tempting that button to break loose. With her next movement, the button had all it could take and shot across the room like an arrow launched from a tight bow. If Marliss noticed, she gave no clue. The button bounced off a spittoon on the floor that I hoped was merely decorative.

“No, I’m not familiar with her work. Do you know her?” Reaching for my purse, I steered Marliss back toward the door.

She wrinkled her nose. “Sort of. We met at an authors’ conference last year and didn’t get along very well.”

I tried not to sigh. Business as usual.

“What happened?”

“She had just broken up with her boyfriend or husband or whatever.” Marliss cast her heavily lined eyes to the ceiling. “And she thought I had something to do with it.”

For Pete’s sake. Not a romantic triangle.

“Did you?”

Her laugh bounced off the hallway walls as we walked along, giving me the tip I needed. Of course. She had everything to do with it.

“Heavens, no! They were on the skids.” She shrugged carelessly. “I merely had a drink in the bar one night with him. Hilda saw us and accused us long and loud of having an affair. Honestly.” Marliss flipped her long hair off her shoulder. “If I were to steal anyone’s boyfriend, it wouldn’t be Hilda’s. She dates the most boring guys.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Marliss how she could possibly know that, but I wisely refrained. It might be a good time to keep my own counsel, as Laurence would say.

As we neared the stairway leading to the lobby, Marliss stopped and laid a hand on my arm.

“By the way, I’m so dreadfully sorry about your husband.”

“Thank you.”

“I never met him, but I bet he was a wonderful man.”

“You’re right, Marliss. He was a good man.”

Something caught her attention and she waved.

“Let’s hit it, Jaynie. Showtime!”

Squaring her shoulders and pointing her nose upward, Marliss Kendall descended the staircase stepping delicately as if touching the steps would burn through her five-inch heels. With eyes wide open and red lips parted, her demeanor was as elegant as Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*. What a ham. Look out, William Holden, or whatever male snagged her attention.

Hilda Richenboch.

I could waste a lot of words trying to describe her, but just imagine the actress Cloris Leachman as Frau Blucher in the movie *Young Frankenstein*. Got the picture? She resembled a middle-aged

Austrian bar wench with her colorful folk blouses and gaudy skirts. A tight bun sat atop her head with an enormous mole parked on the side of her chin. I had to force myself to look into her eyes when I was speaking to her. That scary mole spooked me.

When we strolled through the lobby, I noticed Hilda tracking our every move with a disgruntled look. The atmosphere didn't improve by the time we met her in the little bar tucked into a back corner of the hotel. Marliss had blown kisses to every man in the vicinity and I could smell the trouble brewing already, as from a well-used coffee pot.

As I stood between Marliss, shamelessly batting her lengthy false eyelashes in every direction, and the Frau Blucher look-alike with thick eyebrows that seemed to have a life of their own, I wondered, not for the first time, why couldn't Ahmed book me with two normal authors?

With a nonchalant attitude, Marliss dipped into the pool.

"Jaynie Floyd, this is Hilda Richenboch. I'm sure you're familiar with her work." Marliss was actually trying to be gracious. Perhaps she owed Hilda one for stealing her last boyfriend.

Hilda cast a dark look at Marliss before her eyes sent the same dark look my way. What had I done? We'd just met. Maybe it was guilt by association.

"Nice to meet, Ms. Floyd. I've read one of your mysteries." Her tone lightened ever so slightly. "It was...interesting."

"Thanks." I thought of adding 'I think' but didn't dare. I had a feeling the swamp around Hilda would be an easy one to sink into. "That's nice of you to say."

"Have you read any of mine?"

Now...you never, ever ask another author if they've read your books. They will bring up that information if they want to. It's not something to force out.

I swallowed. "I'm sorry, but I haven't had the pleasure."

Thick eyebrows shifted downward as her head tilted. I could feel her disapproval and could almost hear what she was thinking: 'I've read one of her books, why hasn't she read one of mine?' A tiny headache sprouted in one corner of my brain.

"Hilda," began Marliss. "Jaynie just lost her husband." It wasn't an explanation of why I hadn't read any of Hilda's books, but I suppose Marliss was going for distraction.

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Ms. Floyd. Please accept my condolences on your loss."

"Thank you, and please call me Jaynie."

"Would you and Marliss care to join me?"

“Certainly. That would be nice.” I sat next to Hilda with Marliss across the small table. We were sitting close to the bar and Hilda raised a hand to the bartender. I noticed a gold ring with a lovely green stone on one finger. I opened my mouth to compliment her when Marliss spoke up.

“Jaynie and I were on a tour last year about this time, weren’t we, Jaynie?” She looked brightly at me for confirmation.

“Yes.”

“Did you sell many books?” asked Hilda. That was another question you never asked an author. It was similar to asking a rancher how many head of cattle he owned.

Marliss laughed and batted her lashes again. “Now, Hilda. You know we never talk about book sales.”

“I do.”

“Well.” Marliss calmly smoothed the wrinkles on the sleeve of her silk blouse. “I don’t.”

Before the tense mood could turn the corner to Crazy Town, I straightened in my chair and waved again at that bartender. Could he be any slower?

A few minutes later, with Hilda and Marliss obviously squaring off, a burly man looking like a character out of a Robert Parker murder mystery sauntered over to our table. Tall, stocky with a tight mustache, dark clothes and darker expression, the man could have been what I envisioned Parker’s cop, Jesse Stone, to look like.

“What’ll you have, ladies?” He cast an appreciative eye at Marliss before turning to Hilda and me. “We’re a bit busy tonight.”

I glanced around the bar. There were six people, including the three of us. His definition of “busy” was different than mine. But who knew? Maybe this was considered rush hour at the bed and breakfast.

“I’ll have coffee,” said Hilda.

“A glass of chardonnay would be fine,” I told him.

“What winery?”

“Do you carry any Napa or Sonoma wines?”

“Sure.”

I thought a moment. “Anything from the Russian River area?”

“I have a nice La Crema.”

“Great. I’ll take that.”

Hilda, on my right, had shoulders scrunched around her neck. Her lethargic attitude made me think of a turtle about to be run over by a speeding truck. This was going to be one long glass of wine.

The man's eyes sparkled with interest when Marliss piped up. "I'll have an Old Fashioned, if I may."

"Certainly. We carry Maker's Mark bourbon. Is that all right?"

Marliss beamed at the man. Her focused attention was not lost on him and his eyes slipped to the next button on her low-cut blouse trying to break free to bring the girls out on display.

"Coming right up."

Before he left, I could have sworn there was a hint of a smile under his thick mustache that Marliss responded to. Hilda practically harrumphed at the exchange between the two.

"I hope we'll be able to have a good event...this time," she began.

"This time?" I asked, then could have bitten off my words. Hilda's eyes flashed with the oncoming storm.

"Yes, well, there were difficulties with the last tour." Hilda stared straight at Marliss who was flicking her flirty glances at the men at the next table. "Weren't there, Marliss?"

But Marliss wasn't paying attention. Her gaze finally landed on Hilda with a distant, "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

Luckily, the bartender brought our drinks in record time, and began setting them on our table. The break gave Hilda a moment to cool down and Marliss more time to flirt with the man.

After taking a quick sip, Marliss drawled, "My goodness," like a true southern belle. "You make the best drinks." She batted those thick lashes at him. "What's your name, honey?"

"Jesse, ma'am." Did I guess that one right or what? Jesse Stone straight out of Robert Parker's novels.

"That's just the nicest name. Thank you so much, and we'll have another round."

He puffed up like a penguin at her ridiculous compliment and left. Hilda puffed too, but not the good kind. I thought I saw steam coming out her ears.

"How do you know we'd like another round, Marliss? How dare you insist that I..."

"Spare us the righteous indignation, Hilda." Marliss coolly sipped her drink. "You're only having coffee. I don't think two cups will kill you, and besides..."

I was willing to wait for her to finish, but Hilda wasn't.

"Besides what?"

"We weren't done with our conversation."

Had we begun one?

Marliss' eyes locked on Hilda's. "I sold five hundred books at our last event together, Hilda. How many did you sell?"

Hilda squirmed in her chair as uncomfortably as I would in her shoes, but she'd brought the subject up.

"Because, honey." Marliss leaned over me to rest a hand on the sleeve of Hilda's folk blouse. "I know you didn't sell many of those horrible gothic things you try to pass off as novels. Your writing stinks and you know it."

My mouth dropped open at Marliss' spiteful words and at Hilda's appropriate gasp. She pulled her arm away from Marliss' touch as if a scorpion had bitten her. In a way, one had.