

# ADVANCE PRAISE FOR THE BAD BREAK

“A ray of sunshine cloaked in a mystery. Orr is one to watch—the best humorous mystery writer around, with a voice all her own.”

— Laura McHugh, internationally bestselling author of *The Weight of Blood* and *Arrowood*

“Here comes Riley Ellison, the journalist-slash-hero we need right now. She solves murders! She writes obits! She gets life coaching from an app and somehow makes it work! I loved this fresh page-turner—it’s fun, funny, and moves like lightning. Jill Orr has created a complex plot and complex contemporary characters that make murder quite delightful. Can’t wait for the next in the series.”

— Lian Dolan, *Satellite Sister* and author of the bestselling novels *Helen of Pasadena* and *Elizabeth the First Wife*

“Deft at imbuing her pop-off-the-page characters with both humor and heart, Jill Orr also spins a gem of a twisty mystery that will leave readers breathless as they chase a huge (and dangerous) headline with Tuttle Corner’s sassy, scrappy new star reporter, Riley Ellison. Utterly delightful—don’t miss this one, y’all!”

— LynDee Walker, Agatha Award-nominated author of *Lethal Lifestyles* and *Front Page Fatality*

## Praise for *The Good Byline*

“Jill Orr has put pure joy on the page.”

— *BOLO Books*

“Fresh and funny, romantic and sunny, Jill Orr’s book checked three genre boxes for me: a smart cozy series, a Southern small town setting, and, my favorite, a newspaper mystery . . . I loved the hilarious emails the author interjects into the narrative from Riley’s Personal Romance Concierge.”

— **Carole Barrowman**, *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

“Riley ‘Bless Her Heart’ Ellison is a breath of fresh air—a funny, empathic, millennial heroine. She kept me turning the pages well into the night.”

— **Susan M. Boyer**, *USA TODAY*-bestselling author  
of the Liz Talbot mystery series

“A fun romp... Recommended to admirers of Janet Evanovich’s Stephanie Plum capers.”

— *Library Journal*

“Who knew obituaries could be this much fun?”

— **Gretchen Archer**, *USA TODAY*-bestselling author  
of the Davis Way Crime Caper series

“In this irresistible page-turner, Jill Orr delivers a funny, smartly written mystery featuring a charming heroine.”

— **Ellen Byron**, author of *Body on the Bayou*  
and *Plantation Shudders*

“The methodical local reporter, Will Holman, is a standout—here’s hoping he will appear in more of Riley’s adventures.”

— **Naomi Hirahara**, *Edgar Award*-winning author  
of the Mas Arai and Ellie Rush mystery series

*For my Ellie, my Fletcher, and my Jimmy.  
You guys are all the reasons and all the rewards.*



# CHAPTER 1

So how long will you be gone?" I asked Holman, trying to keep the panic from my voice.

"Depends. Could be a few days or a few weeks."

"Uh-huh. Yeah. Okay. I gotcha." For reasons I didn't understand, I kept spitting out affirmatives. I could feel my head nodding up and down like a bobblehead on the dashboard of a monster truck. "I see. All right. Mm-hmm."

Holman arched an eyebrow. "Riley, are you okay?"

He had clearly not anticipated the effect the news that he'd be taking leave to go undercover would have on me. I was a little surprised myself, but the idea of working at the *Tuttle Times* without Holman had me feeling panicky, like all the air had been sucked out of the room. Or like I couldn't find my cell phone. I guess I'd come to depend on him more than I realized during the past month.

"A few weeks? Really?"

He shrugged. "The first trip is scheduled for seven days. But if I don't see anything, I may have to do another."

For the past few months, Holman had been working an investigative piece on the TransVirginia Shipping Company. A former employee had tipped him off that the company had been ordering its workers to illegally dump barrels of toxic waste in the ocean to avoid the high cost of proper disposal. Holman had found several former employ-

ees who corroborated the story, but all refused to go on the record. As the son of a maritime engineer in the Royal Canadian Navy, Holman knew his way around a ship. So he'd been trying to get a job as a handler on one of the ships, which had proven more difficult than he anticipated. But after several weeks, he'd finally been hired. It was a great break for him. For me, not so much.

"You'll be fine," he said. "You're ready."

"But what if I'm not?" I let my insecurities bubble up to the surface. "I have yet to write a single story without going over it with you first."

"You bring your work to me because it makes you feel better. Not because you need to."

"But who will edit me now?"

"Kay, of course," he said. Kay Jackson was the editor-in-chief of the *Times*, and although she was technically my boss, I think I'd spoken a total of seven words to her since I started working there. She was nice but scary. And therefore my tenure at the *Times* so far had been spent comfortably in Holman's shadow. I liked it there. He had become my personal safety net, my insurance against failure.

"Fine," I huffed. "Leave me all alone with the jackals."

"Spencer and Henderson aren't jackals—"

"Well, they don't exactly like having me around."

"—if anything, a more apt comparison would be vultures, as they're waiting for you to die, metaphorically speaking, of course, so they can pick off your stories," he completed his thought.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Holman blinked, surprised. "I wouldn't think so."

The guys in the newsroom had not been thrilled when Holman convinced Kay to hire me. The *Times* was a small

weekly newspaper, and everyone who worked there had worked there forever and had their own turf. Holman was the paper's crown jewel, having received the Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism some years ago, and I was hired mostly to assist him. But at a small paper, everyone pitches in, and over the past few weeks I'd been assigned stories from multiple departments. This wasn't always appreciated.

"They think I'm an *intern*," I said, sulkily. "Spencer called me Lewinsky yesterday."

"Who cares what they think. You're not an intern. You're a paid employee, same as me."

"Are you sure you won't be available at all, even by phone? Text? Email?" My desperation ticked up as he packed up his files and loaded them into his briefcase.

"Listen," Holman said. "You are going to be fine. And who knows, maybe Flick will even let you help with obits while I'm gone."

I knew he was just trying to make me feel better. Hal Flick hadn't let me do anything for the obituary department except research on the "pre-dead." Even though Kay told him to train me, Flick had stubbornly refused to let me write a single obituary since I'd been at the *Times*. This was partially because he was an old curmudgeon who didn't like change, and partially because he and I shared a long and complicated history. Either way, it sucked.

People in small towns read the newspaper for two main reasons: high school football and obituaries. Flick had been lobbying Kay for years to let him expand the obit section to include more than just death notices sent in by families or funeral homes. He wanted to run editorial obits, like the kind in *The New York Times*, true news stories about people whose lives have influenced our community. Kay

finally agreed to give him the space for one news obit per issue, and the response had been amazing. People in Tuttle were loving the longer obits. Personally, I felt vindicated that I was no longer the only person in town who realized the simple beauty of the form. Plus, I was thrilled that I was going to get to learn the craft of obituary writing like my granddaddy had done. But so far Flick had kept the juicy assignments all to himself, leaving me the scraps, spell-checking death notices or doing research for our advances, which basically involves calling healthy people and asking them to verify information to be used . . . “later.” Needless to say, people don’t always appreciate these calls.

“What am I supposed to do if I need you?” I whined.

“You won’t. This will be good for you—a natural way to bring your training to an end. I have provided you with the knowledge, insight, and experience gained during the course of my career to help launch yours. As the sculptor molds the clay, I have been able to shape you—”

“*Holman!*”

“What?” He looked surprised. “I didn’t mean that in a sexual way, if that’s what you were thinking—”

I held up a hand to stop him. I simply could not have this conversation again. “That was not what I was thinking. That is *never* what I am thinking. It’s just . . . what if I’m not ready?”

“You’re going to be fine,” he said again with a confidence I envied. “But there is something I’m going to need you to do for me while I’m gone.”

“Name it.” I got out my notepad to write down the assignment. Was it research for another investigation? Following up with a source? Looking for the proverbial smoking gun?

“I’m going to need you to feed Aunt Beast.”

“What? You need me to feed your aunt? Is she ill?”

“No, she’s not ill,” Holman said, looking at me like I was crazy. “She doesn’t have any arms.”

This was the first I was hearing about a relative of Holman’s with no arms. But before I asked any more questions I paused, waiting for the rest. With Holman I’d learned that sometimes when you thought you were talking about one thing, you were actually talking about something else entirely.

“She gets one pinch in the morning and one in the evening. And if I’m gone for more than two weeks, you’ll need to change her.”

Before I could object to feeding, pinching, and changing anyone, he pulled out a large cylinder of Bettamin Tropical Fish Food and set it on the desk in front of me.

And there it was: a fish.

Holman pointed to the electric-blue betta fish swimming in a clear glass bowl atop his credenza. I realized that although I’d seen the fish nearly every day, I’d never asked if it had a name.

“You named your fish Aunt Beast?”

“Yes.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Aunt Beast. You know, from *A Wrinkle in Time*?”

It sounded familiar, but I was going to need a little more to go on.

“Aunt Beast is the beloved monster who helps Meg heal and teaches her not to judge people by their appearances.”

I looked at Holman and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. It was one of the sweetest and saddest things I’d ever heard. Before I could stop myself, I threw my arms around his neck and squeezed him as tight as I could. “Do you really have to go?”

Holman, for his part, stood quite still except for his long, spindly arms that he stiffly wrapped around me and crossed at the wrists, being very careful not to touch any part of my torso. He'd tried to hug me once before and I remember thinking the experience was akin to being embraced by a stick bug. This second attempt was not much better, but I appreciated the effort.

"Who will protect the coastal waters of mid-Eastern Virginia if not me, Riley?"

I released him and tried not to be offended by how relieved he looked. "Fine. Go save the environment. Leave me here all alone."

Holman picked up his briefcase and turned off the light. "You won't be alone. You'll have Aunt Beast."



After Holman left for places unknown, or at least unknown to me, I skulked back to my cubicle and was about to text my boyfriend Jay to tell him I was thinking about his cute face when my phone rang.

"Riley, thank God! It's me."

"Me" was Tabitha, my former library co-worker and current bridezilla. I'd been covering some shifts for her at the library as she prepared to marry her blue-chip doctor fiancé, Thad. She'd complained bitterly when I handed in my resignation. "*How am I supposed to plan my wedding and do all of your work for you?*" I agreed to help out here and there mostly because I loved our boss, Dr. Harbinger—and he loved Tabitha and me. We were both like daughters to him, which I suppose made us like siblings, rivalry and all.

"Can you come meet me? Like *now?*" she snipped.

Tabitha was an unrelenting taskmaster and no matter how hard I tried, I never seemed to be able to do anything

to her satisfaction. I wondered what cardinal sin of information management I had committed this time.

“I’m at work. Can I do it later?”

“That depends,” she said. “How long after finding a dead body can you wait before calling the police?”