

## Chapter 16: Letters from Home

This book started because one of my co-authors worked with me to write a response letter to Vanessa's book. For this book, my first coauthor worked with Lisa and Betty, and my second coauthor worked with Christi to write me these response letters. Getting a copy of the letter Mrs. Bennet wrote to Lisa was an unexpected surprise. But I feel I must warn you, these are very emotional, they made me cry when I first read them. You can credit/blame my coauthors for bringing out the emotions, none of us could have done it without them.

Dearest Lisa,

I know it's been a while, but this is important. The girl who brought you this letter is Ericka Brown. She has come to be a child I have claimed as my own, and you know better than anyone what that means.

Ericka is not a saint, she has gotten herself into some petty trouble in her life, but what happened here was just wrong. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time and took the fall for the death of those two people. I called in a number of chips to get her Baptized and Confirmed over the summer, to make her a full-fledged member of the Church, as well as to have the forgiveness ceremony done and to get her sent to you.

Do you remember when I first found you living under the bridge? Her situation was just as bad as yours was back then. I know you remember what I did to make things right for

you. I have done the same for her, but it wasn't enough.

We don't save kids hoping for anything in return, and I have never asked you for anything, but now I need you to do for her what I did for you. She is your adopted sister, and as special to me as you are. She is a good kid, just like you were. Do what you need to do, but please help her, please take care of your sister for me.

Love

Jackie Bennet

P.S. The bible I gave her is one of the seven you and I made the summer we learned printing and bookbinding. She really is that special.

Dear Ericka,

When you asked me to keep your secret, I really had no idea what I was agreeing to, but I promise you, I will take your secrets to my grave.

I will say, you guys did an excellent job of hiding the church in both books, while still telling the story. I am very impressed. Jackie would be equally impressed.

Getting that letter from Jackie the day I met you was the shock of my life. Jackie never asked anything like that of me before or after that. I have included a photocopy of the letter you delivered to me. I know you will need to change a few things in that letter (and this letter) to hide the church, but I think you should include these letters in your book.

Jackie and I had a falling out about 5 years before you went to the Island. It was stupid, I was stupid for what I did, but I was too prideful to admit it and reconcile with her. You gave me another chance with her, and to be honest, I really needed that.

We have never talked about this, and I know Jackie hid this from you, but I think it is important that you know what Jackie did for you. As you know, Jackie stepped down from being a Bishop when her husband got sick. The trade she made for pencil-whipping you through to full-fledged status was that she agreed to become a Bishop

again, a toxic job she had sworn never to do again. She took the job to protect you and she stayed in the job to protect you. You were that important to her.

It warms my heart that you remember our time so fondly. I always did the best I could for you, but I often wondered if I really did right by you those years. I knew when the plane got based back in the States, it would be rough on you, but until I read your book, I didn't know the extent of what Sister Paula put you through. I found out a few months after the fact that you got in trouble and that with me off the Island, Jackie called Mr. S for an update on you.

It was only then that he and she found out what was going on and she pressed Mr. S to intervene. I didn't really find out about it until my job had me back on the Island more and even then, I didn't know the details of it until I read your book. I would have done something about it if I had known. We may have been from a different branch of the church than they were, but you were a member of the church, you should have been treated better than that. All of you should have been treated better than that.

I know I was tough on you, but you also needed that to survive on the Island. Before my eyes, you went from an angry kid to an amazing young woman. It was only then that I understood

what Jackie had seen in me twelve years earlier. That first time I spanked you for those lost points was a turning point in my life. Spanking girls was part of my job, but that was the first time I understood why Jackie sometimes cried after she spanked me.

After you went back to your bunk, for the first time in my life, I cried over giving a spanking. You needed to learn, it needed to be me, but I so wished it wasn't a lesson you had to learn. The same is true of the situation with the orgy, the situation with Nikki and so many others. These were lessons you only needed to learn because of where we were, lessons I really wish I could have spared you from.

Mr. S taught me as much as he did you. His view on how to treat the girls was a huge change and one that really resonated with me. The one thing I wish you conveyed better was just how drastic the changes he made to the Island were.

While letting the girls hug each other or letting the Sisters hug the girls may seem like a small thing, the change was enormous. He made girls less our enemy and more our kids. It stopped being "us vs them" and it became "US". The expectation he set to view the girls in a positive light, to care about the girls and not just to do the job of "caring for the bad girls" was incredible.

He made us understand that the girls were now part of us, that we were one family, that our girls were now a reflection of us and of the church, and not what brought them to the Island. That he did all of that while facing so many of his own demons is just remarkable.

You leading the Guardians as you did was something I took a lot of pride in. It was worth every fight I had with staff over it, especially seeing the changes you guys made for so many girls, changes that made Jackie as proud of you as I was. You learned to make yourself indispensable to the operation of the Island, you learned to play the game in a way few people ever do and that no other girl in the program ever did before or after you.

You have no idea the fights Sam and I had with Ms. Rawlings. When she ever introduced her “fundraising” plan, it was just so wrong. I couldn’t believe she had gotten it approved. The great resignation sent shockwaves through the church. They really scrambled to get people to go after that, even having to pay almost half the staff.

After you left and what happened to all those girls, Jackie is the one that led the charge to shut the place down. Looking back, it should have been shut down, the only really good years it had was while Mr. S was the one running it. With him it

was about the girls, whereas for everyone else it was only ever about the money or the certificate.

*-Lisa*



Hey Erika!

I can't believe how well you and Vanessa wrote about us! It's us, it's what we did, but at the same time, it is not us. I never knew you could write like that. We went through so much—sometimes I still can't believe it.

I was the first girl to ever be both the Head Girl of my pod and the President of the Peer Council at the same time. That was a terrifying amount of power, the most that any girl ever had on the Island before the Guardians. Giving that up, taking that leap of faith to become a Guardian was one of the scariest things I ever did on the Island. Mr. S said it would be worth it, and I thought he might've been crazy, but he was right.

Do you remember that meeting at Mr. S's dining room table? We were in the headmaster's house, in the dining room, with no idea why. None of us knew what was going on. Then Sister Lisa and Mr. S told us about the plan for the Guardians-- it felt so surreal. It took me a while to realize that he was talking about us forming this group.

I wish you had more time to talk about our bunk life as Guardians. I get why you didn't,

there just wasn't time and it didn't seem to fit in many places, but at the same time, it was important. Do you remember the water fights we got into? You ran a tight ship as our leader, but we still managed to get away with a few things, didn't we?

While you and Vanessa both mentioned Sister Kara, and I know it is impossible to include everything in a book, I feel like Sister Kara should have been talked about more. You had Sister Lisa as your safe adult, and Vanessa had Mr. S, and although they were both there for us, too, most of us leaned on Sister Kara as our safe adult.

Sister Kara was the one most of us Guardians went to for advice, a shoulder to cry on or when we needed a good swift kick in the pants. She spent more time in Bunk 1 than any other Sister (she was one of the few sisters allowed in to Bunk 1). I still talk to her, her family owns the building my Café is in. I sometimes see her in my café. She still believes in all of what they did.

I wish you had talked more about what friendship was like on the Island. It was so hard to make, keep, and be friends with each other. The

program was designed to pit us against each other and get us to give up and give in.

Having us form friendships was counterproductive to that goal. They did so much to tear us apart and make us unable to trust each other, just in case we started to care more about each other than the program. You never could really trust any girl. I would even go as far as to say that before the Guardians, we didn't really have friends, only temporary allies. It was awful.

But the Guardians changed all that. Becoming a Guardian really was a saving grace there, because they wanted the opposite of us. They wanted us to be a team and work together. You were my best friend, maybe the first real best friend I ever had. We all became so close once we couldn't be made to turn on each other. I don't think I ever had that level of friendship before or after, but I had it then, and that means a lot.

In the beginning I was more than a little suspicious of it—I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, to be asked to spy or tattle, to be bribed to sell one of the rest of us out, or to be punished for not reporting. But it never came, and we never had to do it. I learned to trust it eventually, but I was always still a little wary about it. The

Guardians were the antithesis of what girls on the Island were supposed to be, y'know? I'm really grateful I got to be a part of it all.

Also, you should tell them some more about our epic reunion party! I loved it, and so did everyone else. It was crazy how we could still all remember the commands and routines so perfectly, wasn't it? I didn't even know I remembered them all, and yet my body took over, just like all of ours did. It was nostalgic, sure, but it also felt a little weird. I thought I had put all that behind me, but I guess not.

At any rate, I love the books. You guys did amazing. Also, it's so funny that Christi is my fake name because that's my sister's name! How crazy is that?

Love,

~~Christi~~

Hi Ericka,

V asked me to share my thoughts on your book. It blows me away, both books do. You both wrote such amazing things about us, you told our best stories, and you told them so well, maybe better than we deserve, given why we all went. I don't think I could have written something like this, I would be too scared of what the church might do if they ever found out it was me.

It's Christmas, and instead of responding to the book like the letters in V's book do, I want to share what I remember most about Christmas on the Island.

Do you remember my first Christmas as a Guardian? Mr. S gave us each a card with the name of a girl who wasn't succeeding in the program. If you remember, our job was to quietly help get them back on track. The rules of the game were that we weren't even allowed to tell the other Guardians who

our girl was or how we were helping them. Then, as if we were Santa's elves, we each performed our own Christmas miracles.

I think most of you got the job done in short order, but it took me all Spring. My girl was Becky from Bunk 13. She was that high-spirited fourteen-year-old girl who never quite fit in. She was the one that didn't really rebel, but she just didn't get it either. If you remember, because she didn't get it, Becky was in the main office for punishments all the time, like, way more than any other girl I can think of. How she didn't end up in Bunk 22 is beyond me. But she was my girl, as tall an order as it was.

When I saw Becky enter the office, I went in and signed her out. I explained to her that while I couldn't stop her punishment, maybe I could find another way to help. We went for a walk and talked about what got her sent to the office. What stuck with me was how she described trying and how

she described the bow drill just kept coming out of her hands. Becky was completely lost in what she was supposed to be doing and how the drill worked.

So, I took her to an area where boulders were being done, grabbed a bow drill and had Becky show me what she was doing. It was all wrong. You know how girls would usually just watch and copy what the other girls are doing and then get the technique with a little practice? Not Becky, she didn't learn like everyone else did, she just wasn't capable of just watching and then doing a rote task without actually understanding it.

So, I spent 3 hours teaching her what she had to do for each part of the task, helping her get the motions just right, even letting her try things her own way to see why they didn't work and why we did them the way we did. By the end, she was making holes almost as fast as I did.

At the end of our walk, I returned Becky to the office. I could delay her appointment with Brother Sam, but I couldn't get her out of it. When we got to the office, I was about to send her to stand nose-tits-n-toes with the other girls waiting for Brother Sam when Mr. S asked me if the issue was settled. I told him that she hadn't seen Brother Sam yet, but that I think we fixed what got her sent to the office. Mr. S said that since Brother Sam was having a tough day, and since I addressed the underlying issue, that I should just return Becky to her bunk. I told Becky that this was her lucky day and returned her to bunk.

I checked on her the next day, and for the first time, she was now making quota. I was so proud when I reported that to Mr. S! Becky didn't get sent back to the office for the rest of that week, or all of the next week,

But then her bunks chore changed to firewood, and she was back in the office. I got summoned to the office



and when I found her standing in line for an appointment with Brother Sam, I signed her out and took her out for another of our walks, this time showing her how to use a saw and swing an axe. Mr. S again asked if it was settled, and Becky got to skip her appointment with Brother Sam. Becky again had almost two weeks without a trip to the office.

When we had our weekly Guardians staff meeting and I learned that her bunks chore was going to change, I got Mr. S to give me orders to take Becky out for one of our walks and cover how to do her next chore. Becky didn't get sent to the office that week, or the next and even made it to level 3. I even got to put her third hollow bar on her armband.

All Spring, I did that with her before her bunk's chore changed until we had covered all of the basic chores. It didn't matter what my team was assigned to, I always found the time for this. But Becky was no longer a fixture at the main office.

Becky grew and changed a lot in that time. She wasn't in trouble so much and was advancing in the program. I was proud of Becky. One of the best feelings was how I felt about giving Mr. S the reports on Becky.

But the thing is, this was a gift to me as much as it was to Becky. This was the first girl I ever took under my wing, the first girl I took personal responsibility for changing her life. It was this that really let me understand what being a Guardian was all about, and that may have been the best Christmas gift I was ever given.

Until this day, I had never told anyone but Mr. S that secret.

I know you didn't have room for many of these kinds of stories in your book, but I hope you find a little space to fit this one in.

Merry Christmas!

xoxo Betty xoxo

So, what happened to everyone else? We were not able to track down everyone, but let me share with you what we know as of 2023:

**Guardians and Girls:**

**Adrian**, the girl who pulled 75 stumps in two days, stayed on the Island until it closed. She works as an IV nurse at a hospital in California and struggles with relationships. She is still a member of the church.

**Alex**, the girl who moved the mountain, stayed on the Island until it closed, what happened to her after that is unknown.

**Alison**, one of the voluntaries I arrived with, spent 2 years on the Island and timed out as a level 6 girl. What happened to her after that is unknown.

**Betty** works as a manager at a retail establishment along with her husband. They have a son in college. (*Guardian, Orange Team*)

**Brittany** is married and is now a stay-at-home mom with 2 kids. (*Guardian, Red Team*)

**Christi** did 1 tour with the Navy, she now works in Iowa as a waitress. (*Guardian, Green Team Sergeant*)

**Clementine**, from Bunk 11, timed out as a Level 4 girl in my second year. What happened to her after that is unknown.

**Debbie**, one of the voluntaries I arrived with, spent 2 years on The Island. What happened to her after that is unknown.

**Emma**, the girl Purple team rescued from Bunk 22, went to college for art, she works in the art field making stained glass. She is still a member of the church.

**Gigi** worked her way back up to Level 7. She left the Island with me. She did 2 tours in the Navy before going to college. Gigi died in a car accident, hit by a drunk driver. She is survived by her husband and son.

**Gretta**, from Bunk 7, left with me to join the Navy. She did one tour and went on to work in electronics. She is still a member of the church.

**Jenna**, who shared a room with Jess in Mr. S's house, now works as an Uber driver.

**Jennifer** did 1 tour with the Navy. She is now working in retail and has struggled with drug addiction. (*Guardian, Green Team*)

**Jess** left the Island shortly after Vanessa. She and Vanessa have now reconnected. They live only a few miles apart and spend as much time together as they can. It's good to see the littles reunited, after all, how often do long-lost sisters find each other again?

**Julie** stayed on the Island until it closed. She committed suicide 2 years after getting home. (*Guardian, Purple Team*)

**Kat** is struggling with drug addiction. She is homeless on the streets of LA. Jess and Vanessa are trying to get her into rehab. If anyone can, it's those two. (*Guardian, Blue Team*)

**Kate**, the Guardian that got to go home early, did one tour in the Navy. She works for a defense contractor, has 2 teenagers, 1 of whom went through 9 months in a Wilderness TTI program.

**Laura** graduated from college, and now teaches Phys Ed and coaches a girls track team. She is still a member of the church. That girl can still run, she regularly runs marathons for the Church. (*Guardian, Orange Team*)

**Lori**, who arrived with me as a voluntary, left the Island with me. She did one tour with the Navy and currently works in billing at a radio station. She is still a member of the church.

**Lucy**, from bunk 11, timed out in my second year. What happened to her after that is unknown.

**Marci**, Jenna's older sister, died on the Island. Her cause of death is unknown. (*Guardian, Orange Team*)

**Maxine** stayed on the Island until it closed. She has spent her life in and out of psychiatric institutions and currently lives on the streets of New York City. Both Vanessa and Jess are working on this, and now so am I. I hope to have her sober and staying at my house soon. (*Guardian, Purple Team*)

**Meghan** works in the adult entertainment field and is doing quite well for herself. (*Guardian, Blue Team*)

**Mia**, who arrived with me as a voluntary, timed out after 18 months. What happened to her after that is unknown.

**Michelle** did 2 tours in the Navy and got her degree. She now works in mechanical engineering. (*Guardian, Blue Team Sergeant*)

**Molly**, aka superman, was eventually sent to a long-term hospital placement to be treated for her seizures. She is now seizure free and works managing rental properties. She is still in touch with Brother Joe.

**Nancy** did 1 tour with the Navy, she currently works for a pest control company in Oklahoma. She is still a member of the church. (*Guardian, Red Team*)

**Nikki**, the girl we Guardians broke, is currently serving 25-life in prison. I still feel bad about the part I played. We now write and talk on the phone with each other regularly, and I have even been able to do video visits with her.

**Paula** is currently serving life in prison. We talk every week. (*Guardian, Red Team*)

**Rachel**, the girl who moved the big pile of bricks in two days while on a starvation diet, now works in retail in Utah.

**Rory** “Bad News from Bunk 22” is currently serving 15 years in prison. She has 3 teenage daughters in foster care. V and Jess made sure they got a good Christmas last year, and now we all make sure they get good Christmases and birthdays and other support every year.

**Sarah** received a Dishonorable discharge for violating Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell. She is recovering from drug

addiction and with Jess' help, is now in a stable living and working situation. (*Guardian, Green Team*)

**Sasha** was Honorably discharged from the Navy. She died of a drug overdose. (*Guardian, Green Team*)

**Susan** is married with 2 children. She works in IT in Seattle. (*Guardian, Blue Team*)

**Shawn** served as an NCO in the Navy. She died of complications from Meningitis just shy of completing her 20 years. (*Guardian, Orange Team Sergeant*)

**Tonya** received an Honorable discharge from the Navy. She is a single mother with three kids. She supports her family with an OnlyFans site. (*Guardian, Purple Team Sergeant*)

**Tori** received an Honorable discharge from the Navy. She struggled with drug addiction and committed suicide at age 26. (*Guardian, Blue Team*)

**Vanessa**, ever the princess, dramatically escaped the Island with the help of Brother Sam and Sergeant Richards. She went to college and grad school, then worked for a while as an officer in the Naval Reserves. Vanessa has made her career as a computer programmer. She has a husband of over 25 years and two daughters in college. (*Guardians, Purple Team*)

### **Staff:**

**Brother Sam** left the Island with Vanessa a few months after the Great Resignation, fulfilling his promise to Mr.

S of helping her escape. He worked for a construction company until he died of natural causes.

**Brother Mark** was 23 when he completed his 4-year Missionary assignment and left the Island. He worked in one other TTI program where he met his wife. They now own a ranch in Texas where they live with their 3 children. He is no longer part of the church and does not work in the TTI. Recently, he has advocated against the TTI.

**Sister Ava and Brother Tom** are still married and still members of the church. They live in Rhode Island with 3 teenage children, where they both work in manufacturing.

**Sister Jean** is still a counselor with the Church. She still works with teenage girls.

**Brother Joe**, the maintenance guy who took Molly under his wing, left the Island as part of the Great Resignation. He lives in California with his wife, two daughters and his little sister, who has Downs Syndrome and epilepsy. He and Molly are still in contact with each other, and he is still a member of the church.

**Sister Kara**, who herself graduated the program as a Level 10 girl when she was 16, then went back as a Missionary at age 19, left the Island at age 26 as part of the Great Resignation. She married and had a daughter. They live in Minnesota. She now manages her family's portfolio of properties, including the building in Iowa Christi works in. She is still a member of the church.



**Sister Lisa** left the Island as part of the Great Resignation. She and I still get together regularly. Lisa is still a member of the church, but no longer works for the church, she now works in a law firm.

**Sister Mary** left the Island as part of the Great Resignation. She now owns a small restaurant in Delaware with her sister, where she employes several former girls from the Island. She has a daughter that spent time in a TTI program and she is still a member of the church.

**Sister Nancy** left the Island as part of the Great Resignation and worked for a while as a therapist in a residential treatment center. We do not know what happened to her after that.

**Sister Paula and Brother Tim** left the Island as part of the Great Resignation. They are still married and still members of the church. They live in Michigan, where Tim works in a car dealership and Paula is a stay-at-home mom.

**Miss Rawlings** is married and has 3 children and 2 grandchildren. She has semi-retired, but still works for the church part-time in its educational mission. Her specialty is fundraising.

**Sister Sadie** works as a middle school teacher in the Tri-State area. A hallmark of her classroom is teaching middle schoolers to be humans and to advocate for each other, something she credits to her time as a Guardian. She is still a member of the Church.

**Father Fred and Sister Denise** are still happily married and live on the West Coast, where they raised 3 children and still run a small congregation of a different Christian church. They even hosted our reunion and administer the fund we set up to help support those of us that went to the Island. Most of the authors royalties from the sale of both this book and Vanessa's book goes to that fund.

**Sergeant Davis** recently retired from a private defense contracting firm. He still takes in foster teens and plans to do so until the day he dies.

**Sergeant Duplessie** retired to upstate New York, where he tinkers with old cars and tractors.

**Sergeant James** taught at a college in Asia until he passed away from natural causes. He is survived by his third wife and a son from his first marriage.

**Sergeant Mackey** reconnected with his own daughter after leaving the Island. He now lives with her and his two grandchildren and a soon-to-be first great-grandchild.

**Sergeant Mitchel** works for a defense contractor and does volunteer work with teenagers through the Boy Scouts of America's Exploring program.

**Sergeant Richards** has retired for a second time and lives a mile from Vanessa. He enjoys fishing and spending time with his two Grand Nieces, Vanessa's daughters.