

THE LETTER SEASON 2, Episode 6: Whisperings

Amy Donaldson: With every stroke of the pen, Leslie Rasmussen Moore banished a little more pain from her heart. And when she mailed the letter she'd written to her brother's killer, she sent years of sadness away too. But when she offered forgiveness she gave grace that wasn't hers alone. She knew she'd eventually have to confess the choice she'd made to her family but she wasn't afraid she was strangely at peace. It was as if a weight had been lifted.

Leslie: I said, I don't believe what I just did. But I'm going to share what I did with you. So that you know.

Amy Donaldson: Leslie told her parents, her sisters and Jordan's widow. She shared the first draft of the letter she wrote to Michael Moore. A letter that said not only did her entire family forgive him but declared him their brother. Their youngest sister Ann Marie couldn't believe it.

Ann Marie: Oh, my goodness, what? What have you done?

Amy Donaldson: And that wasn't all. She had something else to tell them something they weren't prepared to deal with Michael Moore had written back. She reached out to Jordan's widow DeAnn.

DeAnn: I distinctly remember when she called me and told me that she had received a reply to her letter. And she wanted to know if I wanted to read it. I didn't want to read it.

Amy Donaldson: DeAnn was still struggling to make sense of the compassion she'd felt during the parole hearing two weeks earlier. She wasn't even sure this meant she wanted to forgive Michael. And she certainly hadn't even considered what it might mean to communicate directly with her husband's killer. Leslie's confessions had her head spinning. So she reached out to Jordan's younger sister Diane.

DeAnn: I remember calling Diane, and asking her about it. She says, I don't want to read it.

Amy Donaldson: Leslie decided to put the choice in their hands, literally. She delivered copies of Michael's response to everyone in the family. DeAnn kept looking at the unopened letter and wondering.

DeAnn: And it took me probably a day or so before I wanted to read it. But I know my curiosity. I didn't wait very long. But I remember sitting in my car when I read that. It was the most overwhelming feeling I've ever had in my life. I just had this image of Christ. And he said, these are the sins I paid for. This is what I have atoned for. I atoned for you, for your pain, and I've also atoned for Mike Moore's sins. It was the most spiritual moment ever in my life. And I just knew without a question, I had to forgive him. And it wasn't like I have to, it was like, I will. I want to.

Amy Donaldson: The empathy she felt for the man who shattered their lives was disorienting. What was she supposed to do with it?

DeAnn: I didn't know what was to come. But I knew that whatever was to come, that I was going to be able to do it. Something had shifted in my life.

Amy Donaldson: She called Diane again the sister-in-law who had shared her reluctance to read anything Michael had to say.

DeAnn: And I said, Diane, you need to read the letter. And she called me back a day or two later. And I picked up the phone and all I heard was sobbing. And I said, you've read the letter. And she said I did. And I said we know what we have to do.

Amy Donaldson: From KSL Podcasts, I'm Amy Donaldson, and this is The Letter Season 2: Ripple Effect, Episode 6: Whisperings.

[Music]

Amy Donaldson: The letter Michael sent in reply to Leslie was four pages typed.

Leslie: Dear Leslie, thank you for your letter. What you wrote touched my heart. I can't describe the wonderful impact of your forgiveness.

Amy Donaldson: Michael apologized for calling her by the wrong name in the parole hearing two weeks earlier, but said he was deeply impacted by her words and the pain that was so evident in her voice.

Leslie: After listening to you and DeAnn speak at my board hearing. I had gone back to my cell. And I spent most of the night crying for the pain that I had caused all of you for the pain it caused DeAnn, your family, Jordan, I was devastated. I felt helpless. I felt helpless to do anything to lessen your pain. I prayed but the tears kept coming. I was an absolute wreck. When I received your letter, I cried again. But this time, the tears were tears of happiness.

Amy Donaldson: Michael acknowledged the part of his 'defense' that caused Leslie the most pain. He wrote, I felt your hurt and heartache regarding my horrible statement long ago that 'Jordan deserved it.'

Leslie: For all these years, I have been unable to forgive myself for what I did to your family. I told you at my hearing that each day I lived with the pain I caused, not a day has gone by, in these last 10 years that I haven't been distraught about all of that hurt.

Amy Donaldson: And then, at long last, Michael took all of the responsibility on himself.

He said (quote) “The problem wasn’t Jordan. The problem was me. I hope anybody who questions Jordan’s integrity understands that.”

He said the person he was when he committed the murders was (quote) “an arrogant, angry, insensitive, and confrontative young man with a lot of pent-up emotion.”

He said part of what had changed in him was recognizing that an abusive relationship with his father led to him abusing alcohol. He said he was unable to deal with emotions appropriately, and he found himself trying to be tough and ignore his feelings rather than confronting or managing them in a healthy way.

Michael talked about striving to find ways to improve himself in prison and told her he was trying to help other inmates do the same. When I asked Jordan’s sister Diane to read this portion of Michael’s letter it elicited the same feelings that washed over her when she first read it 30 years ago.

Diane: “I am now truly a humble man. It also may give you some comfort that I have never again hurt anybody, but instead have spent my time teaching and assisting. I am an outspoken proponent of the repentance process to other inmates. Your letter, beyond being a remarkable statement of faith, love and forgiveness is something I will forever treasure close to my heart. It has also provided a clear example that the process of repentance works and has real potential to heal.” It’s been a while since I read that.

Amy Donaldson: Do you feel like this is a miracle that has happened to your family?

Diane: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Amy Donaldson: Why do you think that?

Diane: just because of all the tender mercies. I just know. First of all, because I we were protected. I personally have my own testimony of how I was protected right from the beginning, protected from any remorse or revenge.

Amy Donaldson: Here’s where Diane’s Latter-Day Saint faith comes into play. She believes that they were able to avoid becoming mired in hatred because God ‘protected’ them or shielded them. Then in the same hearing, they all experience the same change of heart. That was in her opinion only possible with heavenly help.

Diane: We were so unified in this. I think that’s miraculous in itself.

Amy Donaldson: Somehow, though they never explicitly discussed forgiving Michael, all three of Jordan’s sisters and his parents seemed to come to the same conclusion. At almost the same time.

Rasmussens: I think we each individually felt it ourselves. We didn't go we're all we're all on board here. It was. It was each individually and we went 'Wow.'

Leslie: We all just kind of ended up on the same page about the same time, I think.

Amy Donaldson: It's remarkable right?

Leslie: It is. It is.

Amy Donaldson: When you think about family dynamics, I mean, it's hard to agree on anything, right?

Leslie: It's hard to agree what you're gonna have for turkey dinner and who's not going to bring the sweet rolls.

Amy Donaldson: I was going to say, who's bringing the side dishes.

Leslie: Exactly.

Amy Donaldson: This is not to say that everyone in the family was on board right away.

Leslie: Took our husbands I think a little while. It was faster for those immediately close to Jordan, than those on the periphery.

Amy: Really?

Leslie: They were a little bit more hesitant to say, Well, wait a minute. Wait a minute. We, you know, this is, yeah. But then they all came on board.

Amy Donaldson: Those initial two letters were just the beginning of written correspondence that quickly extended throughout the entire Rasmussen family. And just weeks after that first letter, the women decided they wanted to meet with Michael in person. Jordan's widow DeAnn began making calls to see if it was possible and if they could meet him before Christmas.

The caseworker who helped set up a meeting told her he'd never organized anything like this in his 14 years at the prison.

DeAnn: They said This is gonna take some doing because this has never happened before. And so it took weeks for the arrangements to be made.

Amy Donaldson: Jordan's sister Diane said there was only one member of their family who didn't want to go to the meeting at the prison their father Elden.

Diane: He said, I know I have forgiven him, the Lord knows I have forgiven him, and he knows I have forgiven him, but I don't need to see the man that took my only son.

Amy Donaldson: Finally, a meeting was arranged for 11 a.m. on Jan. 26, 1994. Jordan's widow, his mother and his three sisters decided to meet that morning so they could drive to the prison together. They met at the home of the youngest sister Ann Marie and Leslie led them in a prayer before they got into the car and made the 30 minute drive to the same place they'd attended Michael's parole hearing. DeAnn said they felt 'unusually calm' as they drove and they didn't get nervous until they met the caseworker in the parking lot of the prison's main gate. Jordan's sister Diane thought about what she wanted to say to Michael. She had forgiven him, but she also wanted answers.

Diane: And I went in just okay, why why would you take the life of this sweet man and leave him with three children.

Amy Donaldson: They began to go through a number of security checkpoints, including a metal detector, on their way into the facility.

DeAnn: And I remember walking into that dismal place nothing other than gloom and doom in a prison.

Amy Donaldson: Leslie gave her sisters a warning.

Leslie: I said, you know, I'm here, because we need to be here. But if he says one negative thing about Jordan. I'm gonna have to just go wait in my car, because I can not hear that.

Amy Donaldson: After they'd cleared the last of the security areas, the caseworker led them into an undecorated room that was used for meetings and family visits. One wall of the visiting room had floor-to-ceiling windows, but the view was a bleak prison yard framed by fences topped with razor wire. The snow-capped Wasatch Mountains where Jordan was killed were visible in the distance above the flat rooftops and guard towers.

As they entered the room, Michael was already waiting for them with another caseworker. He stood up and invited them to sit on two couches that faced each other.

DeAnn: Obviously, everybody was uncomfortable. And he sat down on a chair, and we were in our seats. And we just did small talk to begin with.

Amy Donaldson: DeAnn showed him a picture of her family of Jordan with his children.

DeAnn: He addressed me personally, apologized over and over again about what he had done to the family, and what he had done to my children. He said, there wasn't a day, go by that he did not think about my children and what he had done to them. He especially mentioned David's

name saying, I think of David every day. And I can't imagine what it must be like for him to have somebody take his father. And it was just a really good, peaceful, calm feeling.

Amy Donaldson: It was a wide-ranging conversation, and nothing was off limits.

DeAnn: "It wasn't all kumbaya it was, I mean yes feelings of the last years were expressed and the hurt and the pain and the suffering, that was all expressed. I remember everything was really good. we got our questions answered, But then I remember looking over at Leslie.

Amy Donaldson: And she knew something wasn't right.

DeAnn: And Leslie has become flushed. She's become agitated. And she just says, Okay, this isn't right. I'm not feeling good. We shouldn't have come.

Amy Donaldson: It was sudden, without warning. But Leslie said she fell into an all-consuming darkness.

Leslie: There was the blackest feeling you could ever feel you could have cut that feeling in there. It was so, it was just a bizarre feeling. And I finally said to her, I said, you know, I'm afraid I've got to go. Because it was just almost engulfing. I mean, I think I was even having a hard time breathing.

DeAnn: It was physical, you could tell physically, that she was struggling.

Amy Donaldson: DeAnn has a theory about what was happening that day. She believes it was the devil or as DeAnn calls him, 'the adversary'. She says it didn't just feel off, it felt 'truly evil.' But she didn't think the evil came from Michael.

DeAnn: When the bad feelings came, I liken that to the adversary. He did not want this forgiveness to take place, he would much rather see hate and contention. And that we live with that.

Amy Donaldson: Leslie and her sisters also believe it was 'the adversary' trying to scare them away from their purpose at the prison that day. But then almost as suddenly as the darkness descended Leslie felt it lift.

Leslie: I have to testify there was like a light of Christ that came into that room. And I know personally, the adversary did not want us to forgive him. And when we had that exuberant feeling that we did, that's when everything was a transition. We were able to embrace him, and we were able to just release everything that we had as hostility. So that was a real blessing.

Amy Donaldson: After two hours, prison officials said their time together was over. They started to say their goodbyes, when middle sister Diane walked over to Michael and wrapped him in an embrace.

Diane: It pretty much even shocked me to know that I was hugging him when we left. And that I felt compassion to him, and I just continued to feel sorry for what he had gone through.

Amy Donaldson: They couldn't find the words to describe what was happening, how they felt, how things had changed. So how could they ever explain it to anyone else? Even some of their spouses didn't understand what was happening.

Rasmussens: In our family, I think there were skeptics that are going, Are we sure that he's not pulling a ploy or something, you know?

Amy Donaldson: And if their husbands struggled with it, imagine how those outside the family would react. They knew they'd seem naive, gullible. So they kept it safe inside their little circle.

Diane: We didn't dare share with the public.

Leslie: No!

Diane: Friends, people.

Leslie: No.

Diane: because they would have thought we were nuts.

Leslie: Absolutely.

Amy Donaldson: Especially when Jordan's parents started to consider something totally unexpected.

Leslie: Our parents had talked about having him after he got out of prison, They said he'll need someplace to go. And so they said, why don't we just have him come and stay with us until he can get everything arranged?

Amy Donaldson: And that's when matriarch Blanche Rasmussen one of the earliest advocates of forgiveness, said that might be too much even for them.

Leslie: I remember my mom saying, Well, now, that's not going to work, because people are gonna think we're insane.

Amy Donaldson: But there were a few people who may have understood what the Rasmussens were experiencing. People who worked or volunteered inside the prison. They had spent years getting to know Michael and they'd seen him change. Some of them even thought he deserved a second chance. And that is a very rare thing. How had that happened? We'll tell you after the break.

[Music]

Amy Donaldson: Almost from the moment the cell door locked behind him, Michael Moore began working to try and prove he wasn't a cold-blooded killer and that he didn't deserve to be locked up. He enrolled in college classes, tutored other inmates, committed to counseling and was a regular at religious services. He also got a job.

Dick Clasby: When I first noticed him, he was in our print shop.

Amy Donaldson: This is Dick Clasby, the head of Utah Correctional Industries at the time the arm of the prison that employed inmates in businesses like a dairy farm or a print shop. Michael worked his way up from janitor to print shop supervisor that's when Dick met him.

Dick Clasby: By then we bought good equipment and were trying to expand the print shop. He was good at typesetting, and got to be the clerk for the print shop.

Amy Donaldson: Dick is now in his 80s and retired. He had a fall last year, and he said it's impacted his speech and some of his cognitive abilities, but he said he still remembers Michael and his work at the prison very well. Dick is one of the Corrections officials who wrote letters to the Board of Pardons on Michael's behalf. He characterized Michael as creative, ambitious and never content with the status quo.

Dick Clasby: The shop supervisor would talk about how good he was. He was a brilliant kid. And he could carry on a good conversation and he worked hard in the print shop. Everybody he worked with was pleased with what he was doing.

Amy Donaldson: Michael quickly climbed the ranks thanks to his aptitude for computer programming and accounting. Both skills made him indispensable to Utah Correctional Industries. Michael was able to do things for prison officials that would have cost thousands of dollars if they had to pay market prices and not inmate labor rates.

Dick Clasby: He would earn the highest that we would pay a non private sector inmate. So it would be \$1.75- \$2.00 an hour. And then he would work. A lot of hours because he was trying to do that.

Amy Donaldson: Like others before him, Dick described Michael as intelligent. Said he innovated new job opportunities for himself and other inmates. But sometimes his emotions and his ego tripped him up.

Dick Clasby: He was so smart, just so smart. And he knew it. And he was emotional. He would get down if somebody questioned his intelligence or, or something happened to him.

Amy Donaldson: He said Michael would get offended if Corrections officials rebuffed his suggestions or if he was reprimanded at work. But in general, Dick says, he got along well with most people in the prison.

Dick Clasby: they say he learned five languages. I only knew he could speak English, Japanese and Spanish. And I don't know how fluent he was, but, but he used that with other inmates.

Amy Donaldson: Dick said the officers told him about several incidents where he was able to help them keep the peace.

Dick Clasby: There was a problem in the print shop several years ago, where there was some racial tension in there. And he, he used his Spanish, and he calmed them down. Now i didn't see it, but that's what I heard.

Amy Donaldson: A lot of prison officials felt similarly about Michael. Among his most vocal champions was Jack Ford, the spokesman for the Department of Corrections.

Jack Ford: He was a model inmate

Amy Donaldson: Before Jack worked at the prison, he was a television reporter for KSL TV our sister station. He actually covered Michael Moore's murder trial, although they never discussed it. When they met again inside the prison, they set the past aside and became friendly very quickly.

Jack Ford: I'd go over and talk to him he had a small little tiny cubicle, where he managed the books for all of Utah Correctional Industries, which was making money for inmates and for the prison.

Amy Donaldson: Jack said he spent quite a bit of time discussing Michael's ideas in his tiny, but coveted office above the machinery of the print shop. In fact, Michael had a lot of ideas about a lot of things including how prison-run businesses could be even more successful.

Amy Donaldson: And because he was so valuable to correctional industries, he had other privileges, some that might seem odd for an inmate. He had his own telephone extension, the ear of prison officials and even had a letterhead with his name on it.

Jack Ford: I mean, it wasn't like he had a free run of anything. But he was paid better than most inmates were paid. And Inmates are really jealous about somebody's getting something I'm not getting.

Amy Donaldson: Jack said Michael took the money he earned and started not just saving it, but investing it to the tune of thousands of dollars.

Jack Ford: He had somebody that was probably taking the money and investing it somewhere. But he was doing the research on what he was going to invest in. I don't remember the details of how he transferred the money, but I know he was investing in the market.

Amy Donaldson: Michael's boss Dick Clasby said all of this educating himself, being on his best behavior, investing it gave Michael the air of a man who was preparing for life in the real world. And he seemed to be doing everything in his power to earn a chance at freedom.

Dick Clasby: He was trying everything he could to get back to the Board of Pardons.

Amy Donaldson: But Michael's interactions with the board had been disappointing, including his most recent parole hearing in October of 1993. The day Leslie called 'the awakening' the hearing that moved her so deeply, she wrote that letter of forgiveness.

The Board hadn't been moved in quite the same way. Despite his good record, rave reviews from prison staff and contrite statement they denied him a parole date again. Instead, they said he could come back and plead his case in another 9 years.

But Michael wouldn't have to wait another decade. A lawsuit by a group of inmates forced the Board to change some of its rules and it meant many inmates, including Michael, got new parole hearings.

So just two years after his 1993 hearing, he would get another opportunity to make a case for a second chance but this time, he had a new reason to be hopeful. This time, the family of one of his victims was going to take up his fight alongside him.

Don Blanchard: Good morning, you're mister Michael Patrick Moore, is that correct?

Michael Moore: Yes.

Amy Donaldson: Like the hearing two years earlier, the family of Buddy Booth did not attend. But according to news reports, they made their feelings known to the board. They opposed any kind of mercy for Michael Moore, especially parole.

But on a cool, windy Friday morning in June of 1995 the Rasmussen family filed into the same room where just two years earlier. They'd begged the board to keep Michael locked up. As they sat in a row of neatly arranged chairs, they were just as singularly focused, just as determined but this time, it was in hopes of helping Jordan's murderer go free. This hearing was, once again, conducted by a single member of the parole board. He started the hearing and then invited Jordan's father to speak on behalf of the family.

Don Blanchard: At this point in time, I'm going to give Mr. Rasmussen an opportunity to present his testimony.

Amy Donaldson: Elden Rasmussen left his family in the rows of visitors and took his seat at a table in the center of the room. He didn't have any written notes. He'd just speak from the heart.

Elden: I have been to this hearing before my daughter in-law Deanne and my daughter Leslie gave beautiful descriptions of the feelings we have at the loss of Jordan and only talking more about that except that the day that this happened was the most painful day of my life.

Amy Donaldson: The truth was Elden Rasmussen was never the same after his only son's murder. He was, even at joyful times, quieter, more withdrawn. The man who woke up his children singing the Cougar fight song was gone.

And he never spoke in detail about the day his son was murdered, until this hearing. He told the parole board that in the days after his son was killed, he took comfort in a prosecutor's promise that Michael Moore would pay for his crime with his life.

Elden: I first wanted his life and I was upset when his attorney got him off the death penalty thing to a life sentence.

Amy Donaldson: But he'd seen the power of forgiveness transform his family. And he said he appreciated that Michael was finally taking responsibility for what he'd done. And then Elden said something that, to some, will seem strange.

Elden: Jordan has forgiven Mike for doing this.

Amy Donaldson: All of the Rasmussens have expressed this sentiment. That because they know who Jordan was when he was alive, they believe he would have forgiven even the worst offense, his own murder. They said they've felt his presence as they've wrestled with forgiveness. So they say this without equivocation not that they believe Jordan has forgiven Michael Moore, that they know he has.

Elden confessed it took him some time to follow his son's example. He'd even rebuffed overtures from Michael's father to talk to try to make amends.

ELDEN: His father has wanted to talk to me on several occasions once we met accidentally in a grocery store. And he wanted to talk and tell me what Mike was doing. And I did not give him a decent time of day.

Amy Donaldson: But Michael's apology had touched his heart. And his letters helped Elden understand him.

Elden: I can't be as big as my son, but I too have this feeling. And I felt sorry for Mike, as I've heard him bear testimony and go through this story. And I know what he's lived with. I forgive him. My wife forgives him and I think all my daughters do.

Amy Donaldson: Elden said he didn't think Michael was dangerous. That he believed he deserved a second chance.

ELDEN: I do know that Mike has not committed other crimes other than this one. It was a horrible one. I would feel that he would not do this again that he has learned his lesson on that score. I would trust him, I know he would not hurt my family. And I have confidence that he would be a worthy citizen again. I disliked him at the time he did this but I can say I like Mike. It's just unfortunate that this happened.

Amy Donaldson: Elden Rasmussen offered one final thought, a suggestion about how Michael might make amends for killing his son and Buddy Booth.

Eldon: He said at one time he wanted to pay his debt to society. And I wondered what that would be. And there are some children here that if he could ever help in any way, if he's released, he could do something to help with them.

Amy Donaldson: Don Blanchard said he'd seen all kinds of sad and terrible cases in his service as a Board of Pardons member. He said he wanted to note the generosity of Elden's feelings.

Blanchard: We see both extremes. By that I mean, we see some that have extreme difficulty ever, ever forgiving in any sense of the word or, or even accepting and going on with their lives. And we see the other end of the continuum. Families such as yours, where even though the loss was as tremendous and profound as it was, in this case, an amazing ability to accept, deal with and then go on with your individual lives. And I simply commend you. Thank you again, for your testimony.

Amy Donaldson: When Michael was given a chance to speak, he referenced a packet of papers he was given. Part of the inmates' lawsuit that paved the way for this hearing included the right to see all of the documents the Board of Pardons would use in considering the case.

Michael Moore: I read everything in that packet. And then I started to read my confession, and it was the most horrible thing I've ever read.

Amy Donaldson: So much had changed since he first gave that confession 13 years ago. In the trial and his first hearing, he blamed his crime on a theory that mafia members were after him, and that he thought Jordan was the mafia's accountant. In the second hearing, he did offer remorse. Remorse that led to the Rasmussen's forgiveness. He explained to Blanchard what that forgiveness meant to him.

Michael Moore: The Rasmussen family is the neatest family I've ever met. My efforts were to be repentant in here and they offered me forgiveness. It's the most wonderful thing I've ever experienced is to be able to apologize to the family, and to have them accept my apology and forgive me. It's a testimony I'll bear forever.

Amy Donaldson: He also said he'd tried and would continue to try to have the same kind of reconciliation with the Booth family.

Michael Moore: I was able to find Carla's brother. And in many of the same ways, I've apologized to the Rasmussen family, I've finally begun to do that with the Booth family. Doesn't change anything in terms of the violence and damage I did to these families. But I think it's important that I take responsibility for what I did and acknowledge that.

Amy Donaldson: In this third hearing, Michael offered some new explanations for what led to his spiral into paranoid rage in 1982.

Michael Moore: I was an alcoholic since I was 18. It was a real problem in my family. And that was something that I had to address.

Amy Donaldson: For the first time, Michael said he was an alcoholic. Not only that, he claimed his father was an alcoholic who also physically abused him. He said he'd unearthed these painful realizations through therapy which were documented in the prison's psychological reports.

Michael Moore: Today 30 years later, I carry scars on my back from the beatings I took as a kid. I want you to know that that's where all the violence and anger began. It's that, that exploded at Log Haven.

Amy Donaldson: He didn't suggest that he was under the influence when he committed the murders. Instead, he said his violent actions were the end product of a youth filled with shame, anger, and family violence.

Michael Moore: When I was a kid, the only defense I had to the beating and humiliations was to stand there and take it. I remember standing in the basement being whipped by my father. Maybe I deserved it, maybe I didn't.

But I remember I learned not to cry or scream out. I learned to keep a stone cold face and betray no emotion. It was the only way I could deny him the satisfaction of knowing he'd hurt me. After a while he gave up on the belt and special ordered some three order maple sticks to use on me.

I've spent years in here coming to grips with that. Sadly, I think I vented all those childhood years of anger and hurt on two innocent people named Jordan and Buddy Booth.

Amy Donaldson: Michael then went on to say his father had disowned him. But Blanchard took issue with this new characterization. This was, in fact, the first hearing Michael's father hadn't attended.

Blanchard: I don't think that he has cast you out, nor totally set you aside. He appeared at your initial hearing, pleaded in your behalf. He's written in your behalf, expressed some concerns about some miscommunications. Maybe there was some real tragedies in your life before maybe there was abuse at his hands. I don't know that. I don't know that he's disowned you.

Michael Moore: That's been my impression. He hasn't spoken to me since my last Board hearing. And the comment was, is that I had embarrassed him. And that was the end of it. And he wanted nothing more to do with me.

Amy Donaldson: But a dysfunctional childhood wasn't the only thing Michael relied on in explaining what led him to murder. He returned, with some new modifications, to some of the conspiracy theories he'd offered when he was first arrested. Gone were the accusations that Jordan was a thief or a bully. He exonerated Jordan explicitly. But the Mafia threats that terrorized him until he murdered Jordan, they were back. And when it came to killing Buddy, Michael never admitted what he told police in his confession. That he killed him to cover up Jordan's murder. Instead:

Michael Moore: The truth is that I shot Buddy because he arrived in a van and I've been told by log havens parent company that people were coming after me that morning, and they'd be driving a van.

Amy Donaldson: Even when the board member balked at this, Michael stuck to his story.

Blanchard: Why were they coming to get you? What was it that you had done wrong? Why would they waste their effort and energy on you?

Michael Moore: The information that came to me through the company is that the company was importing drugs in international shipments.

Amy Donaldson: He named several names, and said he'd become a target for a hitman when he stumbled onto that drug smuggling operation. But then he admitted he never saw any drugs, only heard rumors about them. He said while the threats may not have been real, the talk about them was. He tried to have his conspiracy theory and his remorse too. But this time, he expressed that remorse more explicitly than he ever had. He pulled no punches about the brutality of what he'd done.

Michael Moore: I shot each man a third time. One of them at point blank range. As you reviewed, I then put the bodies inside the laundry van and tried to conceal what I had done. Long ago, I tried to justify to all and myself what I'd done. But there was no justification for what I did. The problem was me. I want to acknowledge that to you. And I want you to know that I don't ignore or minimize any of it. I caused unimaginable loss, suffering, sorrow, heartache and strife to the Rasmussen and Booth families.

Amy Donaldson: The board member remained skeptical. He asked Michael if he'd wanted to take full responsibility, why did he appeal his case? Michael's appeal was based on the assertion that he hadn't waived his right to speak with an attorney before confessing to police. The Utah Supreme Court ruled against him in 1985, but when asked why he pursued that issue, Michael became defensive.

Blanchard: Shortly after your commitment to prison, you did appeal your case on technical reasons. Was that a desire to escape the punishment that you knew was justly do you?

Michael Moore: I had no part in the appeal.

Blanchard: You had no part in that appeal whatsoever.

Michael Moore: That was done by Utah Legal Services. And the only time I heard of that appeal is when Ruby Pace, when I was at SSD, showed me a copy of the report in the newspaper about it.

Blanchard: I could understand that if it was an appeal on a capitol sentence where an automatic appeal is filed. I don't know if I understand your absolutely having no part of it whatsoever.

Michael Moore: I never saw before it was filed.

Blanchard: Well, I didn't ask you if you saw the actual appeal before it was filed. What I asked you was, weren't you part of the decision-making process to pursue that appeal?

Michael Moore: In that case? Yes, sir. I was

Amy Donaldson: It seemed Michael was trying to distance himself from the appeal, perhaps thinking it would cast doubt on his sincerity. He continued to fight against the idea that he was being insincere, taking issue with a letter written by prosecutor TJ Tsakalos calling him a chameleon and a board member in the last hearing saying he had only been a model citizen in prison to manipulate people into letting him out.

Michael Moore: But I want you to know that I sincerely striven to be a different person than the one about you read into police reports and Mr. Sakalosis letter.

Amy Donaldson: He said he hadn't wavered from his efforts to change his life and make amends to his victims even though a parole board member hinted that it might not change how long he'd spend behind bars.

Michael Moore: I've stayed the course because I've gained empathy for others. In the 14 years since log Haven, I have never again hurt anyone. Instead, the record shows my concern for others and my strive not to be a burden.

Amy Donaldson: He said whether they offered him parole or not there was no escaping that his punishment would always be a life sentence.

Michael Moore: I will forever be a convicted killer, a murderer. I have no career. I have no home to go to. I've never married. I have no children. Added to it has been a life in this prison for the last 15 years. And life has been daily existence in a series of seven by 10 foot white cement boxes surrounded by loneliness, violence, depression, apathy, and the sadness and despair that define this prison.

Amy Donaldson: If anyone questioned whether he'd been punished, he assured them he had.

Michael Moore: Mr. Blanchard, I no longer know what love tenderness, warmth and closeness mean. I've lived without those basic human needs for a decade and a half. I no longer even know what it's like to be touched. Now I know that punishment doesn't come anywhere near equaling what I did to the Rasmussens. But I want you to know that that's been a significant punishment.

Amy Donaldson: Dohn Blanchard ended the hearing by saying, while the board acknowledged Michael Moore's outstanding efforts in prison, they had to weigh that against what he'd done on that winter morning in March of 1982.

Blanchard: In making our decisions, there is absolutely no doubt that the focus in all cases, not just yours, is the offense that got the person where they're at. The primary issue is not what, what has the person done since they have come into prison. The primary issue is, how did they get here? What did they do? That clearly is the primary basis for all of our decisions.

Amy Donaldson: The hearing ended. Michael returned to prison and the Rasmussens to their lives. And a month later, Michael was denied parole, yet again.

All that forgiveness, the expressions of remorse but no mercy. It seemed there was nothing that could change Michael Moore's fate until an unlikely ally appeared. That's after the break.

[Music]

Amy Donaldson: In early 1997 two years after Michael Moore had been denied parole for a third time former, prosecutor John T. Nielsen was preparing to take a trip to the Utah State Prison.

As you may remember, John T oversaw the prosecution of Michael Moore. He was also a friend of Jordan's father. So, after the murders, he'd taken the unusual step of personally guaranteeing the Rasmuseens that Michael Moore would face the firing squad.

John T: This was a slam dunk, it seemed to me. And I thought an obvious case that merited the death penalty.

Amy Donaldson: But after the trial ended, he didn't think about Michael Moore at all. John T eventually left the county attorney's office and went into private practice and sometime in 1997, he was asked for advice on how to get a history of the state legislature published. John T suggested using the print shop at Utah Correctional Industries. He volunteered to go to the prison himself to find out if the printshop could handle the job. It was one of those seemingly small decisions that turns out to be life-changing.

When he got to the prison, Dick Clasby, the head of Utah Correctional Industries, met with him to answer his questions and walk him through the facilities.

John T: And so he takes me on a tour. And I'm, I'm walking this room and I see this guy at a big oak table with computers everywhere. And I said, What's he doing over there? Who is that? And he said, Well, that's That's Mike Moore. I said, You mean, Log Haven, Mike Moore? He said, yeah, and so I asked him if I could go over and see him. So I went over and introduced myself.

Amy Donaldson: He shook the hand of the man he'd hoped to execute nearly 18 years earlier.

John T: And he said, Oh, yeah, I remember you. Said, I hold no animus. Probably, this is a good thing for me, because where I was headed, was not good. And I've hopefully I've improved my life considerably. And I said, Well, good for you. Good luck to you. And I walked away.

Amy Donaldson: Of all the cases he'd been involved in, John T said this was among the most disturbing. So he was taken aback by the polite, professional man who stood in front of him.

John T: I would have expected something completely different, because as I recall, he was a cocky little cuss, when he was first arrested.

Amy Donaldson: As John T continued his tour, he mentioned this to Dick who confirmed what John T had seen in Michael and then went even further.

John T: He said, we could not run Prison Industries without him. He has set up the entire computer system for our industry workshops here and how we do things, he runs it. And without him we'd have trouble really doing what we, we've done and he said, let me just tell you about him. He's mastered five languages. We use him as an arbitrator, when we have issues with, with the inmates of different cultures and so on. He has two degrees from Utah State University. And if I'm not mistaken, he told me that he was working on a PhD eventually, with the hope that someday he would be released and he could use what he learned in prison to be a productive citizen. He said, There's, we've never seen anybody like this. He's just amazing. And I said, Oh, my. Amazes me that he's been able to do that. Good for him.

Amy Donaldson: For a man who'd seen so much death and devastation in his time as a prosecutor, this was a profoundly satisfying moment.

John T: So I began to harbor this notion that, you know, in some cases, rehabilitation really works.

Amy Donaldson: But when he left the prison, he was thinking about the printing job...and not much more.

John T: And that was it. Until two days later.

Amy Donaldson: 48 hours after his visit to the prison, John T walked into his bank in downtown Salt Lake City and ran into a man he hadn't seen in years. It was Jordan Rasmussen's Brother-in-law Leslie's husband.

John T: He said, John, you'll just never guess what's happened to us the last couple of years. He said, our family, my mother and father have made a amazing reconciliation with the guy that killed their son. I said, Michael Moore? And he said, Yeah, I said, Well, I just saw him two days ago. He said, You know, we've had the sweetest correspondence back and forth. I think he told me, he'd had been out to see him at the prison. It was hard for me to believe because he had murdered their son,

Amy Donaldson: And then, came a request. A shocking request.

John T: Is there anything you can do to help him? Cause we think he ought to get out?

Amy Donaldson: John T was stunned. In two days' time, he had gone from not thinking about Michael Moore in 15 years to, first, running into him and a chance meeting with the family of one of his victims? It felt like more than just a coincidence.

John T: You know, you'll forgive me. But I really get emotional when I think about it. Because as I said, in my journal, I don't, I don't have many, I didn't have many whisperings in my life, but this time, I mean, I heard a voice. And it said, You got to help.

Amy Donaldson: So he made the Rasmussen family a second promise this time, it wasn't about retribution, it was about mercy forgiveness It was for a second chance.

That's next time on The Letter.