

# No More Time

"Judge, you don't understand."

"Yeah, I do, kid. More'n you think." Having been friends with McCormick for over five years, Judge Hardcastle had learned to read the young man like a book, and right now the page revealed to him was very disturbing. Taking the time to eat another mouthful of eggs, he continued cautiously, "Look, you've tried everything with Sammy. You were nice to 'im and it didn't work; you played hardball with 'im and it didn't work. You even invited the boy to stay here for awhile, and what'd he do the first time your back was turned? The little bastard stabbed ya in it."

Silence fell at the table as each of their thoughts returned to that day two weeks ago when Hardcastle walked into the den just in time to see the glint of a switchblade as it cut through the air in a downward sweep. His warning cry not in time, the knife slashed into Mark's left shoulder, burying itself to the hilt.

Moving quickly, Hardcastle caught his young friend, and lowering McCormick gently to the floor, he charged Sammy, fully prepared to deliver a blow that would've broken the teenager's neck. Only Mark's weak cry of protest stayed his hand, but Hardcastle remembered well the fear and white-hot fury that had engulfed him then.

McCormick was remembering, too--the wave of nauseating pain that had swept over him, the anger and concern on the judge's face as he gently tried to staunch the flow of blood, and most of all, his own sense of disappointment and failure.

Studying Hardcastle's lowered head, he tried to erase the memory by teasing softly, "You were worried about me, weren't you?"

Hardcastle looked up. "Worried about you?" he grumbled. "Nah, I was just mad because you got blood all over the den."

Glancing down at the ketchup covering his eggs, McCormick pushed his plate away with a grimace. "Thanks. I really needed that."

Regretting his words, Hardcastle broke into a grin. "Hey listen, how about some Rice Krispies? Or I've got a coupla honey buns in the fridge."

McCormick shook his head. "I'm not really hungry,

anyway." Propping his elbows on the table, he released a long sigh. "Judge, what am I gonna do?"

"I assume you mean about Sammy," Hardcastle frowned. At McCormick's lethargic nod, he asked another question in a rough voice, "What'd I tell you when you wanted to get into this Big Brother program?"

"You told me not to let it interfere with my law studies," McCormick recited in a flat tone.

"Yeah, but what did I tell you about the program itself?" Hardcastle pressed.

"You said I could probably help some boys, but I'd also have some failures, and I couldn't let those outweigh my successes."

Hardcastle slapped the table. "There! Now, why can't you do like I tell ya?"

"You just don't understand," McCormick complained. "All of yours were successes."

"Now, that's a lotta bull and we both know it," Hardcastle shot back. "I know damned well you haven't forgotten J.J. Beale."

"He was different," McCormick retorted.

"Why? Because he was older?" Hardcastle shook his head. "Right off the bat, I can name you a half dozen kids who were from fifteen to twenty years old when I tried to help 'em, and every damned one of 'em is in prison now." Picking up his and McCormick's plates, he started towards the sink, adding casually over his shoulder, "Matter of fact, if you wanna get technical about it, you're the only real success I ever had."

McCormick glanced at the judge's back in surprise. "Do my ears deceive me? Is that a compliment I just heard?"

"Take it any way you like," Hardcastle tossed back without turning.

His smile fading, McCormick dropped his chin in his hands and stared at the wall in dejection. "I just wanna do for Sammy what you've done for me," he mumbled in a forlorn voice. "Why isn't it working? What am I doin' wrong?"

Hardcastle turned, tossing the dishtowel on the counter behind him. "What you're doing is overlooking one very important thing here," he pointed out.

McCormick continued to stare at the wall. "Like what?" he asked glumly.

"Like the fact that I only deserve half the credit for the way you turned out," Hardcastle responded gruffly.

His head coming up slowly, McCormick looked at the judge in puzzlement. "What're you talkin' about?"

"I'm talkin' about the person who gets the other half of the credit--you, kiddo."

McCormick's eyes widened, then the shadow of a smile teased his lips. "Two compliments in five minutes? Better watch it, Judge, you're getting senile."

"I'm not complimenting you!" Hardcastle threw back angrily. Taking his seat again at the table, he leaned across it to face McCormick squarely. "You ever known me to make a habit of being nice to you?" he demanded.

"Not so it would be obvious," McCormick smiled.

"Well, I'm not doin' it now, either," Hardcastle retorted. "I'm simply stating a fact and tryin' to knock some sense into that pea brain of yours. Part of the reason why you turned out the way you have is because you wanted to. It's time you realized that a lot of what you are today came from you, not me, sport. I could've complained and yelled my head off and it wouldn't have made a damned bit of difference if you hadn't wanted to listen."

"But what's that got to do with Sammy?" McCormick questioned.

Hardcastle sighed patiently. "Sammy doesn't wanna listen."

McCormick shook his head determinedly. "I don't believe that, Judge."

"Well, you better, kid, because I know what I'm talkin' about." Hardcastle leaned back in his chair. "When you've been around ex-cons and juvenile delinquents for as many years as I have, you'll see what I mean. You learn to tell the difference between the ones who want your help and the ones who'd just as soon put a gun to your head and pull the trigger. Sammy falls in that last category."

"No, he doesn't."

"McCormick, he tried to kill you!" Hardcastle exploded.

"Look, Judge, I know you got upset over that," McCormick tried to placate, "but you can't--"

"Upset!" Hardcastle roared. "I don't call wanting to kill a fourteen-year-old boy with my bare hands 'upset'! I don't call nursing you for three days and nights, and then

listening to you refuse to press charges against that half-pint killer 'upset'! No, what I call it is 'madder'n hell'!!"

"Look, it won't happen again," McCormick promised.

"You're damned right it won't!" Pointing an angry finger at the young man across the table, Hardcastle ordered, "You are goin' down to the social services office before your classes this morning, and you're gonna ask 'em to assign you another kid."

"But Judge--"

"Don't 'but judge' me!" Hardcastle interrupted. "You've already worked with this miniature John Dillinger for over two months. Your grades are slippin', you can't sleep at night, and you damned near lost your life. Now, if you haven't got the sense to call it quits, I'm gonna do it for you."

"For God's sake, Judge, he's only a boy!" McCormick argued. "I can't abandon him."

"You only abandon someone who wants ya," Hardcastle threw back. "That teenage scuzzball doesn't, or he wouldn't've tried to douse your lights permanently." Leaning across the table, he laid a hand on McCormick's outstretched arm. "Face it, kid," he spoke softly. "Sammy Coletti is on the road to prison, and there's not a damned thing you can do about it."

"No!" McCormick jumped to his feet. "Sammy's not goin' to prison, Judge! That's the last thing I'm gonna let happen! My God, they'd eat a kid like him alive in there!"

"You can't stop it!" Hardcastle protested.

"I can, and I will!" he yelled and started for the door.

The judge rose quickly. "McCormick, come back here! Mark!!"

His order fell on deaf ears and dropping in his chair, Hardcastle listened to the angry squeal of tires in the drive, and sighed. How do you convince a young man that there is such a thing as being too good and honorable?

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Pulling into a parking space behind the social services office, McCormick cut the engine, but made no move to leave the car. A war of emotions was raging within him, and he tried to sort them out, attempting to come to terms with at least a few of them.

His angry exit from the house was not something to be proud of. He knew Hardcastle was only looking out for his welfare, and McCormick suspected that the judge was right about

Sammy. His own ego, however, would not let him admit defeat in his very first shot at being a "big brother". Stronger than that was his desire to help Sammy, to be there for the teenager and show him that someone cared. The young man's life chronicled his own, and McCormick was determined to give Sammy the help that he himself had been unable to find at that age.

There were two obstacles to his plan, however--Sammy didn't want his help, and he suddenly found himself afraid of someone hardly more than a boy.

Climbing out of the Coyote, McCormick leaned against it, sweat breaking out on his forehead. He could again feel the nausea as the knife bit into his back, slicing through flesh and scraping his shoulder blade with a scream of white-hot pain that had caused him to go numb.

In his Lone Ranger and Tonto routine with Hardcastle over the years, he had come face to face with men who would've blown him away at a moment's notice, but none had been as young or as cold-blooded as Sammy. McCormick remembered the black eyes staring down at him on the stretcher, angry and remorseless, sending a chill through him even worse than the knife wound.

He had not seen the teenager since that day, and even now, two weeks later, it had taken all his courage and willpower to call and schedule an appointment with the young man.

Glancing at his watch, McCormick pulled away from the car and forced his legs to carry him towards the government building. A voice inside him screamed in protest, and he began to wish he had at least brought the judge with him. If he had asked, Hardcastle would gladly have come along, but McCormick knew he couldn't face the young man for the first time since the attempted murder with a watchdog beside him. Any respect Sammy might have for him would be instantly destroyed, and McCormick knew it was that respect he would have to obtain first if he entertained any hope of making progress with the teenager.

His reluctant steps took him to the third floor where, to his surprise, instead of being directed to one of the meeting rooms, he was ushered into the office of Brian Maitlin, head counselor for the social services department.

Glancing up at his entrance, Maitlin rose to his feet, offering a hand and a congenial smile. "Well, hello, Mark. How're you feeling?"

"Pretty good," McCormick returned cautiously. "What's wrong? Isn't Sammy here yet?"

"Oh yes, he's waiting for you in 2-C." Maitlin circled the desk and sat on the edge of it, facing McCormick. "I-uh-I told the secretary to show you in here first. I thought it might be best if we had a little talk."

"About what?" McCormick questioned suspiciously.

Maitlin's eyes met his squarely. "Mark, are you sure you want to do this?" he asked bluntly.

McCormick nodded. "Positive."

"Did you talk it over with Milt?"

He nodded again.

"And what did he say?"

McCormick shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "You've been friends with the judge for almost fifteen years. You know damned well what he said."

"And you came, anyway," Maitlin smiled.

"I had to," was McCormick's almost inaudible reply. "I didn't have any choice."

There was silence a moment, then nodding as if he had just made a decision, Maitlin rose to his feet. "You want anyone to go with you?"

"No," McCormick replied quickly. "I've got to do this...alone."

"Okay, but watch him," Maitlin warned. "He's been thoroughly searched for weapons, but that kid has a lot of mean tricks up his sleeves."

"Don't worry. My back will literally be against the wall," McCormick promised.

He stood and Maitlin offered his hand again. "I've gotta admit, Mark, if I were in your shoes, I don't think I could do what you're about to do."

"Yeah, you could," McCormick smiled. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be head counselor around here."

"Get outta my office," Maitlin grinned. "I got work to do." When McCormick opened the door, he called after him softly, "Be careful, Mark."

He nodded without turning, and stepping into the hallway, walked slowly to Room 2-C, stopping only long enough to take a deep breath and lick his dry lips before he unlocked the door and swung it open.

The room was small, containing only a table with two chairs, an old couch, and a water cooler. McCormick studied the angular form stretched between the couch and a chair, and swallowed hard. "Hello, Sammy."

The teenager didn't move from his position, acknowledging McCormick's presence with a sullen jerk of his head.

McCormick let the door swing shut, sucking in his breath when he heard the lock on the other side click into place. Keeping his promise to Maitlin, he moved cautiously across the room, his body partially facing Sammy at all times. Turning the remaining chair backwards, he straddled it, and rested his chin on his forearms. "Well, how's it goin'?" he asked casually.

"Okay, I guess," Sammy shrugged and turned black, indifferent eyes on him. "What're you doin' here, anyway?"

"We have an appointment," McCormick answered. "Sorry I missed the last two, but I was kinda indisposed."

Sammy's lips parted, revealing even, white teeth. "Yeah, so I heard. Hey, man, why don't you ditch the shirt?"

McCormick stiffened. "Why would I wanna do that?"

"'Cause when I do a guy, I like to see my handiwork," Sammy sneered.

A white-hot fury engulfed McCormick and jumping to his feet, he kicked the chair across the room. "I've had it with you!" he exploded. "You think you're hot stuff because you knifed a guy! Well, let me tell you something, little man--only cowards attack when someone's back is turned! Now, if you think you can handle me face to face, you just come ahead and try!"

Sammy came off the couch with a cat-like move. "I can take you on any day, man!"

"Take your best shot, boy!" McCormick urged, his curled fingers motioning the teenager towards him. "Let me warn ya about something, though. I damned near died of that knife wound, but that's the first, last, and only chance you're ever gonna get to waste me! You try it again, and I'll take you down so hard, you'll need a wheelchair 'til you're fifty!"

Sammy backed off a step, a strange look creeping into his eyes. "Go to hell, you bastard!"

"Yes, I am, and so are you!" McCormick shouted back. "But it's about time you realized that doesn't make you any better or worse than anyone else in this world! It also doesn't give you the right to hate!"

Sammy straightened, eyeing him with thinly-concealed admiration. "Ya know, you got a lotta guts comin' in here again after what I did to ya."

McCormick blinked in surprise at the sudden change in Sammy's demeanor, then decided to try something different.

"Guts, huh? You don't know the half of it," he admitted. "When I got outta the car down there, my knees were so weak, I could hardly walk."

Sammy stared at him in awe. "Hey, man, you're pullin' my leg."

McCormick shook his head. "Nope. You almost killed me, man, and everybody's afraid to die." The teenager remained silent and he continued, "You ever been afraid, Sammy? If you have, think about it, think about how you were tremblin' all over and how the nausea came up in your throat, threatenin' to choke ya. Double that and you get a pretty good idea how I felt when I was lyin' there with your knife in my back."

Sammy backed away slowly, then turning to the window, stared out in silence.

McCormick studied his back a moment, then asked softly, "Is that what you really want, Sammy? To make people feel that gut-wrenching fear, to rob them of their self-respect and maybe even their lives? That's not a feeling to be proud of, is it?"

Instead of answering him, Sammy continued to gaze out the window, obviously seeing the past instead of the present. "Mom had a boyfriend over one night," he began in a hoarse whisper. "He was drunk and it turned out he liked little boys more'n he did grown women. I didn't understand what he was doin', but it hurt, and I wanted him to stop. Mom tried to make him stop, but when he hit her, I got away. I ran outside and hid in the alley behind a bunch of old garbage cans. I was shakin' so hard, I just knew he was gonna hear me. He kept calling my name, and I just kept shakin' and..."

McCormick reached out to lay a hand on his shoulder, and Sammy whirled around. "Don't touch me!" he screamed, then the past slowly faded from his eyes, and he slumped. "Uh-look, man, just-just go away, will ya?"

"You sure?" McCormick asked softly.

"Yeah." Sammy turned back to the window. "Just go, okay?"

McCormick moved away slowly. "I'll be back, Sammy, next week, or sooner, if you need me."

"Yeah, sure," Sammy mumbled. "Why not?"

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It was a thoughtful young man who returned to Gulls-Way that night and sat at the dining room table, hardly touching his food.

Unable to stand the silence any longer, Hardcastle



growled, "That food's not there for decoration, ya know. You're supposed to put it in your mouth and swallow it."

McCormick looked up and blinked. "Huh? Were you talkin' to me, Judge?"

"No, I was talkin' to that little green man sittin' across from you," Hardcastle shot back, and his voice rose in volume. "Who the hell do you think I was talkin' to? If you'd get your brains outta mothballs, you'd hear me!"

McCormick smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, Judge. I was just thinking."

"Well, you gonna tell me about it?" Hardcastle asked gruffly.

Knowing what he was referring to, McCormick turned in his chair to face the judge. "You were wrong about him, Milt."

"Well, good," he beamed. "Now, you wanna fill me in on the details?"

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Hardcastle pushed the button illuminating his watch and peered at the dial. "Almost two-thirty!" he grumbled, and grabbed for the phone insistently demanding his attention. "This had better be good." Snatching up the receiver, he barked, "Yeah, what do ya want? Frank! What the hell're you doin' callin' this time of night?" He listened a moment, his face creasing in a troubled frown. "What! When'd it happen? Aw, damn! And the kid thought he was gettin' through to him, too. Yeah, I'll tell 'im; somebody has to. You know damned well how McCormick's gonna take this. Yeah, well, thanks for callin', Frank. I'd rather he hear this from me than from someone down there at that social services office."

He returned the receiver to its cradle, then slowly got up and put his clothes on. There would be no more sleep tonight.

Trudging out to the gatehouse, he climbed the stairs to the loft and paused, gazing down at the curly head resting on the pillow. "Aw, kid, I'm sorry," he groaned softly, and reaching down, gripped a lean shoulder. "McCormick, wake up."

Rolling over on his side, McCormick mumbled, "Wha' time is it?"

"Two-thirty."

"Go away, you donkey. Not even the crooks are out this time of night." McCormick tried to put the pillow over his head, but Hardcastle gently pulled it away from his grasp.

"C'mon, Mark, get up. I gotta talk to you."

McCormick's eyes popped open and staring at the judge, he pushed himself up to a sitting position. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly.

Hardcastle dropped to the edge of the bed, fervently wishing he was anywhere but there. "I-uh-I got some bad news for ya, kid. Frank just called." He licked his lips and inhaled deeply, releasing his breath with the announcement, "Sammy Coletti committed suicide tonight."

McCormick turned white as a sheet. "Oh my...God."

"He-uh-he somehow got his hands on a knife from the kitchen," Hardcastle continued, knowing that sooner or later, McCormick would ask. "The boy slit his wrists. Guard does a routine bed check at midnight, and that's when he found him. Sammy was...already gone."

Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, McCormick buried his face in his hands and began rocking back and forth. "Oh God, it's all my fault," he whispered hoarsely. "I drove him to it."

Scooting over quickly, Hardcastle put an arm around the slumped shoulders. "Aw now, that's a lotta bull, kid. Frank said they couldn't find any kinda note, so we'll probably never know what drove Sammy to commit such a desperate act."

"I know," McCormick returned in a choked voice. "I made him face some things that he wasn't ready to deal with. I knew where he was comin' from because I'd been there, too. I was never...molested, but I understood his anger, and that-that feeling of bleakness, like there's just no future. I was tryin' to help him, show him that he did have a future."

"Maybe that was the problem," Hardcastle suggested softly. "Maybe Sammy's been bent on self-destruction all along. But after what you said to him yesterday, maybe he realized he didn't wanna take anyone else down with him, so Sammy took this way out."

McCormick's head moved back and forth in his hands, and he rocked even harder. "He opened up to me. He was reaching out, wanting my help, and I didn't give it to him. I wanted to, but I must've-I must've said or done something wrong." He stopped rocking and slumped against Hardcastle, his spirit seeming to die with Sammy. "My God, Judge, I killed a fourteen-year-old boy."

The harsh words cut through Hardcastle like a knife, and knowing this was not the time to hold back, he wrapped strong arms around McCormick, pressing the curly head to his shoulder. "C'mon, kid, let it out," he urged softly.

McCormick began trembling violently, sucking in breaths as he fought the sobs. "I-I failed 'im, J-Judge. I wanted-I

wanted to be there for-for him, to h-help him, but instead I-I..."

His voice was lost in wracking sobs, and somewhat frightened, Hardcastle held his young friend tighter, gently massaging his back. He had hugged Nancy when she cried, and he had comforted little Tommy when he had come running to him with a scraped knee, but never had he held a grown man in his arms and felt such unbridled grief. Mark's total breakdown unnerved him, and tears streaming down his own face, Hardcastle felt a wave of unashamed hatred for the dead boy. It hadn't been enough that Sammy had almost killed McCormick; now he had hurt him far worse than any knife wound ever could. "Damn, this is all my fault," he muttered. "I should never have let you go back to see Sammy again." Resting his chin on the curly head, he released a ragged sigh. "I'm sorry, son. I thought when you reached the age you are now that things would be all down hill for ya, but life just keeps handin' you garbage. You try to do right, and look what it gets ya. Seems to me you've been kicked in the gut more'n enough for any one man in a lifetime."

McCormick's sobs gradually began to lessen, then finally stopped altogether. His hands fell from the judge's back, and lowering his own, Hardcastle let the young man pull away.

Sniffing loudly, McCormick dropped his head and mumbled, "I'm sorry, Judge."

Pulling out his handkerchief, Hardcastle handed it over. "Never be sorry 'cause you're human, kid," he admonished gruffly.

McCormick made use of the square of cloth, then standing, moved to the window and stared out. "I wanna play basketball," he stated simply.

Understanding immediately, Hardcastle rose and slapped him on the back. "You got it, kid. Get dressed and I'll fetch the ball."

Minutes later, the floodlight sprang to life, illuminating the two somber players. The game began, no holds barred, and neither of them keeping score. They played on and on in silence until, winded, Hardcastle held up his hands and backed away, leaving his companion to continue alone.

McCormick was a man driven, grief-stricken frenzy causing him to dribble hard and hit the backboard with a force that made the entire pole tremble violently.

He played on, seeing black, unforgiving eyes boring into him, accusing him of murder. What was the phrase, the one word he had said that had pushed Sammy over the edge? Why in God's name did he say it?

His still-healing shoulder began to throb, adding fuel to his grief, making him dribble faster, jump higher, and hit the backboard harder. Only vaguely aware of Hardcastle watching just beyond the floodlight, McCormick continued his game with players that only he could see--frightened, black-eyed children, cowering in the shadows, trying to hide from adults who did unspeakable things to them.

He made a vicious throw at the basket, missed, and collapsed to his knees, lack of oxygen causing everything to go black.

Hardcastle caught him before he toppled over, and with strong arms, held him upright, waiting silently as he sucked in lungfuls of air.

"I-I'm okay now," he managed at last, and Hardcastle nodded.

"Can you stand?"

"I...think so." With the judge's help, he made it to his feet, every muscle in his body crying out in agony.

Steering him towards the gatehouse, Hardcastle growled softly, "Morning's still a coupla hours away. You're goin' back to bed."

McCormick shook his head slowly. "Judge, I-I don't wanna--"

"Yeah, I know you don't, but you're going to, anyway."

Stumbling up the stairs, McCormick fell on the bed, still protesting feebly, "Judge, I--"

"Don't worry. I'll be right here, kid."

McCormick was asleep in minutes, and pulling a chair close to the bed, Hardcastle watched the rhythmic rise and fall of the young man's chest. In the pre-dawn light he could see the youthful face, creased with lines of anguish even in sleep, and leaning forward, the judge did something he had not done in a long time--he prayed.

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Elsewhere in the world, it was, no doubt, a beautiful morning, but in the Hardcastle household the subject of death had cast a shadow over its occupants.

When McCormick awoke after less than two hours of agitated sleep, Hardcastle set a plate of pastries and a pot of coffee on the patio table, but neither man was in any mood to eat.

McCormick stared out over the landscape, one hand grasping the coffee cup which he had apparently forgotten.

Taking a sip of his own hot liquid, Hardcastle watched the young man, seeing his face go through changes that obviously mirrored his bleak thoughts. Reaching out, the judge's large hand closed around the one gripping the coffee cup. "Mark, you gotta talk about it," he urged softly. "You can't keep this bottled up inside."

McCormick turned dull blue eyes on him. "I killed Sammy," he spoke in a resigned voice. "What else is there to talk about?"

Hardcastle's hand came down hard on the table. "You didn't kill 'im! You did everything humanly possible for that boy! It's not your fault he chose this way out."

"I killed him," McCormick repeated in a monotone, and with a jerky motion, jumped to his feet and began pacing, his voice choked with emotion. "God, I should've listened to you. I should never've gone back to see Sammy. You're always right about this kind of thing, but no, I had to let my ego get in the way. Sammy almost killed me, and I wanted to show 'im he had failed."

"Is that really the reason you went back?" Hardcastle asked quietly. "Was it because of what Sammy did to you, or in spite of it?" McCormick threw him a confused look, and the judge explained, "Yeah, there may have been a little ego involved, but after all these years, kid, don't think I don't know you inside and out. You'd help every homeless mongrel and every derelict on skid row if you could. You didn't listen to me yesterday because you knew I was wrong about Sammy. You were determined to help 'im despite him almost killin' you. That's a helluva commendation, son. Don't destroy it by tearin' yourself apart like this. Never belittle the fact that you got more good in you than any person I've ever met."

Stopping behind the older man, McCormick gazed down at the broad back, and on impulse, draped his arms over Hardcastle's shoulders, resting his chin briefly on the white hair. "Thanks for being here, Judge," he whispered hoarsely.

Hardcastle patted the hand on his chest. "My pleasure, kid."

McCormick straightened and sighed. "I-I gotta call the social services office about making arrangements for Sammy's...funeral."

Hardcastle watched him go and shook his head sadly. Life was going to be rough for a good long awhile. Rising slowly, he made a trip to the mailbox outside the gates, frowning as he leafed through the letters and found one

man. Time's run out for me, but they still got a lifetime. Don't let 'em down. Sammy."

Dropping the letter to his side, Hardcastle gazed at the forlorn figure slumped over his desk. "I was dead wrong about that boy," he admitted softly. "He not only had a lotta smarts for his age, but there was a lotta good in him, too. He knew what he was about to do and yet he was thinkin' of those other two kids, and especially you." He paused, then asked hesitantly, "Are you still blaming yourself?"

McCormick's head rose and with tears in his eyes, he smiled for the first time since the news of the teenager's death. "No, Sammy fixed that for me. He was one helluva kid, Judge." Turning in the huge chair, he gazed out the window and sighed. "I just wish--I just wish there had been a little more time."