

Chapter 1

The End

This is a story about a man named Eddie, and it begins at the end, with Eddie dying in the sun while he was at work at Ruby Park. It might seem strange to start a story at the end. But all endings are also beginnings. We just don't know it at the time.



Like most of the other hours of his life, Eddie's last was spent at Ruby Park, a typical old-style American amusement park beside a great gray ocean. Visitors came to walk along the beach, to eat hot dogs and cotton candy, to win a prize at one of the shooting games, and, especially, to go on the rides. There were all the old-fashioned rides like the big Ferris wheels, the bumper cars, and the roller coasters, and there were some exciting new ones, too, like Freddy's Free Fall—and this was where Eddie's life would end.

At the time of his death Eddie was a short, broad, white-haired old man with a thick neck and strong arms. He used a cane and walked with a limp after being shot in the leg in World War II. Since then his left leg had caused him almost constant pain. His face was rough and lined after so many years in the sun, and his lower jaw stuck out, making him look prouder and less friendly than he really was. He kept a cigarette behind his left ear and a ring of keys hooked to his tool belt. He wore heavy shoes, an old cap, and a brown uniform. All of this suggested that he was a working man, and that was exactly what he was and had been for more than sixty years.

Eddie was the maintenance man at Ruby Park, which meant that he kept the rides running safely and smoothly. Every afternoon he walked through the park, checking each

machine, looking for broken boards, loose screws, worn-out steel. And he was always listening. After all those years he could *hear* trouble and knew exactly how to fix the problem.

With fifty minutes left on Earth, Eddie took his last walk through Ruby Park. He was eighty-three today, but he didn't celebrate birthdays any more. Instead, he treated this day like a regular working day, and with forty minutes left to live, he went to the front of the line for the "Ghost," the biggest roller coaster in the park. Eddie went on every ride at least once a week, and the kids who knew him followed behind shouting, "Eddie!" "Take me, Eddie!" "Take me!"

Children liked Eddie. Not teenagers. Teenagers were trouble. They gave him headaches. They were always shouting, and throwing their trash on the ground. Children, on the other hand, were polite and nice. They liked Eddie and were attracted to him like cold hands to a fire. They played with his keys and begged to go on the rides with him. Today it would be the turn of two little brothers in baseball caps. "Here we go ... *Here we go!*" one of the boys shouted, and the other pulled Eddie's arm around his shoulder as they climbed into the ride.

Thirty-four minutes to live. The roller coaster came to a stop, and Eddie gave each boy a piece of candy before he walked slowly over to the maintenance building to cool down. He was following his regular, dull routine with no idea that his death was hardly more than half an hour away. And if he had known, what would he have done differently?

One of the maintenance crew, named Dominguez, was at the sink cleaning a wheel.

"Hey, Eddie," he said. "What's happening, man?"

"Same as usual, Dom," Eddie replied. "No problems yet today."

The workshop had a low ceiling and was dark and crowded with work tables and spare parts. Tools hung neatly on the

walls—everything for maintaining the rides. Eddie had dreamed of leaving this job, of building a different kind of life. But the war came and his plans never worked out. Like his father before him, Eddie was the head of maintenance, or as the kids sometimes called him, “the ride man” at Ruby Park.

Thirty minutes left.

“Hey, happy birthday, I hear,” Dominguez said. “Are you having a party?”

Eddie looked at him in disbelief. He thought how strange it was to be an old man working in an amusement park.

“Well, remember, I’m on vacation next week. Theresa and I are going to Mexico to see the family. And to have a big party! Have you ever been south of the border?” Dominguez asked.

“To Mexico?” Eddie said. “Kid, I’ve never been anywhere except where the army sent me.”

Dominguez was quiet. Eddie thought for a moment and then took his wallet from his back pocket. He held out two twenty-dollar bills to Dominguez.

“Get your wife something nice,” Eddie said.

Dominguez looked at the money and a big smile spread across his face. “Man! Are you sure?”

Eddie pushed the money into the young man’s hand.

Twenty-six minutes to live. Eddie was walking along the boardwalk at the south end of Ruby Park. Business was slow. A long time ago, this park was *the* place to go in the summer. There had been big shows in the evenings—dance contests, fireworks, and even elephants. But very few people went to the old seaside amusement parks now; these days they went to the big new theme parks, where you paid \$75 to get in and had your photograph taken with big furry movie characters. Ruby Park was a lot cheaper than those places, but it couldn’t compete any more.

Eddie limped past the bumper cars and noticed a small

group of teenagers leaning over the metal gate at the exit of the ride. “Great,” he thought. “Just what I need.”

“Off,” Eddie said, striking the gate with his cane. “Come on. It’s not safe.”

You could hear the sound of the electricity from the car poles that connected each bumper car to the ceiling.

The teenagers stared rudely at him.

“It’s not safe,” Eddie repeated. “Move along.”

One of the teenagers, with a shaved head and a ring through his nose, laughed at Eddie, then climbed onto the gate and began shouting at the kids in the bumper cars.

“Come on, guys, drive over here and hit me!” he cried, waving his arms at the young drivers. “What are you afraid of?”

Eddie hit the metal gate so hard with his cane that he almost broke it. “MOVE!”

The teenagers quickly ran away.

One of the stories that went around about Eddie was about his days as a soldier. It was believed that he had fought in quite a few battles during the war. He’d been brave—even won a medal, they said. But toward the end of his time in the army, he got into a fight with one of his own men. According to the story, that’s how Eddie was wounded. No one knew what happened to the other guy.

No one asked.

With nineteen minutes left on Earth, Eddie sat for the last time in his old wooden beach chair. His legs were red from the sun and the rest of his body showed signs of a hard life. His fingers were bent and stiff, after a lot of injuries from working on different machines. His nose had been broken several times in what he called “bar-room battles.” He looked like a man who had been good-looking, but—like a boxer’s—his face and body had taken a lot of punishment.

Now Eddie just looked tired. But when he had a few

minutes to sit and rest, he thought of the old days, when a band played in the evenings at Ruby Park, and people came to the Stardust Room to listen and to dance.

This was where Eddie had met Marguerite.

Every life has one true-love moment. For Eddie, it came on a warm September night after a thunderstorm, when the boardwalk was wet. Marguerite wore a yellow cotton dress and had a pink flower in her hair. Eddie didn't say much. He was so nervous that his tongue was glued to his teeth. But they danced to the music of a big band, and he bought her a lemon soda and a bag of candy. She had to go home before her parents got angry, but as she walked away, she turned and waved.

That was Eddie's true-love moment. For the rest of his life, whenever he thought of Marguerite, he pictured that scene. He saw her as she turned and waved, her dark hair falling over one eye, and each time he felt his heart bursting with love again.

On the night he met Marguerite, he came home and woke his older brother. He told him he'd met the girl he was going to marry.

"Shut up and go to sleep, Eddie," his brother complained.

Sixteen minutes to live. Eddie watched a wave break on the beach. He used to think a lot about Marguerite, but not so much now. She was hidden somewhere, like an old wound under a bandage, and he had grown more used to the bandage.



No story exists by itself. Sometimes stories meet at corners or cover each other completely, like stones beneath a river.

The end of Eddie's story was touched by another seemingly unrelated story that happened months earlier on a cloudy night when a young man arrived at Ruby Park with three of his friends. Nicky, the young man, had just passed his driving test and had his dad's car for the evening. He put the car key in his