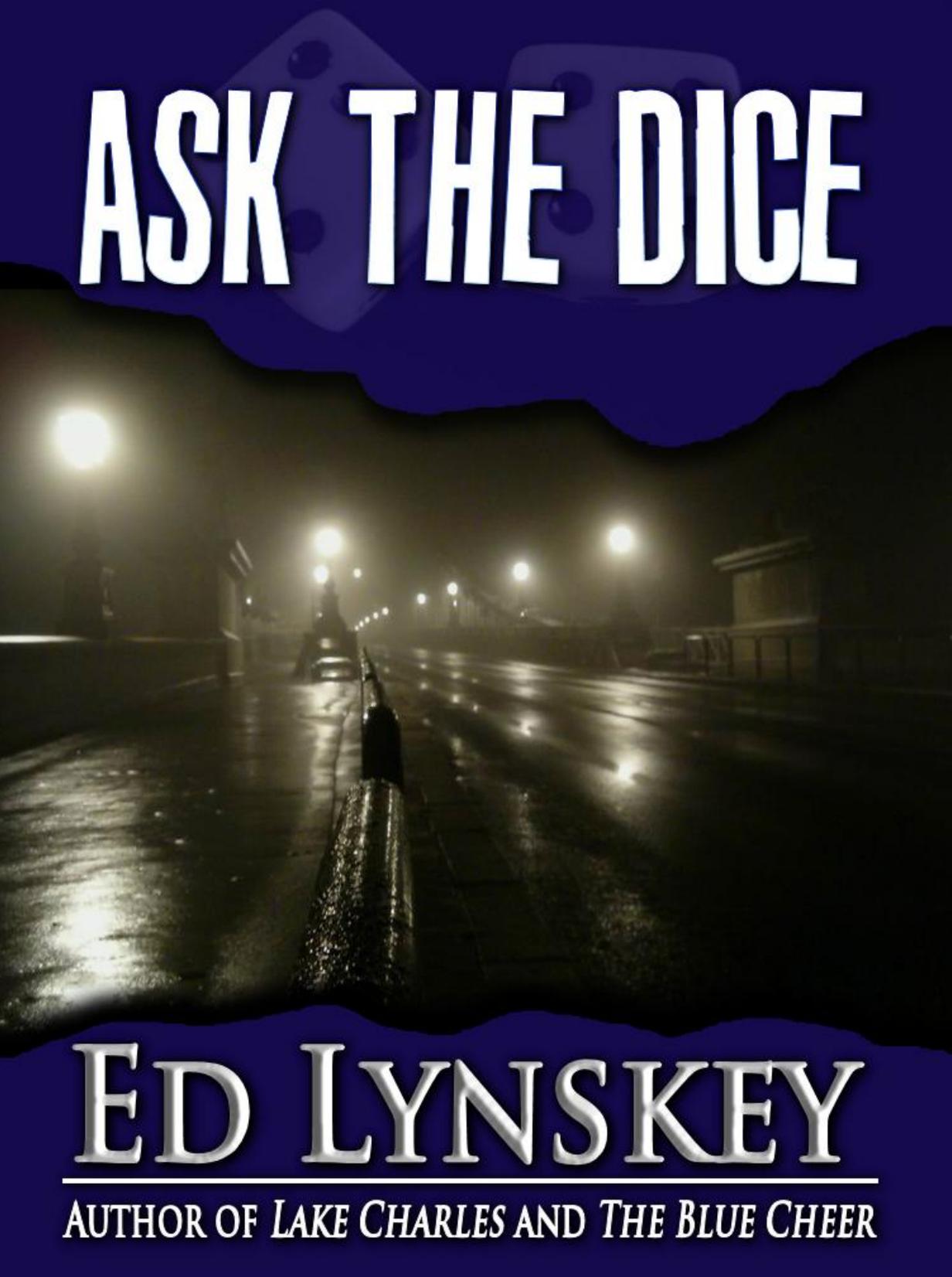


ASK THE DICE



ED LYNKEY

AUTHOR OF *LAKE CHARLES* AND *THE BLUE CHEER*

ASK THE DICE

Ed Lynskey



MACABRE INK

Digital Edition published by Crossroad Press

© 2011 / Ed Lynskey

Copy-edited by: Christine Steendam

Cover Design By: David Dodd

Background Images provided by: <http://cabgdl.deviantart.com>

LICENSE NOTES

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return to the vendor of your choice and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Dedication Page

For Heather, With Love

Buy Direct From Crossroad Press & Save

Try any title from CROSSROAD PRESS – use the Coupon Code FIRSTBOOK for a one-time 20% savings! We have a wide variety of eBook and Audiobook titles available.

Find us at: <http://store.crossroadpress.com>

"What should I ask the dice for, John?"

"Don't think, honey."

—Marilyn Monroe with the director John Huston at the craps table, Reno, Spring 1960, during their filming of *The Misfits*, her final motion picture. As reported in *Marilyn* by Norman Mailer (Grosset & Dunlap, 1973).

Chapter 1

The alcohol fumes were singeing my nose hairs. My lip snarled. All morning had been a bust. For a diversion while seated in the waiting area, I'd tried writing a poem in my head. Only the scary needle imagery stood out as clear. Right now, I sat here, dealing with my fear.

"Are you a vet, sir?"

A bit surprised, I wagged my head. "No. Why?"

"Buzz cut. Trim build. Stoic face. Just my read, mind you."

I gave him a curt look. "Wrong read."

"Just making conversation, Mr. Zane."

"Uh-huh. Just finish it."

"Just relax. Haste makes waste."

My back muscles banded tight as I watched my blood—a deep crimson ink—slurp out to fill the glass tube. The rubber tourniquet encircling my arm two inches above my elbow squeezed away. The hypo needle, carbon steel, pierced my plumped vein. If the hypo needle sheared off, or if he jabbed me any damn sharper, I'd treat him to a knuckle croissant. My chomps hacked at my gum. The phlebotomist, a half-head shorter but thirty pounds heavier than me, enunciated like a voice-over artist, each syllable made crisp. He noticed my tension, and he talked faster as if to defuse it.

"Rough winter."

My sour grunt admitted as much.

"Our electric power went out three times."

"Is this your last vial?"

"Yes, your doctor only ordered the cholesterol and triglyceride levels."

The vampire unsheathed the hypo needle, let off the tourniquet, and dabbed a gauze pad on the punctured vein. I unclenched my fist and poked my forefinger and middle finger on the gauze pad until he anchored it by sticking on a Band-Aid.

"There. Not so traumatic, huh, Mr. Zane?"

"Duck soup, dude."

"If you're not a vet, what is your vocation?"

"Hit man."

As he swished around the tube of my blood, his smile deflated to a frown. "No cause for the sarcasm."

"Are we done here?"

"You're free to go. Make it a nice one."

"Fuck you."

Cutting out of his cubicle, I marveled at how my spirits had already lifted. I hawked out my gum into the lobby's wastebasket. The fact was I felt halfway dead, an

incongruous mindset for a man, 54, certified to be in robust health. Standing nude in front of the closet mirror, my body still showed no major battle scars. Last Thursday my GP had given me a physical. First she'd played with my nuts, checking for a hernia. The quiver gave me a woodie, and her forefinger flick ended that fun. An auburn henna, the willowy Dr. Izellah stood an inch taller than my six feet. Her bronze eyeshadow gave her a regal appearance. She was also a chatterbox.

"So, you keep HR running smooth, Mr. Zane. Making the terminations must be murder for you."

My heart stuttered over a beat. "I beg your pardon?"

"I had to lay off two LPNs, and I cried over it for days."

My nod was fast. "Yeah, it's a jungle out there."

"I shoot from the hip. The best way is to end it quick."

Her latexed finger now waving up my asshole palpitated for prostate cancer. It was tricky holding up my end of our conversation. "Quick is the best."

"Are you experiencing any job-related stress?"

"Nothing I can't handle, Doc."

"The work is always there, isn't it?" She uncorked her finger. "All done. Everything is shipshape. Don't forget to schedule that colonoscopy."

"You betcha."

"Good colon health is important."

I thanked her for her thoroughness, dug out my money clip to pay up front, and ambled out of the brown block building. So, it wasn't a physical problem. I guessed middle age was rotting me from the inside out. For the past four days a blue funk had capsized my state of mind, and no lifelines had been tossed my way.

I sought to blame the past winter after three blizzards socked in Washington, D.C., and I'd shoveled enough snow to erect Zane's Great Wall. But the warmth soon melted the snowbanks, and April had given spring its toehold on us. We'd segued from the royal purple crocus to the tarnished gold daffodils with the lipstick red tulips puckering up.

En route to my split-level, I wondered if making a few tweaks to my lifestyle might buck me up. Smoking struck a romantic chord. The Duke ("Duke Ellington Longies"), Count (Lucky Strikes), and Louis (Camels)—jazz's holy trinity—always with a lit cigarette had set the bar for elegance. Even the middle-aged brother in residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue ducked out into the Rose Garden for the occasional puff much to the First Lady's chagrin.

After hanging a U-turn at the next traffic signal, I hit the shopping plaza nearest to my street. I unfolded from the coupé and shut its door. It was a good coupé. All it had to do was get me from Point A to Point B. Who cared if it was a rust bucket of bolts, axels, and fans? I balked at driving a navy blue sedan like Mr. Ogg's dark suits did. I was never a dark suit no matter what he tried to claim.

I picked up my gait entering the drugstore. Three patrons—the lanky, tall dude sported prison tats, body studs, and a rap star menace—at mid-morning browsed its wares. The cashier, mid-sixties, was liver-spotted, and stout. I squinted, not at her but at the white board above her listing the tobacco brands by price. My birth father, Bradford, had been a menthols fan, but their flavor invoked my anguished memories.

"Your cheapest weed, please," I said, her minty lozenge mixing with her hairspray odor in my nose.

She bent in the knees as if arthritis pained her, groped under the counter, and fished out an aqua blue pack. The brand was Blue Castle, its manufacturer located right here in the Old Dominion.

"Smooth blend?" I asked.

She hunched to shrug under the batik dashiki. "Blue Castles were my brand until I quit."

"Doctor's orders?"

She nodded. "I chomped on that nicotine gum until my jaws ached."

"My specialist told me the opposite," I lied. "Smoking might quell my nerves."

"I've been nothing but a nervous wreck since my final puff. Life will never be quite the same."

"Smoking will cast me as a pariah."

"Who's got the time for judgmental twerps?"

Liking her crusty spirit, I smiled. "Matches?"

She unclipped a plastic lighter from the cardboard display by the cash register.

"Here. Complimentary for our preferred customers."

"Thanks." I paid in cash, and my headshake passed on her offer to bag my items.

"Make it a good one." She winked at me, not flirty, just easy-natured.

"Likewise. Thanks again for the recommendation, and lighter."

"Don't mention it."

On my hike from the drugstore, I tore off the cellophane-wrapped top and knocked out a Blue Castle. By the time I was in the lot, I set flame to my debut cigarette. The snort of nicotine bombing my lungs sent the endorphins cartwheeling through my brain. My senses jump-started. The bright sun dazzled me, and the cloudless sky gleamed lacquer blue. On the next puff, I didn't cough or spill hot ashes down my shirtfront. I once saw a barfly at happy hour scorch a hole in his necktie that way.

I centered myself under the steering wheel and lowered my window when my beeper chirped. Frowning, I reached down, unclipped the beeper from my belt, and picked off the caller's number. It was my boss. I cocked my arm to hurl the hated beeper out the window and go on as if I'd never heard a peep. But he'd track me down, one way or other.

Cell phones were Big Brother's electronic tools used to control us, and I vowed never to carry one. My paranoia was justified. A man in my line of work feared and resisted

any location monitoring. Wearing the archaic beeper (although they proved invaluable on 9/11 and Katrina after the overloaded cell phone networks crashed) was my compromise. I dragged my ornery self out of the coupé and huffed back into the drugstore where I caught the cashier's wondering eye.

"Public telephone?" I asked her.

She laughed with a wave. "Nobody has used that relic in months. Go to the pharmacist's counter, and it's on your right. Good luck, too."

The aisle peddling toy plastic Uzis, AK-47s, and M4s was my shortest line to the phone housed in a vintage mahogany booth, a courtesy for privacy. Cell phoners didn't mind who overheard their blather. An artisan retired from Western Electric had stained the mahogany panels used to erect the phone booths. He'd pointed out to me where his date stamp and signature appeared in the upper corner of each booth door. Everybody, me included, left their mark. Again my beeper warbled. My boss was getting hyper.

I darted into the booth, toed shut the collapsible door, and the fan whirred above me. The corner seat felt rock hard. A punk ass had thumbed chewing gum now dried in the coin slot. I used my pocketknife's blade to chisel away the obstruction while my beeper went nuts. The phone receiver was still linked by its steel-armored lanyard. One quarter plinked in, but I dropped the second one. It rolled under the seat.

Cursing, I bent over between my knees and fetched the quarter. The dial tone had crackly line static. Maybe cell phones weren't so bad after all. Culling the number from memory, I saw my hand's tremulous grip on the receiver. An adrenaline rush always racked me when I placed this call, one reason why I kept doing it.

Mid-ring on the first peal, the other party's gravelly voice sounded familiar. "Zane? Tommy Mack? Is that you?"

"Who else."

"I got a job for you."

"Today?"

"Natch."

"Expect me in ten minutes."

"Eight."

"That bad, huh?"

"This is personal."

"Look for me."

My boss, like always, beat me at hanging up. I left the drugstore and rocketed off as fast as possible without smoking the tire rubber on the pavement. The first traffic signal I flew up on was a fast red, so I ignored it. The honks of the irked motorist squealing his tires to avoid our T-boning didn't faze me. My flick of the lighter fired up my second Blue Castle. It wasn't, I decided two inhalations later, as satisfyingly mellow as my first one had tasted.