

Dave Zeltserman lives in the Boston area with his wife, Judy. He is a die-hard Patriots and Red Sox fan; and when he's not writing crime fiction he spends his time working on his black belt in Kung Fu. Serpent's Tail also publishes *Pariah* and *Small Crimes*.

Praise for *Pariah*

"*Pariah* is all I know of bliss and lament...bliss at reading a superb novel and lament at knowing that Dave Zeltserman has now raised the bar so high, we're screwed. This is the perfect pitch of reality, history crime, celebrity, plagiarism, and sheer astounding writing. It needs a whole new genre name... It's beyond mystery, literature, a socio/economic tract, a scathing insight into the nature of celebrity and in Kyle Nevin, we have the darkest, most alluring noir character ever to come down the South Boston Pike or anywhere else in literature either. I want more of Kyle and more of this superb shotgun blast of a narrative... If every writer has one great book in them, then Dave can rest easy, he has his and it's to our delight and deepest envy" Ken Bruen

"Mean like bad whiskey and sophisticated like good scotch, *Pariah* is a rare find and a scorching read. This accomplished novel features a great blend of strong narrative voice and a realistic, multi-layered plot that lays bare the dark soul of South Boston's underworld. In Kyle Nevin, his main character, Zeltserman has a dark Celine creation that is as literary as he is noir. To my mind this novel provides the final word on the Southie's demise and does so more artfully than its predecessors. Brimming with historical anecdote, rife with keen sociological insight, Zeltserman invests his novel with a veracity found mostly in non-fiction. However, this is a novel and a damn

entertaining one, one that reminds us that reading the book truly is more informing and riveting than seeing the movie”
Cortright McMeel

Small Crimes

“Zeltserman delves deeply into his specialty, an unorthodox look at the criminal mind – the ‘unlucky’ guy who can fool himself way too long. It kept me turning pages and glancing over my shoulder” Vicki Hendricks

“*Small Crimes* is a superbly crafted tale that takes the best from mid-century noir fiction and drops it expertly into the twenty-first century. Like the very best of modern noir, this is a story told in shades of grey. Immensely subtle, and written with a rare maturity and confidence, the story of troubled ex-con/ex-cop Joe Denton always keeps you guessing. This deserves to be massive. At the very least, it must surely be Dave Zeltserman’s breakthrough novel” Allan Guthrie

“So noir...all the way to a surprisingly bold ending... Fairly zips along” *Guardian*

“Zeltserman creates an intense atmospheric maze for readers to observe Denton’s twisting and turning between his rocks and hard places. Denton is one of the best-realised characters I have read in this genre, and the powerfully noirish, uncompromising plot, which truly keeps one guessing from page to page, culminates with a genuinely astonishing finale” *Sunday Express*

“Zeltserman’s breakthrough crime novel deserves comparison with the best of James Ellroy” *Publishers Weekly*

Killer

—Dave Zeltserman—



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to ed gorman

chapter 1

1993

“What if I gave them Salvatore Lombard?”

That gets my lawyer’s attention. It would have to, me offering up Boston’s top crime boss. Up until that moment he’d only been going through the motions, halfheartedly suggesting that he might be able to cut me a deal for thirty years, but using a tone which indicated he didn’t really believe that. I can’t blame him. I’ve already seen the same videotapes and wire tap transcripts that he has. The state has me dead to rights for a long laundry list of crimes including extortion, a shitload of Mann Act violations and attempted murder. My busting up an undercover cop’s skull with a crowbar was only icing on the cake as far as they were concerned.

“You’re sure about this?” he asks.

I nod. This wasn’t a spur of the moment decision on my part. It was something I’d been mulling over for weeks, ever since I realized someone in Lombard’s organization must’ve given up the operation. This was the reason I fired the lawyer Lombard had cherry-picked for me, and had my wife, Jenny, find me a virgin one, someone not connected. I’m forty-eight,

and maybe betraying Lombard means I'm never going to see forty-nine, but I'll be fucked if I'm going to be buried in a prison cell for the next thirty years.

"And you can tie him to all this?"

"Yeah."

"That might change things," he admits. "Let me see what I can do."

His face is flushed now. He stands up abruptly and knocks on the small square Plexiglas window embedded in the locked door, and two guards come into the room to escort me to my cell. Less than an hour later I'm brought back to the same room. My lawyer's waiting for me, his face still flushed, maybe even a bit shiny at this point. I take the chair opposite him, and we both wait patiently until the guards leave the room and close the door behind them.

"If you can really deliver Salvatore Lombard—"

"I can."

"Then I can get you fourteen years," he says. "This is a gift given what they have on you."

"I need better than that."

He stares at me, his eyes widening as if I'm crazy. "Leonard, let me try to impress on you how generous their offer is. I know the DA must be salivating over the prospect of nailing Lombard, but fourteen years is the best he can give you without inciting a riot within the police department after what you did to that officer, not to mention those other people. I wouldn't have a prayer of doing better than that if this went to trial—"

"I can do the fourteen years. That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what?"

I shift in my seat, my gaze wandering past him. "If I give up Lombard he'll tie me to other felonies. I need immunity from those. Fourteen years is all I do regardless of what else I confess to."

“What else did you do?”

I shake my head. “When we have a deal in place I’ll give the rest to the DA.”

My lawyer gives me a funny look, but he gets up again and signals through the Plexiglas window. The guards let him out, but this time they don’t bother taking me back to my cell. I sit alone for no more than fifteen minutes before my lawyer is let back in. His eyes are hard on mine as he nods.

“As long as there’s no crimes involving children, no child porn, and no sex crimes, the DA’s willing to give you a free pass on everything else if what you give them can be verified and is enough for a conviction.”

“We’ve got a deal then,” I tell him.

My lawyer and I meet with the DA. After I’m given the paperwork for the deal my lawyer has worked out, I give the DA what he needs. It takes them three weeks to check it out, but once they have Lombard charged, we all meet again so I can outline the rest of my crimes, the ones I’m going to be given immunity for. It takes a while. There are so many of them. When I go over the twenty-eight murders that I did for Salvatore Lombard, the DA’s face turns ashen. Involuntarily, my lawyer’s lips twist into a sick smile, almost as if I’m pulling something over on him too.

I breathe easier after that. Ever since I fired Lombard’s chosen lawyer, I was expecting Lombard to either find a way to kill me or to leak my involvement with those killings to make sure I couldn’t cut any deal. I guess he couldn’t figure out a way of doing either of them without screwing himself. Anyway, a hell of a weight off my chest...

chapter 2

present

Someone was moaning within the cell block. The noise was muffled; whoever it was must've had his face buried in the mattress. I sat and listened, trying to figure out which cell it was coming from and whether the moaning was the result of an inmate humping his mattress or sobbing into it. Not that I cared, but I'd been up several hours now and welcomed the distraction. The hours when I waited for the lights to be turned on were the hardest. Early on at Cedar Junction, when Jenny was putting the maximum she could into my prison commissary account, I had been able to buy myself a reading light and those hours weren't so bad. Once she came down with cancer, that changed, and it wasn't long before the only money coming in was from my work detail, which paid all of eight cents an hour. As much as I hated doing it I sold my reading light when my last bulb blew. I couldn't afford more bulbs; the little money I got was needed to buy necessities like soap and toilet paper. After that I was no longer able to escape from those quiet early hours alone with myself by reading.

If I were back in Cedar Junction, other inmates right now

would be giving this guy hell and letting him know in explicit detail what would be happening to his rectum the next day if he didn't shut the fuck up. Not here, though. Most of the inmates knew they were lucky to be held at a medium security prison. They knew there were far worse places they could be sent, places like Cedar Junction. And that they'd end up in one of those shitholes if they acted up.

There were no windows in the cell block, but still, there was never a true darkness here; only a murky grayness. The same had been true at Cedar Junction. At night both prisons kept a bank of fluorescent lights flickering on beyond the hallway. It was probably a prison regulation, at least in Massachusetts.

My internal clock told me it was five-thirty. At six o'clock every morning the lights are turned on and a horn is blasted solidly for a full minute to rudely awaken any of the lucky ones who had managed to sleep through the night. After the lights and the horn would come the showers, mess hall and then work details. Not for me, though, not with today being my last day in prison. A fourteen-year stretch done and finished with, and I'd be fucked if I was going to give anyone one last chance to ice me. Later that morning I had one last appointment with my "society reintegration" case worker, then I was done. Until then, I wasn't going to leave my cell for any other reason. Not that I believed anyone here had the intestinal fortitude to take me out, nor would it make any sense at this point for Lombard's boys to let it happen, but still, I'd feel like an idiot if I gave someone an opening at this late date.

The moaning had stopped. I had to turn my thoughts to something other than the stillness and quiet suffocating me, and I started thinking of Lombard's boys, of how surprised they had to be that I was going to be leaving here alive. I wondered briefly what odds were given on the street that I'd ever walk out of prison. Probably at least ten to one, and even

then it would've been a sucker's bet. Not that Lombard's boys didn't make an effort. I knew they'd put a price on my head; at times I'd spot the ones who were gearing themselves up to make a go for it. But then I'd catch their eye, and I'd see their toughness fading fast, and I'd know they didn't have what it took to go through with it. The one time any of them tried it, there were three of them and they had set it up so that we'd be alone. When they made their move I moved faster and the one closest to me was on his knees vomiting blood, the other two quickly looking like scared school-children and scrambling to get away from me. After that, all the others that Lombard's boys tried to employ would make the same mistake of first trying to give me the hard stare in the eye, and then they'd be worthless.

That was all in the past. A different breed in prison now than what you can get on the outside. Things were soon going to get a lot easier for Lombard's boys, or harder, depending on how you looked at it.

I closed my eyes and listened for whether the moaning had started up again. It hadn't. Nothing but a dead, uneasy quiet. And far too much of it.

It was eleven o'clock when a guard dropped off the street clothes I had on at the time I was arrested all those years ago. I shed my prison dungarees and tee shirt, and put on my old clothes instead. My shoes, while dusty and scuffed, still fit. Nothing else did. My pants hung loosely on me, as did my shirt and leather jacket. I could've used a belt, but I guess they were holding that back until I was officially released. Still, it was good to be wearing my own clothes again. I was leaving the cell for the last time, and the only thing I took with me was a large envelope stuffed with papers. Nothing else was worth the bother.

While I was led through the cell block to the administrative wing of the prison, the guard escorting me made an offhand comment about this being my last day.

“Last hour, actually.”

We walked in silence for a minute, then he muttered out of the side of his mouth, “No fucking justice.”

I turned to give him a look. He was in his late twenties, about the same age as my youngest son. A big, awkward-looking kid with short blond hair, a pug nose and wide-set eyes. His flesh hung as loosely off him as my clothes did me, and it had the same color as boiled ham. There was something familiar about him, and I realized what it was. He looked enough like one of the guys I had taken out to be his son. I asked him what his name was and that startled him, alarm showing in his pink, fleshy face.

“For Chrissakes,” I said, “I just want to know if you’re related to Donald Sweet.”

He shook his head.

“How about any of the other guys I, uh, had business with?”

Again, slowly, his head moved from side to side.

I looked him up and down, feeling a bit of my old self coming to the fore. “Shut the fuck up, then,” I said. “And show some goddamned respect to your elders.”

He stared straight ahead after that, his eyes glazed, his mouth having shrunk to a small, angry oval, and enough red seeping into his cheeks to make his flesh now more the color of a piece of bloodied ham. We walked in silence, and it wasn’t until we arrived at my caseworker’s office and I was halfway through the door that he remarked how maybe I didn’t find justice in prison but that the streets knew how to take care of rats like me. I closed the door behind me, not bothering to turn around.

My caseworker, Theo Ogden, sat amongst the clutter of his small windowless office. He squinted at me from behind his thick glasses, and from the uneasy smile he gave it was clear he had overheard the guard's comment. "Mr March, I apologize for that," he said.

"I'll be hearing a lot worse soon," I said.

"Maybe so, but it was still uncalled for."

I shrugged it off, and took the chair across from his desk that he gestured for me to sit in. Theo was about the same age as the guard who brought me to him, but was much smaller both in height and weight, and the complete opposite in demeanor. Like the other times I'd met with him, he appeared disheveled and harried, and the suit he wore was about as big on him as my old clothes were on me.

After the way our last meeting went I wasn't expecting much, but the son of a gun surprised me by finding me a job cleaning a small office building in Waltham and renting me a furnished one-room apartment within walking distance of where I'd be working. The hours were going to be from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m., Monday through Saturday. I guess at that time the building would be empty except for security, and the building's tenants wouldn't ever see me, but still, I was amazed he was able to find anyone willing to hire me, even if it was only cleaning toilets and mopping floors. Theo had me starting my new job tonight, figuring I could use the money, and he stepped me through a budget he had drawn up – which showed how much I'd be taking in each month through public assistance and my job and what my expenses would be. It would be tight, with me hovering just above the poverty line, but it didn't much matter. If I ended up on the streets, it would still be better than where I'd spent the last fourteen years. And besides, I didn't expect to be around long enough to worry about it, not with my family history, and certainly not with Lombard's boys out

there waiting, and maybe twenty-eight other families who might want to beat them to the punch.

Theo had finished walking me through the budget, and was now staring at me uneasily while he pulled at his lower lip. I knew he was deliberating whether to broach the same subject we had discussed the last few times we met. I saved him the trouble and told him I had no interest in leaving Massachusetts.

“Mr March, you should consider it,” he said. “Even at this late date, I could arrange it if you let me.”

“What would be the point? If someone wanted to find me bad enough, they’d track me down wherever I ran to.”

“But you’re making it so easy for them...” He stopped to take off his glasses and rub his eyes. With his glasses off he looked like a scrawny teenager who could’ve been president of his high school chess team instead of a prison caseworker who had to spend his days dealing with people like me. He put his glasses back on, ageing fifteen years in the process. His expression turning grave, he told me, “I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but the news has been running a lot of stories about you, and someone released a recent photo – one that was taken when you arrived here from Cedar Junction. People out there know what you look like, Mr March. I can’t imagine it being too safe out there for you.”

I handed him the envelope I had brought with me, the same one that was delivered two weeks ago filled with court documents outlining the five wrongful-death suits that had been brought against me, all filed by the same attorney. A perplexed frown took over Theo’s features as he looked through the legal papers. Once it fully dawned on him what they meant, he looked up at me, blinking.

“There must be some way to work around this,” he said.

“There isn’t,” I said. “And as you can see I need to be at

the Chelsea District Court in three weeks for the first of the lawsuits. They have to know I'm broke and that they're not going to collect any money. The lawyer's not doing this on a contingency basis, and he sure as fuck isn't doing it out of the goodness of his heart. Someone has to be paying the legal bills, either the families or, more likely, some other interested third party who arranged this. And probably for no other reason than to keep me from leaving the area."

Theo stared intently back at the paperwork, trying to figure out a way around the court appearances I was required to make. There wasn't any. I didn't have the money for the traveling back and forth if I were to move out of state, and even if I did it wouldn't have mattered. As soon as I was back in Chelsea for any of the court dates I'd be right in Lombard's backyard. Of course, I could've been making it sound more sinister than it really was. The lawsuits could've been filed for no other reason than to allow those families to have their day in court. But the expense of it made that seem unlikely. I took the papers from Theo's hands. It didn't much matter – if nothing else those lawsuits made it a quick argument between the two of us, because even if I could've I wasn't about to leave the Boston area. I wasn't sure why that was, at least nothing I could articulate, or really get a firm grip on. Of course I could've simply used the excuse that outside of my time in prison I'd lived my whole life around Boston and wasn't about to leave now, and that I was also hoping to re-establish contact with my kids. There was some truth to that, but there was something else, kind of a vague feeling that I needed to stay in the area. I just didn't know why exactly.

"I guess that's it," Theo said.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

"Maybe after these legal issues are settled you can think about relocation."