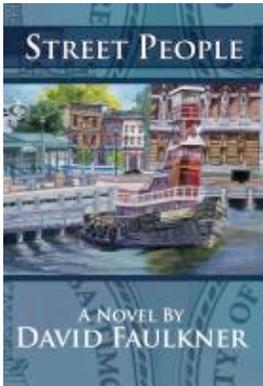


STREET PEOPLE



A NOVEL BY
DAVID FAULKNER



Noah Cassidy, a former prosecuting attorney, agrees to investigate the seemingly random killing of a young panhandler, which the local police have labeled a "nothing case." A city homicide lieutenant schemes to abruptly close the case, ensuring that the killer will remain free. Cassidy, convinced the young man's murder was not a random street crime, presses ahead, utilizing the one resource available to him - Baltimore's Street People.

Street People

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Street People

A Novel

David Faulkner

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Noah Cassidy wondered what the attraction was. He shouldered his way through the onlookers until he was wedged against the yellow crime-scene tape fluttering along a row of parking meters. Two uniforms and a couple of EMTs milled around a sheet-covered form lying in the middle of the sidewalk. No doubt, they were awaiting the arrival of homicide detectives and the medical examiner, whose office was two blocks away. The older of the uniforms warily eyed the crowd of gawkers. His face was familiar, but Noah could not put a name with it. The uniform motioned to his partner then approached the tape.

“Cassidy, isn’t?” he asked.

Noah nodded, trying without success, to get a discrete look at the nameplate.

“My partner and I are curious why an assistant state’s attorney shows up at the scene of some street bum’s murder. This one of the new man’s crime-fighting initiatives, or a play for the bum vote?”

“I left the state’s attorney about a year ago.”

“I hadn’t heard. So what are you doing?”

Noah usually had a response ready for that question, but hadn’t expected to need it here, so it took him a minute.

“I’m taking a break from the law,” was all he could muster.

The uniform pointed toward the sidewalk. “No. I meant, what brings you here, to the scene of our little street drama?”

The crime scene, in the one hundred block of Penn Street, was surrounded by blocks of buildings housing various branches of the University of Maryland Medical School. Ironically, the deceased lay at the front steps to the Pediatric Ambulatory Center; the school’s

famed Shock Trauma Center a short block north. Neither of which had done the form under the sheet any good.

“Over at Shock Trauma,” Noah responded, “with a friend.”

The uniform studied him. “As I remember, you were one of the good ones in that office. I’m sorry to hear you left; still it’s good to know they’re not sending you guys out every time one bum slices up another one. What a huge pain that would be for all of us.” He inclined his head at the sheet. “Besides, it’s just a street bum, who gives a rat’s ass? Am I right?”

The uniform headed back to the sheet as a medical examiner and two detectives pushed their way through the crowd.

Noah turned and, once away from the crowd, headed along Pratt Street toward his car. He was two blocks from the scene when he heard someone moving up fast and glanced over his shoulder. A young man loped toward him, shouting and waving his arms.

“Mister Cassidy! Hold up for a minute!”

Noah stopped and watched as the man covered the remaining distance between them. This was not the best neighborhood, even without the killing back there, and Noah was eased to see that his pursuer’s hands were empty.

If the man hadn’t called his name, Noah could have taken him for a mugger; still he might be one of the pesky panhandlers that, of late, seem to be flooding the city’s streets. This man looked to be a few years younger than Noah, mid-to-late twenties, wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt with the hood laid back, his face exposed. Another indication that he likely was not a mugger. Still, Noah shoved his right hand in the pocket of his trench coat to foster the illusion that he was armed.

The stranger stopped in front of him, gasping for breath.

In a crisp voice Noah said, “You called my name. If I’m supposed to know you—I don’t.”

The man gulped more air before saying, “I was standing near you back there and overheard you talking to the cop. After you left, it took me a minute to figure out what to do. Glad I caught up to you.”

“Why?”

The man blinked. “Why what?”

Street People

Noah looked him up and down.

“Why are you glad you caught up to me? If you are a panhandler, you’re going to be disappointed. If you’re a mugger, we’re both going to be unhappy.”

The man glanced around and lowered his voice. “Back there I heard you say that you used to be a prosecutor. ... I think I need an attorney.”

Taking Noah’s hesitation as a good sign he quickly added, “There’s a coffee shop in the next block. We could go there and talk, out of the cold.”

“I must say, you’ve put some thought into getting a free cup of coffee out of me.”

The man thrust both hands out, palms up and backed away. “This is not about a free cup of coffee. I got money,” he added, and dug a few crumpled bills from the pocket of his sweatshirt. “I’ll pay. I need your help.”

Noah stood his ground. “I wasn’t kidding when I said you would be disappointed. Your buddies waiting to rob me are going to be angry with you for wasting their time.”

The stranger pointed down Pratt Street. “My name’s Corky,” he pleaded “The coffee shop, Peace and a Cup of Joe, is in the next block. It’s a public place and there’s a community outreach police station right across the street. If you feel threatened, just get up and walk out.”

“I’m not looking for clients,” Noah said, “but I am curious why you think you need an attorney.”

The man glanced over his shoulder. “I know something about the dead guy back there. I need to tell somebody, and I sure can’t talk to the cops.”

“Why not?”

“Are you kidding? Look at me. To them, I’m just another street bum. After they hear my story, it wouldn’t take them long to decide it was me that killed him. Case closed. But, what I tell to my attorney is secret. Right?”

Noah nodded.

“And, even though you quit the state’s attorney, you are still a lawyer, right?”

Noah nodded again.

“You couldn’t tell them about me, or what I told you, unless I say its okay, right?”

“Only if you were my client. But, you’re not, so don’t tell me anything.”

“It’s because you think I can’t pay. Am I right?”

“That would be a consideration if we were discussing a fee. But we’re not. Since you brought it up, why not visit legal aid? It’s another free service for you people.”

“This is not a ticket for loitering. If the cops come for me, I would need somebody who knows the system from both sides. I heard that cop say you were one of the ‘good ones.’ That’s what I need, one of the good ones.”

Noah felt this Corky was being truthful when he said he would need a good lawyer. At least *he* believed it.

Corky shrugged and held out his hands, palms up, as if to say, “What else can I do?”

“I should know your full name,” Noah said.

The man, feeling more at ease, smiled. “Corky. My name is Corky Kilmark.”

“Alright, Corky Kilmark, here’s what I’m willing to do. You give me a retainer of five dollars—you have that much?”

Corky nodded.

“When I have the five we will have an attorney-client relationship for the following purpose: I will listen to your story and what you tell me is protected. If, after hearing you out, I don’t like your story, and don’t want you for a client, I’ll refund your retainer and we will go our separate ways. However I will remain bound by the attorney-client privilege.”

Corky pulled a five-dollar note from the bills in his pocket. “When they do this in the movies the lawyer always says ‘One dollar.’”

Noah took the bill. “Those are old movies,” he said.

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“If I agree to take your case there is one other condition; this transaction gives ambulance chasing a bad name. The circumstances of our meeting are never to be spoken of.”

Peace and a Cup of Joe occupied a narrow rowhouse wedged between a University of Maryland Medical Center and a boarded-up warehouse.

Corky paid for the coffee while Noah claimed one of the raised pub tables along a wall of exposed brick.

There was no line at the counter and shortly Corky set two containers in front of them. He stirred sugar into his coffee and said, “Should I call you Mister Cassidy?”

“Noah is good.”

Noah sipped from his cup and glanced around the cramped shop.

“This is great coffee. How did you find this place?”

Corky hunched forward, speaking in a low voice, as if sharing a secret.

“I understand that you need to know all about me, but this is part of the stuff you have to keep secret.”

“You get a one-stop confessional all for the one low price.”

“I get it. Bear with me, this is all new.” Corky heaved a sigh, blew on his coffee and began. “You were right, I am a panhandler. It’s what I do, but I’m not homeless. The thing is, I commute to work every day from Randallstown. Garage parking is too expensive and I finally found a parking spot on one of these side streets, no meters to feed. That is worth the few extra blocks I walk to the Inner Harbor. In fact I’m thinking of selling the rights to the spot to someone when I’m done with it. It’s close to Oriole Park yet remote enough there’s little chance one of my customers will happen upon me getting into a car for the ride home. My car is a six-year-old piece of crap, still they might not understand. I stop here in the morning for coffee and a roll to go, when I’m finished drinking the coffee I use the cup in my work. If the weather turns bad or I just don’t feel like working, I hang out here. It’s sort of my office.”

Corky took a cell phone from a pocket in his sweatshirt and glanced at the time. “I know the clock is running on that retainer, just

give me a second.” He punched one number button and put the phone to his ear.

“Hi. I’m caught in town and am going to sit out the rush hour.” He listened for a minute before saying, “It’s not that. I’ll tell you when I get there. . . . Me too.”

He offered his phone to Noah. “If you need to call anyone, use this. We will be a while.”

“Thanks. I’m good.”

Before his new client could begin, Noah said, “I guess that was your wife.”

Corky nodded.

“Does she know what you are doing or does she think you are going to the office every day.”

“She knows what I do.”

“And she’s okay with it?”

He shrugged. “Let’s say she’s accepted it—for now. This is November—I’ve been on the street about 8 months. I lost my ninety-five in January.”

“Your ninety-five?”

“That’s what street people call a regular job. You know, 9 to 5.”

Noah smiled.

Corky continued. “I was a hotel desk clerk, well motel, really. Tried acting—I make more at this—sold cars.” He shook his head. “Pontiacs, for Christ sake—Pontiacs. Who knew? Anyhow, by April, I was really discouraged and one day, just for the hell of it, I scrawled a sign on a piece of cardboard and headed for the Inner Harbor.”

He raised his cup and peered over the rim. “It’s a real cheap way to open your own business and—what did I have to lose, right?”

“Were you coming from work, just now?”

Corky nodded.

“So where is your sign?”

“Still checking on me, huh.”

Noah’s shrug said, “It’s what I do.”

“I found a place to stash it.” He glanced around the room. “I felt funny bringing it in here, besides it costs next to nothing to replace.

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My first sign was pretty crude. ‘Help! Need money for food.’ I had a lot of competition...”

“What’s it say now? Your new marketing slogan?”

Corky was chagrined. “It says, ‘Saving for a beach house. Please help.’ It’s stupid, I guess, but folks who bother to read it always walk away with a smile. That’s usually worth a few coins.”

Noah smiled. “Indeed. No more interruptions. Go ahead.”

It took Corky a minute to recollect what he was saying. “Anyhow, the summer was pretty good and my wife didn’t bitch at me—much. Just asked me to promise I was still looking for a ninety-five, and I did. Promise, that is. I admit, I wasn’t looking very hard. Besides, I was easily making above minimum wage—especially when you figure the tax angle—so those jobs were out. But the last few weeks have been real slow and she’s pretty fed up. We’re lucky; she’s a secretary so we got steady money coming in.”

Noah drained his coffee. “Tell me why you think you need a lawyer.”

Corky nodded and looked toward the counter. “You hungry?” he asked, “I am. How about a sandwich? They got a great turkey club here. Consider it part of my retainer.”

Noah shrugged, “I could eat something.”

The restroom door was a few feet from their table and Noah was again seated when Corky returned with two stacked club sandwiches, chunks of turkey breast spilling out onto the plastic plate.

Corky wolfed down a couple of bites of the sandwich before resuming his story. “Have you heard of the Road Warrior?”

“The old Mel Gibson movie?”

“No. I...”

“If there’s a remake. I missed it.”

“I’m serious. I believe the dead guy on the sidewalk is the Road Warrior.” Corky stood, “Think about that while I hit the head.”

It had grown dark outside; the streetlights were on. Around Noah, the steamy café was crowded with students wearing backpacks, a smattering of nurses and a few smug looking interns. At some of the other tables, folks were engrossed in surfing the Internet

from open laptops, a cup of cold coffee or a half-eaten sandwich in front of them.

Corky slid into his chair across the table and Noah said, “I believe you were saying the dead kid looks like Mel Gibson.”

“This is no joke. I saw his face before they covered him. I was standing beside you, working up my courage to tell somebody what I knew, when that cop came over. I thought he was coming to take me in, because of the way I’m dressed. Maybe he even thought I did it, and I almost crapped myself. Then I heard you tell him you’d been a state’s attorney, but you walked away before I could bring myself to say anything...”

“Still, what does...”

Corky took in a breath. “Look, I’m still shook from seeing him lying there, dead on the sidewalk. I need to tell it in my own way, but I’ll get there.”

Noah nodded.

“A lot of street people, even the homeless, are capable of surfing the web. A few of them have a laptop or a tablet and anyone can use one of the old PC’s at a shelter.”

“In addition to a hot meal and a cot, shelters now offer Wi-Fi?”

Corky shrugged. “A few do. They justify the expense by saying it is a cheap and easy way for street people to find work. Anyhow, ‘road warrior’ is a common term for young streeters, usually teenagers. A few weeks ago, a streeter at one of the shelters was web-surfing and came across a site called ‘The Road Warrior.’ Most of them, the men anyway, would rather scan porn than look for a job on Monster.com. The streeter who found it probably thought it was a porn site and within minutes everyone was crowded around looking.”

“Were you there?”

He shook his head. “It was night. I was home. One of the streeters, Wise Eddie, was there, he told me about it, later. You know what a blog is, right?”

“Yes.”

“This Road Warrior wrote a blog about the life lived by street people here in Baltimore. He never says it’s Baltimore but the names of the characters and description of locations leave little doubt.”

Street People

“You’ve seen this site, yourself?”

Corky nodded. “The day Wise Eddie told me, I went home and logged on. The first couple of weeks Warrior wrote about different places around town where the homeless slept. Under viaducts, library steps, abandoned rowhouses. No street names or landmarks, but anybody from Baltimore could recognize his description of the Enoch Pratt Library.

“He added something new each week, the first week he mentioned Poe and Marvel—and Frenchy. The next week he wrote about Wise Eddie, Skeeter and a crazy old hag everybody calls Mata Hairy.

“Last week Road Warrior starts saying that not everybody who panhandles is poor, some who say they got no food or shelter live in the suburbs and commute into the city.”

Noah was beginning to understand why this man might need an attorney.

“How do you connect the dead guy to the blog?”

“The guy under the sheet used to walk around with a cell phone, one with a camera. He roamed around taking pictures and a lot of them appeared on this blog. A page he called Street Scene had shots of the people and places he wrote about.”

“That doesn’t prove...”

“There’s more, and it gets worse for me. A couple of weeks ago, the dead guy strolls up to me and starts asking a lot of questions: How long had I been on the street, where was I from, how did I wind up like this—that kind of thing.”

“What was your answer?”

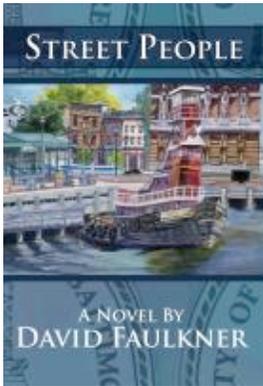
“To steer him away from me, I told some funny stories about a few of the street people. A couple of the stories showed up that week on the blog—almost word for word. I’m sure he was following some of us around to see what he could dig up. I knew he wasn’t finished with me.”

Noah said, “Assuming for the moment that you did not kill him, I can see why you might need a lawyer. If you went to the cops and told them your story, it wouldn’t take them long to find out about

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your commute and anything else you might want to keep hidden. They may very well stumble across you anyway.”

Corky nodded. “I keep thinking about what that cop said, ‘Who gives a rat’s ass?’ If I told them I had been at the scene, they’d say, ‘Why look any further, we got our killer-case closed. And there’s no way I could prove I didn’t do it. Still, I had to tell somebody. You believe me—right?’”



Noah Cassidy, a former prosecuting attorney, agrees to investigate the seemingly random killing of a young panhandler, which the local police have labeled a "nothing case." A city homicide lieutenant schemes to abruptly close the case, ensuring that the killer will remain free. Cassidy, convinced the young man's murder was not a random street crime, presses ahead, utilizing the one resource available to him - Baltimore's Street People.

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