

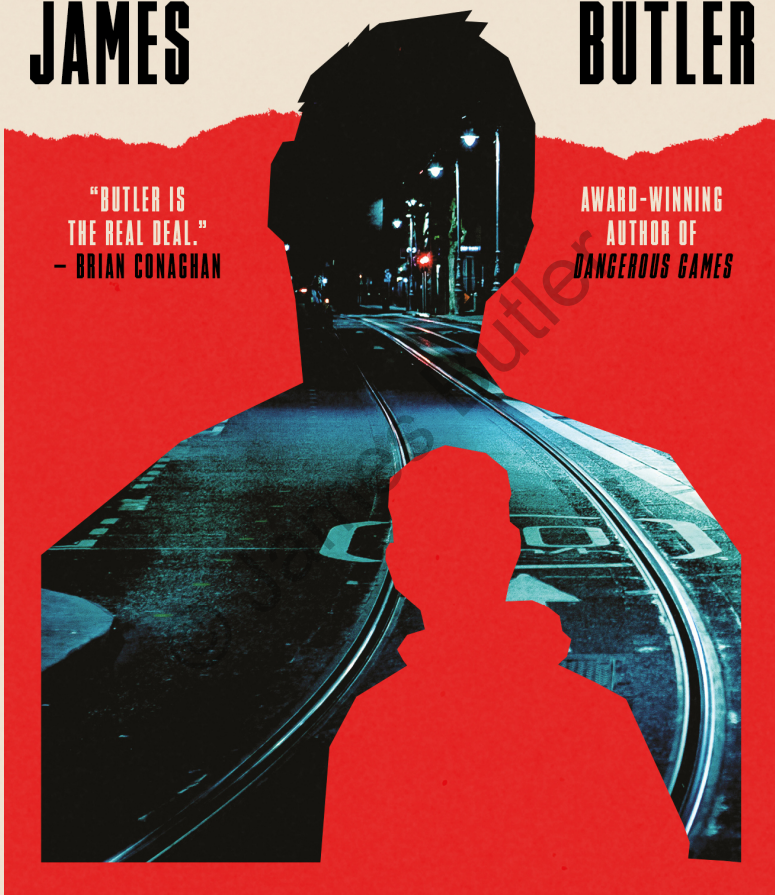
CRYING

JAMES

BUTLER

"BUTLER IS
THE REAL DEAL."
— BRIAN CONAGHAN

AWARD-WINNING
AUTHOR OF
DAANGEROUS GAMES



WOLF

CRYING WOLF

JAMES BUTLER



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*In memory of
my mother Mary Duggan and
my father Jim Butler*

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Joey is aware of the car before he sees it. He can hear it roll as it pulls into the kerb just alongside him. He glances across his shoulder and notes the make and colour. He knows the car, but wills himself not to know it. He has avoided looking at cars. He has avoided thinking about them. He is trying to forget the list he has in his head like it's some sort of crazy prayer to the maker of cars: Camry, Prius, Chevrolet Silverado, Jeep Patriot, Honda Cr-V, Honda Accord.

But this car has glided to a stop and he can see the full length of it. It's waiting for him. He knows it's waiting. The engine is purring and the indicator light still blinking. He should cross the street and avoid it, but he knows that will only delay the inevitable. There's a bus stop just ahead of him. Maybe the driver of the car – it's a Beamer, gold coloured, the latest in the series – is dropping someone to catch a bus, but you don't use a bus when there's a car like this one available.

Joey passes it by, but hears the slide of the window.

‘Hey!’ a voice calls out to him. Hasn’t he been waiting for this to happen? He turns to look and knows already who he’ll see.

It’s Quinlan sitting on his own in the back seat. The big brown foreign-holiday head on him like an egg. The eyes are hooded, the two dark arcs of eyebrow the only trace of hair on his face.

‘Mr Quinlan!’ Joey says like he’s surprised. He leans his head to see who’s driving.

Weso! What’s he doing behind the wheel? And what’s with the new look! He’s wearing a white shirt open at the neck, with a black waistcoat buttoned up. His black hair has grown, but it’s neat now, like he’s impersonating a waiter or a professional snooker player.

‘So! What’s the story?’ Quinlan says.

Weso peers straight ahead.

‘I’m just going to work. And I’m late,’ Joey says. He wants this conversation finished.

‘Not much of a job for a lad with your looks,’ Quinlan says and Joey doesn’t know if he’s taking the piss or not. ‘What do you get an hour? Minimum wage?’

‘Yeah, something like that,’ Joey says.

He spots a bus approaching. Quinlan’s car is blocking the space but the bus doesn’t beep a complaint or attempt to pull in, like the driver knows it’s best to keep moving.

‘Get in,’ Quinlan says, and it sounds like an order more than an invitation.

Joey glances over the car like he’s contemplating the distance to his job and the detour he’ll now have to take.

He doesn't want to miss work. At the rate he's going he could make employee of the month. Hilarious.

'Will you get in. Wesley will drop you to your job.'

This time he knows it's an order, and he has to obey. You don't fuck with the likes of Quinlan.

'I don't want to be late,' he says across the top of Quinlan's head.

Quinlan sniggers and Weso keeps his statue pose going.

Joey goes around the rear of the car and sits into the back seat, his butt squeaking the soft cream leather. There's a child's book on the floor mat near his feet. He lifts it up. He inspects the cover. It's got the picture of a pink teddy bear on the front.

'Hey, Weso, you left your book back here,' he says.

'Put your belt on,' Quinlan orders, taking the book out of Joey's hand and placing it in the door pocket at his side.

Joey would like to know who the book really belongs to, but you don't ask Quinlan personal questions.

Then Quinlan nods towards the driver's seat and the car pulls out into the road.

Joey doesn't know what to think. The book has thrown him off balance. It's made him remember a different book. That one had a red and yellow cover with the picture of a dog chasing a butterfly. He can't be thinking of that now, not now when he has to keep his wits about him.

He's in the car – with Quinlan beside him – and Weso driving. Quinlan! What the hell does he want him for? Why now? And Weso driving? What's that about? Weso – who never had a good word to say about Quinlan.

But Joey knows deep down what this is about. Of course he does. His stepfather – ex-stepfather really – Vinnie. He looks out the window. This isn't the way to work, he realises. They're heading out of the city, not deeper into it. He is about to lean forward and say something to Weso, but Quinlan places a rough hand on his thigh and squeezes it – squeezes it just a little too hard for comfort.

'Scenic route,' he says.

Joey catches Weso's eye in the rear-view mirror but there's no recognition of him there. He could be anyone now.

He takes his phone from his pocket. He has to send a text to Hazel in the store to tell her he's running late. But how late? That's the question.