ALSO BY J. J. ARCANJO

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# BEAST MODE

## THE ANIMAL AWAKENS

J. J. ARCANJO

STAR BOARD

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If you are reading this and English is
your second language, I want to dedicate
this book to you. Because once upon a time,
I was just like you.

# CHAPTER ONE

It was ten minutes until the warning alarm that rang around Vangsford Park every night, and most people were already heading for home.

Not Caine.

He strode past families packing up picnics and friends finishing up their football match, the reds and golds spilling across the sky a fitting end to a warm June day. His eyes, though, were elsewhere. On the grotty stick his dog, Blue, had just picked up.

The black husky, with his eyes of piercing blue, stared up at him expectantly. 'Seriously? More?' Caine sighed. 'Half an hour's not enough for you then?'

Blue tilted his head, confirming that it absolutely was not.

'Come on then,' Caine said, reaching for the slobber-soaked stick and tossing it high into the air. It landed on the sun-scorched grass and cartwheeled several times. Blue bounded off and snatched it off the ground before

it even had a chance to fall still. Caine retrieved it from the husky's jaws and threw it high again.

'Uh oh,' he said. Because he could see what was about to unfold. The stick bounced off a rock hidden in the grass and headed straight for a man who looked like a giant thumb covered in tattoos of dubious artistic merit, striking him hard in the calf. The man grunted and turned, reaching a thick arm down to pick up the stick. Slowly, his dark eyes rose to meet Caine's.

Four other guys, all clearly part of his group, looked over, every one of them with a similar hard expression on their face.

Caine held up an apologetic hand. 'Sorry. I didn't mean . . . I was just trying to throw the stick for my dog.'

''Cept you hit me,' the large man pointed out.

Caine winced. 'It was the rock . . .' he trailed off.

The large man grinned. 'Don't doubt you didn't *mean* to. But you hit me all the same. So here's what's going to happen . . .' He started taking off what looked to be a very expensive watch, then laid it down on the bench beside him delicately. 'I'm going to hit you *back* with this stick. Just once – I'm not a monster. Sound fair to you?'

It didn't sound remotely fair to Caine, but he didn't get the chance to say as much because at that exact moment Blue bounded over, snatched the large man's watch off the bench and sprinted off with it in his mouth.

'Oi,' the man called. 'Give that back!'

'I'm so sorry!' Caine took off after his dog. 'Blue!'

The group ran after them. At that exact moment, the usual night-time warning alarm began to blare through the park like a foghorn and the message came over the loudspeakers: *'A dangerous creature has been seen in Vangsford Park at night. We strongly advise all parkgoers to leave the premises by 9 p.m. If you remain, we accept no responsibility for what may happen to you. You have been warned.'*

Caine didn't believe in the creature the news had dubbed the Night Terror. Some so-called 'witnesses' had described it as a huge black wolf and others a panther. But there was no photographic evidence, so in his humble opinion it was almost certainly just collective panic.

Still, as he sprinted after a galloping Blue, Caine could have done with a shadowy monster to slow down his pursuers . . .

Blue cut through a small cluster of trees at the eastern edge of the park, streaked across the empty road towards Vangsford High Street, then made a sharp right into a dark alley. Caine followed at speed, but when he looked back and saw the men had fallen far behind him, he slowed, entering the alley to find the husky sitting at a dead end, wagging his tail.

'Drama every time with you, eh?' Caine said, breathless. He held out his hand. 'Come on. Give it over.'

Reluctantly, Blue leant forward and dropped the fancy watch into Caine's waiting palm. Caine looked at him for a long moment.

Then he winked. 'Good work. Went just like we planned.'

Caine looked over his shoulder, to the alley entrance where the man and his friends would soon appear. 'Ember, how are we looking?' Caine asked. His friend was not in the alley with them, but she was close enough her enhanced hearing would pick up his voice.

'I've taken down the cameras on this end of the road,' Ember said, voice coarse and low in the distance. 'Greg is still about thirty seconds away. All that vaping'll do that to you.'

'SM0KE would be proud of you,' Caine said, peeling off his T-shirt.

'She could have done this in her sleep,' Ember scoffed.

Caine took off Blue's collar. 'Why are you so sure they're a *she*?'

'If you saw how classy her code was, you'd know it was a woman.'

'Except no one's seen this legendary hacker's code in a couple of years. So maybe she's—'

'I dare you to finish that sentence,' Ember warned in the distance.

Even mentioning the idea that SM0KE, her idol, could be dead would get you the silent treatment for days.

Caine smiled down at Blue. 'Should we get going? You know what to do.'

With that, Blue began to Flip.

Black fur withdrew into every pore in his skin, wagging

tail shrinking into a coccyx. Blue's jaw cracked and his nose narrowed, vicious canines receding into red gums.

When he stood up – this time on two feet – Blue had transformed into a dark-skinned boy with dyed-white hair and glacier-blue eyes that twinkled mischievously. He grinned proudly, looking down at the midnight blue skin-tight outfit they had dubbed the FlipSuit. 'I'm getting quicker. Soon I'll be as fast as you.'

Caine threw Blue his shorts and chuckled. 'We'll see about that.' Caine got on to all fours and Flipped. Jaw clenched against the pain, he became his animal-self. Dark fur spilt through the fabric of the FlipSuit, as fingers shrank and a long tail grew from the base of his spine.

For the first few months after he'd woken up in an unfamiliar forest as *this*, Caine had spent countless hours practising his own transformation, attempting to master it, to endure the pain and streamline the process. Now, one year on from that terrible night, he'd whittled his Flip down to seven seconds.

When he opened his eyes, Blue was dressed in Caine's clothes and moaning about it. 'Listen, I can endure the pain of Flipping, but do I really have to wear *this*? Shorts and a T-shirt aren't really my style. You know I'm more of a smart trousers and linen shirt type of guy. Or, you know, a suit.'

'Sorry we didn't have Caine walking his dog in a *suit*, Blue,' Ember said, her eye-rolling almost audible a

street away. 'We don't have time for this. Greg's five seconds away.'

Blue gave Caine a grin and made a cradle with his arms. 'Up you come. I know you hate being touched, but this was your plan.'

Caine not liking another's touch was an understatement. But he didn't have a choice this time. So Caine took a steadying breath, then leapt up into Blue's waiting arms. A moment later, Greg and Co. came barrelling around the corner, wheezing and spluttering.

'Oi, you,' Greg called. 'Where's my . . .' But when he saw a dark-skinned boy holding an animal that was very obviously not a husky, he trailed off.

'You all right, fellas?' Blue said, walking towards the group. 'Bit late for a jog, but each to their own.'

Greg stared at cat-Caine like he'd never seen anything like him before.

Blue noticed. 'Handsome, isn't she? But she's a right little escape artist. Always sneaking out to this alley to hunt mice, aren't ya, Mabel?'

*Oh, I'm going to kill you, Blue.*

'But that's a *cat*,' Greg said, baffled. 'Where's the dog?'

'Eh?' Blue said, acting confused himself. 'She's a chunky one – Maine Coons usually are – but she's no dog. Why, what's up?'

Greg blinked. 'A dog . . . stole my . . .' He shook his head, realising how absurd what he was about to say truly was. 'Something's . . . *off* about this.' He eyed Blue

and Caine closely. 'I'm sure I saw those two thieves come into this alley. But now it's just . . . you two.'

*If he notices Blue's wearing my clothes, we're in trouble.*

Silence in the alley as baffled looks passed back and forth between the friends.

Then a figure flashed by the alleyway entrance, drawing the group's attention. A flustered girl stuck her head around the corner, black eyeliner sitting over amber eyes. She ran a hand through her tsunami of red hair that was buzzed short on one side. 'Any of you lost a dog? Big black wolf-looking thing . . .'

Greg growled. 'Yeah, where is it?'

The girl pointed down the high street. 'Down there. Nearly knocked me over . . .'

Greg looked over his shoulder at his friends. 'Come on. Let's get it.'

With that, Greg and his friends spun around and sprinted away.

Blue let out a long whistle as he put Caine down, then looked up at the redhead suspiciously. 'If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were in on this, love.'

Ember slowly crossed her arms and grinned. 'What would you two do without me, eh?'