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Opening extract from

Caged

Written by

Theresa Breslin

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CHAPTER ONE

Blood.

In his mouth and on his tongue.

That last punch split his lip. Spinning him sideways to thud against the steel bars of the Cage. And he knew he'd taken a cut.

Blood has a stale taste. Brings back a memory. Don't think about that.

Move.

Fast.

Kai straightens. Beyond the Cage winks the red light of the camera. The fight would be on the Internet within hours. Would Evil Eddy be watching?

The blur of a fist. Kai dodges. Too slow. A whack to the side of his helmet leaves him dizzy.

Now Leo will come in to finish him off.

Gloves up.

But there's no one there.

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Kai swings round. The Cage is empty. He shakes his head. Sweat pours from his hair down his face. Can't see. Pulls up his face visor to wipe his glove across his eyes.

Leaving his forehead exposed.

He hears the victory screech before he feels the impact. Leo drops from the roof bars onto his shoulders. Kai crashes to the floor of the Cage.

He is down . . .

. . . head battered onto the concrete.

. . . and out.

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CHAPTER TWO

A splash of water on his face.

Spartacus stood over him. Seeing that Kai is awake, he emptied the whole bucket onto his head.

'Surprised at you,' he said, 'getting caught like that. And a bigger mistake was to pull up your visor.'

Kai scrambled to his feet. 'Won't do it again.'

Spartacus reached out and grabbed him by the front of his vest. 'You certainly won't!' He addressed the group of teens who were clustered outside the Cage. 'Listen up! All of you! No one, I repeat, *no one*, removes their face visor or helmet during a cage fight.' He glared at Kai. 'Got that?'

'Yes,' Kai mumbled.

'I can't hear you!'

'Yes,' Kai said loudly.

'It's not just about safety. It's to keep your identity a secret. The last thing we want is for anybody to find out who we are and where we live.'

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The watchers growled in agreement.

Spartacus cupped his hand round Kai's cheek and said in a quieter voice, 'Get that cut seen to. Tech will have something suitable among his medical supplies, and let him do his concussion test routine on you.' Then he spoke to Leo, who was removing his visor and his helmet, shaped in the form of a lion's head. 'Well played,' he said.

Leo pulled off his gloves and raised his hand. Curling his fingers into a claw he let out a roar.

'Hey, Leo, turn this way and do that again.' Tech approached with the camcorder. 'It's a great shot to go in at the end of the fight.'

While Leo re-did his roaring lion act Kai climbed out of the Cage, took off his own gloves, visor and helmet and shoved them in his sports bag.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. He should have thought to look up. Where else could Leo have gone, apart from above him? What had distracted him? Kai fingered the tear in his lip. The taste of blood. That was it. Made his attention waver. Shocked a bad memory into his brain . . .

Kai thrust the thought away. It wouldn't happen again. *Fool me once – shame on you. Fool me twice – shame on me.* He was a quick learner. Although Leo was broader and heavier, Kai was faster and smarter – much smarter. And he'd proved it in their first fight of the tournament. Taken Leo down in two rounds, holding him to the floor until the end of the round so that Leo had to concede the match. People had thought Leo would win. He'd been

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tipped as favourite because of his build, screenshots of his naked muscled chest becoming an Internet hit.

Leo was beaming triumphantly as he was being filmed. Basking in the attention of the others, especially Boudicca, one of the three girl Cage Fighters. Clawing the air. Roaring to order.

'Don't do a close-up on the face,' Spartacus warned Tech as Leo stepped from the Cage.

'As if!' Tech gave him a withering look. 'It's his fingers I'm filming.' He laughed. 'Those nails will be a big attraction.'

Leo's admirers joined in the laughter. Leo had let his nails grow and filed them to look like claws. He now painted them a vivid orange colour for each fight.

Kai thought they looked ridiculous and took every opportunity to say so. He went forward and opened his mouth to speak.

'Shake hands.' Spartacus stepped between them.

'Of course.' Leo smiled. 'No hard feelings?' he said to Kai, holding out his hand.

'Course not.' Kai brought his fingers close to Leo's, avoiding actual contact with the orange talons.

Leo took his hand. 'Still mates?'

'Uh,' Kai muttered. They weren't mates, yet this was the way Leo behaved. Smooth and smiling when others were around – with the smile never reaching his eyes.

'You OK?' Raven asked anxiously as she came up.

'Fine,' both boys replied together.

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Raven smiled at them.

'Catch you later.' Leo touched Raven lightly on the arm and moved away.

'You meant me?' Kai asked her. 'Right?'

'Of course I meant you,' said Raven. 'But I was concerned about Leo too. You landed some heavy punches on him.'

Kai glanced over his shoulder. Leo was staring after them. Raven turned and gave him a little wave. Leo waved back and grinned. But Kai had seen the look that was directed at him.

One of pure hatred.