**Caught**

**At**

**Fourteen**

A short story

By

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“Did you miss me? Anabel asked, her voice breaking.

"I guess so," Leslie answered, without making eye contact, as nonchalantly as she could.

"I did it to punish you," Anabel said casually.

"I know," Leslie answered, flicking through the mail.

"But every time I saw salt I would think of you and start to cry,"

"Oh really?" She knew how much Leslie loved salt.

"Were you crying into your cup of tea and pouring through old photos of me?"

"No," Leslie answered honestly, "I just kind of got on with my life."

"Would you have crumbled and died if I hadn't come back?" Anabel asked, almost desperately.

"Um, well, it would hurt for a while and then I guess I'd get over it," Leslie heard herself lie.

By now Anabel was blinking back tears. Poor, dear thing: she'd never engaged in open warfare before and had no idea who she was dealing with – Leslie, war torn, battle weary, permanently on her guard, defensive, jaded after all the single and hand-to-hand combat missions she'd endured over her life. She was not about to start making tactical errors now. But the thought of her daughter out on the streets made her want to scream! And the thought that she, Leslie, had not done her job as a mother properly, well, that just wasn’t a possibility. The events from three days ago, flashed through her mind.

“We’re going to have to check your luggage,” Leslie heard a voice behind her addressing her daughter. Big, burly police officers in uniform with guns holstered at their waist did not perturb Leslie. They’d featured in her life so many times before. A stranger talking to her young and naïve daughter, did. How dare they break into their ideal world in this way! A crowd had already gathered. The entire airport was watching them and the atmosphere was as expectant as that of a grand final football match.

But then Leslie noticed that Anabel’s face had turned crimson red and there was a panicked look in her eyes, not unlike that of an animal about to be shot. Leslie’s intuition was working overtime at that moment: if her daughter was innocent she would *not* be having that reaction. She decided she should give it a second or two before jumping to her daughter’s defence. In that moment, Leslie dearly wished she could morph into another identity because she could see the events that were about to unfold and could do absolutely nothing about it.

“B-b-b-ut I can’t do that because I have to check in, our flight’s about to board,” Anabel stammered out as if she thought she could just walk away from it all. She quickly grabbed her things and turned around to leave.

“Hey!!” Leslie said, in her most attention getting and angry voice, even though inside she was shaking like a little girl and blinking back tears and sobs. “The police asked you to open your luggage. Don’t worry about boarding, open your suitcase!” Leslie said, with as much sternness as she could muster. Leslie’s own childhood was flashing before her eyes and it was an uncomfortable feeling. Nobody knew that Leslie had become the perfect mother because she didn’t want her kids having the same rough upbringing she’d had. And willing to make any sacrifice – right from the first moment she’d held her first baby in her arms – to make sure of it. Nobody, in this life anyway, knew that she had seen too much - the seedy side of life - far too young. People often questioned her about her habit of being a helicopter parent. And some intensely curious people would demand to know how she could afford it all: fancy holidays, expensive ballet tuition, the latest fashions. A secret she would take to her grave.

It wasn’t so much that Leslie was good looking – she’d realised that a long time ago. But there was something about her that made them come back for more. She could always tell the ones that would be her future customers. When she served them at the supermarket, all she had to do was speak in her soft voice, while locking eyes with them and then gently swipe her hand across their palm as she was handing back the change or card. You’d think the ones who got all jittery and broke eye contact fast, would be the ones least likely to pay for sex but that wasn’t always the case.

Right now, though, it looked as though Anabel was following in her mother’s footsteps and Leslie had such a wave of panic come over her that she felt as though her eyes were losing focus.

Anabel turned to Leslie with pleading eyes, begging for her assistance. But of course, where the law was concerned, Leslie had always taught her children that it’s best to stay on the right side. There was no talking her way out of this. Anabel would have to face the consequences of her actions. Anabel persisted with her desperate look to her mother and her eyes seemed to be saying, “you’re siding with them, why are siding with them!?” Leslie was close to all of her children but she always knew instinctively when it was time to pull out her trump card – tough love - and when it was time to be a little more flexible where their punishments were concerned.

The way Anabel opened her suitcase, flipping out some of its contents on one side and then attempting to quickly close it again, further damned her. It was too obvious to Leslie and everyone else who was watching that she was trying to hide something. The policeman reached into the suitcase and checked the other side where the missing and expensive shop products were hidden. Leslie’s legs turned to jelly as she visualised her daughter spending the night in the lock-up, with God only knew who, and she felt so overcome with guilt that she almost retched and vomited. She covered it up by pretending to have a coughing fit. The thing is, she’d suspected for some time, that Anabel had been doing this – she was always coming home with new clothes, jewellery and cosmetics, flippantly saying that such and such a friend had “lent” them to her or had given them as a gift. She would go out on shopping trips alone and come home in strange elated moods that were unlike her. Leslie hadn’t questioned her though because it was completely beyond her reckoning that Anabel could do something like that. After all, she wanted for nothing. Her life was quite perfect as far as Leslie could see.

As if being watched and judged by the whole population of a small, seaside resort town who all just happened to be gathered at the airport, wasn’t enough, Leslie soon had even more harrowing situation to deal with. She’d managed to hold it all inside the whole time her daughter was interrogated by the police, while paying for the expensive products took place and the entire flight home which was as silent as the starry sky on a moonlit summer’s night. But the moment they arrived home, Leslie unleashed a verbal tirade onto her daughter the likes of which the child had never heard before so Anabel walked out of the front door and disappeared for an entire three days. After much searching and pleading, Anabel was fetched home.

“Mum, I’m sorry I got caught shop lifting at the airport, ruining our family holiday and then ran away from home for three days. But mum, I know about your secret life!” Anabelle said with big emotion written on her face – unusual for her. Now it was Leslie’s turn to be shocked. It all suddenly made sense. Their eyes met and locked.

"Come here," Leslie said with arms outstretched and Anabel melted into her embrace.

“It’s time for change!” she whispered into her daughter’s hair.

"I love you,"

"I love you too. It's history now, leave it where it belongs," and the dam inside of Leslie receded a couple of inches, just enough to let her start breathing again. Then they went straight back to chatting about the books they’d been reading as if nothing had ever happened.

Sometimes it took something terrible to happen as a catalyst toward a better life. Everything culminated for Leslie the moment she saw her worst faults being paraded in front of her through her child. But she also acknowledged this - her children loved big because that’s the way she loved and because of that, they would always be alright.