THE MONSTER HAD an alarming abundance of facial hair and was the size and shape of a fridge. The wooden bench groaned with relief as it rose slowly and started moving towards the fresh meat which had just been deposited in the cage. As the footsteps grew louder, the other inhabitants lowered their heads so as not to make eye contact.

‘Oi, you!’

The runaway kept her head fixed on the linoleum, the knot tightening in her stomach as a pair of tattered canvas shoes came into view. ‘Hey, I’m talking to you!’

Before the young girl could respond, chunky fingers like iron rods clamped onto the collar of her leather jacket, yanking upwards so that she had to stand or risk damage to her favourite item of clothing. ‘I’m s…sorry,’ she muttered.

‘Fink you're clever, do ya? Ignoring your elders and betters. Well, you ain’t better than me, girl, understand?’ The Monster pulled back one thick arm, the hairy knuckles bunching, a letter tattooed on each finger. L…O…V…E. The girl shut her eyes, awaiting the impact.

‘Hey, meatball, enough of that.’

Time stood still. The atmosphere thick with tension.

‘What did you call me?’

‘I called you meatball cos you’ve obviously got mince for brains. Now let the kid go.’

For a moment, nothing happened, then the runaway was forcibly dumped back onto the bench. She opened one eye and looked in the direction of the new voice. Silver-blonde hair was whipped up on top of the woman’s head like ice cream in a cone; the eyes large, green orbs with black blobs in the middle which reminded the youngster of those coconut-flavoured Liquorice Allsorts. The fur coat had seen better days and the woman’s black stockings had more ladders than the fire brigade. Something about the way her hands constantly played with each other warned the runaway that, like everyone in this madhouse, the interloper was slightly unhinged.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ she told the Monster, who still had her fist drawn back but was now facing in her direction.

‘I’ll crush you like a walnut.’

‘Maybe,’ said the blonde, ‘but then you’ll have Blaize Hathaway to answer to.’