

'I wear it when I'm being Dietrich.'

The woman ignored this. 'Is it Kate or Kitty?'

At the Macklows' she'd been plain 'Allen.'

'Kitty, Madam, please.'

'Pleased to meet you, Kitty, I'm sure. I'm Ellen Steinberg. Do come in. You could have used the front door, you know, this isn't London, and it's only a cottage.'

'Yes, Madam.'

'Get out of the way, Geenie, and let the girl through.'

Geenie ducked under Mrs Steinberg's arm and fled, taking the dog with her.

'You'll have to excuse my daughter. I'm afraid she's always been highly strung.'

Kitty followed the woman into the cottage, still gripping the sodden shoe in one hand.

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*"We have got gas and electricity, Kitty! A very recent addition out here in the wilderness. So it will be easy for you — in the kitchen. And music. We've got plenty of music. I hope you like music?"*

There was no fire in the sitting-room grate. Ashes floated in the air as Mrs Steinberg walked past the enormous fireplace, dropped into a velvet armchair, and drew a fur rug across her knees. 'Take a seat, please, Kitty.'

Kitty sat on the sofa, which was covered in a tapestry-like fabric, threaded with gold. She thought about putting the shoe on the floor, but changed her mind and folded her hands around it in her lap. Then she looked up and noticed, above the armchair where Mrs Steinberg was sitting, a hole in the wall. It was as big as the woman's head, and its edges were ragged.

Mrs Steinberg twisted around and looked at the hole too, but said nothing.

Kitty let her eyes wander over the rest of the room. The walls were all white, except for one which was covered in wooden racks filled with records. The floorboards were bare, apart from a red rug in front of the hearth. The curtains were pink and green chintz, lined with purple satin. On the mantelpiece was a large bunch of irises and daffodils, stuffed into a blue ceramic jug. The flowers were interspersed with long blades of grass.

'Mr Crane loves grass,' said Mrs Steinberg.

Kitty dropped her eyes.

'He says the grass of Sussex is the best in the world. He's worked wonders with this place; it's really all his doing. He's an absolute whiz with interiors. We're both very keen on modernisation. But it's still damned icy, don't you think? And the rooms are ridiculously small.'

The woman's voice was strange — not

as American as Kitty had imagined, and high-pitched, like a girl's. Kitty shifted her feet. Mrs Steinberg had hung her raincoat and hat to dry in the kitchen, but her shoes were soaked.

'However. We have got gas and electricity, Kitty! A very recent addition out here in the wilderness. So it will be easy for you — in the kitchen. And music. We've got plenty of music. I hope you like music?'

'Yes, Madam,' said Kitty, wondering what music had to do with anything.

'Excellent. Geenie's never been musical and Mr Crane is hopeless. He thinks brass bands are a good thing! So, you see, I need an ally! She adjusted the fur rug and stretched out her feet. Her shoes were made of a soft material, gathered in a visible seam around the sole; to Kitty, they looked like a pair of man's slippers.

'Every woman needs an ally in the house,

don't you think? It's no good just having men and children. You must have dogs, too, and other women.'

Kitty plucked at her skirt. She'd worn her best, blue boiled wool with a pleat at the side, and now it had a damp patch on the front from the wet shoe.

'How old are you, Kitty?'

'Nineteen, Madam.'

Mrs Steinberg frowned. Kitty wasn't sure if she was too young, or too old, for the job. At the Macklows', all the girls had complained about this problem: when you were young they didn't want you because you'd no experience, but as you got older they were reluctant to promote you for fear you'd go off and get married.

'And what was it you did before?'

'I'm a cleaner in the school, Madam, at the moment. But before that I did a bit of cooking for a lady in Petersfield.' In reality, she'd scrubbed the zinc, laid out the cook's knives, and fetched, cleaned or carried anything she was told.

'Are the schools here awful? The ones in London were really dreadful. Geenie was very unhappy in all of them. The English seem to believe children can learn only through punishment.'

Kitty thought of her school, of the hours spent copying words and numbers from a blackboard, the dust that gathered in the grooves of her desk, the teacher who used to pick the boys up by their collars and shake them. 'I — wouldn't like to say, Madam.'

'Can you brush hair?'

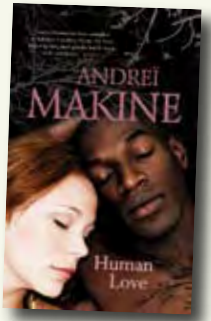
'Yes, Madam.'

## New Releases

### Human Love

Andrei Makine

Sceptre



**H**uman Love is about Africa and related stories following Elias a "professional revolutionary," visiting Angola, Congo, Cuba, Moscow and points in between. There are echoes in this novel that will resonate long after you have read it.

The first part of the book is harrowing and difficult to read. It is about a frightening night after which the two main participants are lucky to be alive. Through this night you see the death that surrounds Elias's life. The writer takes Elias's fountain pen that interlinks with many other narratives. The participants are manipulated by the Cold War superpowers, with their dreams of empire. The monolithic superpowers cast a shadow over the novel's characters. The latter parts of the book include the humanity of the human love of the title, where Anna saves Elias on a cold winter night in Moscow, however this is not the end, and this book is no love story!

Makine writes a meaningful novel that stands out from the crowd; I would suggest that you read it.

Sam MacColl

### Me And Mickie James

Drew Gummerson

Jonathan Cape



**E**veryone needs a light-hearted book sometimes and *Me And Mickie James* does the trick. It's a story about a pop-duo, Down By Law, and their adventures, as they strive for fame.

Down By Law plan on taking the music industry by storm. Their base is in a disused room at the top of St Pancras station, which is dire — no plumbing, but still Down By Law are looking for gigs and a record deal, that's the most important thing.

Making their way through a minor European theme park, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and dealing with the Viet Cong, Down By Law face a series of adventures, which although at times are humorous, seem a bit far fetched, but this is fiction. At times the language is a bit strong, but not entirely gratuitous — it does work in the context of the characters and plot.

*Me and Mickie James* is a story of love, identity and the desire for success, something that we can all relate to.

Cherie Federico