Praise for *The Knowing*

'Vivid, visceral and utterly immersive. Extraordinary'
Liz Hyder, author of *The Gifts*

'You can smell the spit and sawdust rising from the pages of this atmospheric gothic novel'
RED Magazine

'A violent, disturbing gothic tale compellingly told'
Guardian

'If you love Sarah Waters and dark historical fiction, you will no doubt be hooked'
Diva Magazine

'Dark, atmospheric and compulsive, *The Knowing* is a bewitching book that kept me up reading late into the night'
Sophie Keetch, author of *Morgan is My Name*

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Also by Emma Hinds

The Knowing

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EMMA HINDS

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD



Bedford Square *Publishers*

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For those of us still transforming

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'The real test of knowledge is not whether it is true but whether it empowers us.'

—Francis Bacon

'Philosophy is odious and obscure;
Both law and physic are for petty wits;
Divinity is basest of the three,
Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile:
'Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me.'

—Doctor Faustus, Christopher Marlowe

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SANGUIS

PART I

'Be careful not to take anything from the lion but the rose-coloured blood, and from the white eagle only the white gluten. Coagulate (corporify) it according to the directions given by the ancients, and you will have the *tincture physicorum* (The Elixir of the Red Lion). But if this is incomprehensible to you, remember that only he who desires with his whole heart will find and to him only who knocks strong enough the door shall be opened.'

—Tinctura Physica*, Paracelsus*

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London, 1597

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He who cries aloud from desolation

Chapter One

Kit is not afraid as he is tied to the whipping post at the Standard on Cheapside.

'For stealing, the cutpurse is to be whipped until bloody,' the sheriff calls over the assembled watchers.

Kit's audience is a smaller crowd than usual, unsurprising given the slow and steady spread of plague out from around Fleet Prison, not five minutes from the city walls. The watching crowd is reduced to bored fishwives, a few pious-looking types and the dog catcher, paused with his stick and hoop of rope over his shoulder. Kit wonders if the sheriff pays him per dog caught or dog killed. He could kill a dog. Surely it cannot be hard. The first lash lands. It tingles. He knows from the force that pushes his face against the blood-stained post that he should scream, so he does.

'One!' The sheriff's satisfied voice calls over the crowd.

The meagre crowd cheer – because why would they not? If he saw some frater or a jarkman tied to the post or pilloried, he would cheer just as much, and call them fools for being caught in their snatching and forging. There is not a spell or prayer in all of

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Christendom that can take the crime out of criminals, and he has been thieving since he was a sprout. So he yells when the lashes come. He remembers how Ned Alleyn screamed as Faustus was dragged down to hell and gives it his best. He makes a good enough show of it, by his reckoning.

'A cutpurse!' someone shouts. 'Skin him alive!'

The sheriff seems to take that to heart. The pressure of blows across his naked back jolts his forehead into the post. Again. Again. Again. What makes other men piss themselves he just finds tedious, so to amuse himself, Kit considers how he can give the best performance of pain. Most people by this point in the process are less lusty of voice and give more whimpers, so he tries a bit of that. It is nothing to cry, really, just stare into the sun until the eyes are a little blind. At nearly twenty-one years old, he cannot grow a beard, and whilst it is certainly an annoyance, it is good at times like these, when he can squeeze out a few tears; with his young face, people might go easy on him. He ignores the thump of his head against the post and wonders what pie he might get Mariner to buy for him afterwards, if she has managed to filch a few purses during his performance. Or maybe Twentyman will take them to the Mermaid for a pint, if he is hidden in the back. Lads who take the brand for their master, they get pints.

'Have pity!' someone cries.

The lashes pause. The watchers are quieter now. He realises that, for a while, the only sound he has heard is the wet, gasping exertion from the round-bellied sheriff.

'Let the lad down!'

Now he notices that a few of the fishwives are covering their eyes and shaking their heads. Only one person stares at him with the greedy expression of a sadistic cosmopolitan. She stands out, even despite her dark cloak, because nothing in London can hide

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Spanish satin from his thieving eye. It is strange that she is not pressing a nosegay to her face, like the finer ladies are want to do when passing down Cheapside. Those intent eyes linger upon him as he is untied and staggers. That surprises him. Perhaps his feet have gone dead standing so long in the same place. He surveys the crowd, looking for a thin face, perhaps a proud glower. He cannot see his master.

'Kit Skevy, for being a cutpurse you have been whipped with many lashes and now you are to be branded. God save the Queen!' The sheriff pushes him to his knees.

What a red-faced, sweaty man he is. It is a marvel, really, that he is the one who has been delivering the punishment and not receiving it for surely he looks about to die with the effort. The blacksmith stands ready. A hand in Kit's hair, twisting his face down onto the block. He makes sure to watch carefully as the glowing brand is lowered to his temple, waiting until he hears the hiss and burn inside his own skull to scream pitifully and appropriately. Then it is done. Dragged up, tossed away, the smell of his own burnt flesh filling his nostrils as he stumbles into Mariner's waiting arms. She is a tall woman; she catches Kit easily and holds him steady under her armpit. Such height helps her daily deception along with her cropped brown curls and boy's clothes. Her young, rounded jawline has her frequently taken for a lad of one and twenty not the twenty-five-year-old woman she secretly is. Kit has always been envious of her dangerous face; a pink burn scar over her left eye, vivid against her light-brown skin, one eye queerly milky. When she wants to scare children she tells them she can see the devil with it and how the two of them laugh when the little ones scream, for there is delight in having a partner in perceived monstrosity. Mariner does not look like she is laughing today.

'Can you stand?' She appears oddly pale-faced for a Moorish girl

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out of Portugal, but she is probably hungry and twitching to get moving, especially if she is hiding snatched trinkets in her sleeves.

'Of course.' His feet do not seem to want to obey his desire to leave. 'I am only tired.'

Being whipped is more exhausting that he anticipated.

'Tired?' Mariner stares at him, incredulous. 'Kit, the fucker lashed you endlessly; Christ himself was not so whipped! You didn't faint or shout as you should have—'

'I did excellent cries, I thought.' His voice slurs. He has no notion why. 'Where is Twentyman? Are we for the pub?'

He watches as his best friend's face twists into a familiar mask of contained enraged disappointment.

'He's not here,' she says shortly.

Kit does not understand. What have I done this time, he thinks?

'I am here!'

He turns his head, hoping to see the man to whom he has given more than a decade of thieving, the man he was branded for, here to congratulate him, but it is only Griffin, sooty and sweaty as always.

'My sister sent me to help you home. I only have a few bells before rehearsal.'

Griffin manages stage craft for the Admiral's Men. At forty-one years, he retains the height and bearing of a man who was once considered a great beauty of the stage. These days, his long blond hair runs to ratty, a once-cherubic face a little jowly and speckled with blond-grey stubble. A transformation from top billing to the wings, using alchemy tricks and secrets sailed in from distant lands to make devil smoke seep up from under the boards of the Rose. It is Kit's favourite place to be when he is not brawling or stealing for Twentyman; crouched under the boards, helping Griffin spill magic from bottles and braziers.

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'I see she was right to send me,' Griffin says, grasping Kit's other arm.

Griffin's hands are red and damp. Wet, he thinks, since he was taught to name these things, that will feel wet.

'I am bleeding,' he says. He cannot say he feels more because he does not. This is why he is never afraid.

The first time he spoke of it, Kit was burned. He'd been in England about three years by then; eight years old and Twentyman had sent him flying out of the door with a boot up his arse for a bad day's stealing. Fuck off, you little whorehouse shit, his chasing shout followed Kit scuttling down Bankside to the blacksmiths. He watched the smithy boys in fascination as cold, sturdy things became glowing and fluid. Why shouldn't he touch, when it was so bulbous and serpentine, red and writhing, pulsing with heat like a living thing? It was only after, in the sideways glances of the smith boys and Mariner's imperfectly concealed shock that he saw his mistake.

'Trying to broil yourself, Young Kit?' she said.

Everyone called him Young Kit, even Mariner, his newly arrived friend from sea who was only four years older than him, for he was still small for his age. He was in the habit of using it to see what he could get away with. Griffin called that canny and Kit liked the word, just as he liked the smells of London, his stable bed at the Silver Moon and the grand cavernous space inside the playhouse. At the pike ponds behind the Rose, Mariner dipped Kit's hand beneath the water.

'You must be careful around the Smithy.'

'I did not feel it.'

'No reason to pretend, it looks dreadful.' She touched the bubbly white skin hesitantly. It reminded Kit of the rind of fat that

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sometimes gathered on the top of the stew at the Silver Moon when it was too cold. 'Does it not hurt?'

He concentrated on his senses, though sensation had never been something he was good at.

'The water is wetter than my skin, colder than my skin but warmer still than snow. What is hurt?' Kit put words to a truth he had known all of his short, confusing life. 'Is it… hot? It is a little hot, the wound itself. Does it make my skin tighter and harder? It is both. Is that hurt?'

Under the water, the fish nibbled at Kit's fingers with their smooth, enquiring mouths whilst Mariner stared at him, her one, stranger, lighter eye catching the sunlight from the water's surface.

'You say it does not burn or ache at all?' Her words were slow, disbelieving, and then suddenly, fast: 'Do you feel no pain?'

Kit did not know if it was true. Griffin had always watched him ever since he came with him from Antwerp, pulling his hands away from hot plates and thorn bushes. He had simply presumed that perhaps he had not yet done anything that qualified enough to hurt, but Mariner's face was incredulous and her tone urgent and Kit did not know how to placate her.

'What does pain feel like?' he asked.

'God's wounds. I will have to think about it.'

Kit waited. He knew he was different; he had known it for a while. He could stand in the sun for hours without fainting or retching. He could skate on the Thames endlessly and not complain like others did when his fingertips turned blue. He watched the pain of others with interest; he had seen Twentyman cut a man's ear off, seen the blood pour and thought it fascinating, the way men bellowed. Kit Skevy has made a study of screams but he has never screamed for anything.

'Pain feels as if there are warning bells inside your flesh,' she said,

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finally. 'As if a great hue and cry has been taken up inside you. You know that something is very wrong because you feel the pain. The pain makes your heartbeat fast, your brow sweat, makes time move differently.'

'How can time move differently?'

'It moves slower or faster, as it does when you are happy or sad. You know?'

Kit nodded but he did not know. Those words; pain, hurt, burn, ache, they were lands far away Kit always expected to arrive in but never yet had. Mariner, sitting beside him with her frown and disbelief, she somehow lived there.

'Perhaps you are made differently when it comes to pain,' she mused. 'Like a bear, maybe.'

They had watched bears fight, kill a dozen dogs and not go down. Kit was not certain he wanted to be a bear.

'None could hurt Achilles,' Kit said, nervously. 'Griff told me the story. He was dipped in the river Styx.'

It is a wondrous and wicked thing to be magical; even then Kit knew it could take you places. To the great courts of Europe or to burn at the stake. It kept him awake sometimes, those small nightmares of what he could be. Things that later they would call him behind his back, or shout at him in a fight: a witch child, a changeling, a demon, Satan's spawn, unholy. At the time, Kit could only think it was better than being a bear.

'They said the same about Goliath and look what happened to him,' Mariner said, drily. 'It is the Lord's doing, it is marvellous in our eyes, but no need to let it go to your head.'

Kit did not consider it marvellous. The world was full of people feeling; pain and time and sweat and heartbreak. Kit was burdened with being outside of all of it; curious, and alone. So Kit learned to play the part of pain, to hide the secret of his strangeness deep

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behind cries and moans and coughs. Sometimes he would test it, with things that caused great discomfort to others. He nearly drowned twice in the Thames, has fought many fevers and even more brawls. Nothing changes. His friends have kept his secret but his reputation as the oddest boy in Southwark has only grown. Even now, dripping blood through the city, he can sense it: those who saw him whipped watching him and the attention in their eyes curdling from sympathy to suspicion the longer he stays upright.

'Curse you, Skevy, you damned wretch!' a little boy yells to them as they press down through St Paul's square to the river. 'My master had a crown on you swooning!'

For the last four years he's been Twentyman's prize brawler. He's a whole head shorter than Twentyman's other lads and even Mariner but when he gets hit, he never stays down. There's always use for a lad who is as small as a robin and fights like a badger, so says Twentyman, and there are always people who scorn him for rising, over and over, as if all of Southwark waits for the day he does not. He cannot imagine it. Not even now, with slow steps that barely drag towards the bridge, Kit Skevy finds it hard to believe he can die, for surely, if he were to die, he might feel pain eventually?

'You need to be careful,' says Mariner, his arm slung over her shoulders as they weave their way through a flock of sheep crossing the bridge.

'Why should I?' Kit's words are a slurry of mumbles. He's been branded and whipped and he's still headed home for trouble. Mariner steps on his toe when he's looking down so that he'll see it. He looks up at her steadily.

'Ouch,' he says.

'Pushing yourself as close to your death as you can manage will not make you feel it,' she says curtly. 'All it will do is kill you eventually.'

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Kit wonders how it is that a girl like Mariner, raised in the navy and coarse as fucking mud, always knows how to put words to the worst urges of his heart.

'We all die.' Kit's feet stumble underneath him. He does feel very, very sleepy. 'Better surely not to feel it. Better to feel nothing at all.'

'Despair is a sin.'

'So are all the delightful things,' Griffin says and Kit smiles. They say in the Silver Moon that Griffin had a famous atheist lover, the poet Marlowe, dead these four years. They say other things too, that Griffin picked up more than his vices, infected with Marlowe's deadly unbelief. If it's true, then it's an ague Kit seems to have been born with.

'Is hell?' Mariner glares at them both. She is the oddest confluence of things, a dark girl in a city of pale faces, a woman in boy's clothing, full of a sailor's superstitions but also raised a reformer. She amuses and exasperates him in equal measure every day.

'*Where we are is hell, and where hell is, there must we ever be*,' Griffin says.

'Southwark?' says she, and Griffin laughs. An awkward trio, they stumble under Traitor's Gate. All of Southwark is stretched out in front of them, cramped and sweaty under the summertime pall of Winchester House, its tall chimneys belching smoke out into the yellow air. These are the streets where the unwanted of London make their living; odd travellers from distant lands like Mariner, players born in the shadow of the tower like Griffin, or orphans from Belgian whorehouses, washed up in the city where anyone can be anything, like Kit. The great families of London, the Howards, the Sidneys, the Walsinghams, the Raleighs, they rotate distantly around the star of the crown, soar on each other's wings and plummet or rise on their names and fortune. In Southwark, it is different. Here, you scrabble your way up from nothing; come from the country,

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come from the north, from wars and trades, with no family to catch you and a deadly fall below. Marlowe from Canterbury, Spenser from Smithfield, sons of cobblers and cloth makers rising up on rickety ladders made of grammar schools and English bibles. It is in Kit's bones, this impatient striving to make coin, to carve out a life, to leave something better than the little he started with in this patch of houses built on Thames mud. It's been sixteen years since Griffin brought him from Antwerp and when Kit once asked him who he was born to he only said this: It matters not who you are born to but where you are made. On days like these, bloody and beaten, he wonders what good it is to have this secret gift of painlessness if this is all he is? Kit Skevy is Southwark made, a brawler and a thief, and sometimes he worries that this is all he will ever be.

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