

# Subversive

BOOK ONE OF

the Clandestine Magic trilogy

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SLENDER SKY BOOKS

Slender Sky Books

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*To Christina Morland, dear friend, excellent writer and incisive reader of many, many drafts of this novel; and to my husband, who made this book better and never once complained that I've had my head in an alternate reality for eight years.*



# Chapter One

Wizards never came to Ellicott Mills anymore. Beatrix stared at the contrary specimen striding toward her and had a fleeting thought—more of a hope, really—that he simply needed directions to some other place.

Then the man said, “I must speak with the mayor,” and her heart sank. What if this was the town’s new omnimancer? After so long without one, she’d assumed that Washington would never appoint a replacement. It did not bode well if they thought now was the time.

“Well?” The wizard leaned into the counter separating them, frowning at her. “Don’t gawp at me. Is the mayor here or not? This is his store, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid he’s at lunch,” she said, aiming for polite but hitting just shy of the mark. Gawping, indeed.

“I’ll wait.” He turned down the nearest aisle, looking at spices.

He hadn’t introduced himself as a wizard—hadn’t introduced himself at all—but his appearance spoke for him. Though he couldn’t have been much older than thirty, every hair on his head was silver, pulled into a queue that hung halfway down his back. Even Ellicott Mills residents knew what that meant.

Beatrix stared at his profile with disfavor and then surprised recognition. Sharp nose, pointed chin, thin mouth: Peter Blackwell, native son.

She unclenched her teeth. The idea of Blackwell as the omniscient of any place, let alone a small town, was ridiculous. For all that omniscients lorded it over the masses, they were the bottom rung of the wizarding power structure. Blackwell had bypassed that rung from the start, and the town gossips claimed he did important, hush-hush work for the Department of Defense.

Just a visit home, perhaps. For the first time in twenty years.

“You don’t have fresh ginger,” he said, returning to the counter.

“I’m afraid not—no reason to carry it. Our customers who cook with ginger use it dried.” She unbent so far as to grin. “And of course we have no wizards to brew with it.”

“Starting today, you do. Order me five pounds. Mature, not young.”

Beatrix supposed she truly was gawping this time. “You *can’t* mean you’re to be our—our—”

“Omnimancer? Yes, and as such I need a ready supply of ginger. Also,” he said in the tone of a man used to giving commands, “get me fresh horseradish, garlic and rosemary. What you have in stock is atrocious. Tell your husband not to pinch pennies by leaving items on the shelves after they go bad, would you?”

Perhaps he ended up back in Ellicott Mills by insulting the wrong person.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible, Wizard Blackwell,” she said.

“Madam—”

“Miss. I can’t pass a message to a nonexistent person, you see. I am the mayor’s employee, not his wife.”

He looked at her, really looked, for the first time since setting foot in the store. “I do apologize,” he said, not sounding particularly apologetic, “if I’ve hit on a sore subject.”

Honestly. She cleared her throat to cover up laughter. “Not at all—I enjoy being in control of my life and finances.”

“A shopkeeper revolutionist.” His lips curved into an ironic smile. “Equal rights for all.”

Now *that* was an insult she took more personally. She knew she shouldn’t rise to the bait, but she couldn’t help herself.

“We’ve already had two revolutions over the idea,” she said, stabbing a loose hairpin back into her bun. “It ought to be self-evident without launching a third that women aren’t meant to be treated differently than men.”

“You see no distinction?”

“Anyone with sense knows a woman can do anything a man—” She caught herself, but it was too late.

“Except, of course,” Blackwell said, “for magic.”

The front door opened, bell tinkling. In strolled Sam Croft, part-time mayor, full-time general store owner.

“Your turn for lunch,” he called out. “Weather’s beautiful, so don’t spend the whole time with your nose in a—”

Croft stopped, mouth open, as he caught sight of their visitor. Then he offered a “hello” that sounded one part wary and two parts impressed.

“Mayor Croft, Wizard Blackwell would like to have a word,” Beatrix said, trying to avoid sounding as if she wanted to throttle said wizard. “Should I handle the counter for you in the meantime?”

Croft made shooing gestures. “No, no, you go have your lunch.”

But Blackwell positioned himself where the counter opened, blocking her escape. “I don’t believe you introduced yourself. *Miss.*”

The old superstition about the power of names, and never telling yours to a magic-user, crossed her mind. Not that he didn’t know it already, if he bothered to think back to his pre-wizard days.

Croft cleared his throat. “My assistant, Beatrix Harper.”

As she left with her lunch pail and book, she heard her boss ask Blackwell anxiously, “I trust you were ... treated well?”



Blackwell gave a sharp laugh. The closing door cut off the rest of his response.

She spent her break unable to concentrate on her book, her food or the fine weather. Had she just gotten herself fired? What had she been *thinking*? Not of her responsibilities, that was clear. She put her sandwich away half-eaten and resolved to go back and beg.

The moment she stepped into the shop, Blackwell emerged from an aisle.

“Ah, Miss Harper,” he said. “I’m in need of a full-time assistant, and I’ve chosen you. Come with me.”

Her heartbeat thudded in her ears.

“Thank you,” she managed, “but I already have a job.”

“Not anymore,” he said.

Croft—half-hiding behind a cereal display—did not contradict this statement.

She found she could not beg in front of Blackwell. She struggled with herself for a moment before giving in to recalcitrance. “I will find employment elsewhere, then.”

The wizard shrugged. “I doubt it.”

She had a mental image of going from shop to shop on Main Street and finding all the owners cowering behind displays. For a wild moment she thought of getting work in Baltimore—somehow. But the delusion passed. Her budget could not accommodate daily train tickets, and her car couldn’t take even a month of that commute.

“I’ll pay you the same rate,” Blackwell added. “I presume you need every cent, if you’re covering your sister’s tuition bills.”

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Croft inched further behind the cereal boxes.

In desperation, Beatrix said, “I’m the *last* person you want assisting you! I’m the county chapter president of the Women’s League for the Prohibition of Magic!”

“Yes. No doubt your membership will ask you to step down.”

Blackwell walked past her and held the door open. Feeling more powerless than ever before, she followed him out of Croft’s Goods—her face hot, her hands shaking—and toward the long-empty omnimancer’s mansion.

## Chapter Two

The sprawling Victorian designated as home and office for Ellicott Mills' omnimancer sat just up the street from Croft's at the top of the town's highest hill. Peter spent most of the climb wondering if he would dare do what had sprung into his mind when Beatrix Harper coolly took him to task for patronizing her. She would either be ideal or a monumental mistake.

Then they crested the hill and he got a close look at the house, which drove every other thought from his head.

The front porch sagged. The window pane above the door was broken. The wood siding proved to be gray not on purpose but because the light-blue paint was all but worn away.

The panic he'd suppressed as he fled D.C. flared up again. "How long have you been without an omnimancer?"

"Five years," Miss Harper said.

“*Five?* This looks like it’s been falling apart for twenty.”

She said nothing. She probably had no intention of speaking to him unless required. Her mouth was set in a tight line, her hands in fists at her sides.

“What idiot preceded me?” he asked.

“The same one who was here when you left.”

“Graham?” He couldn’t believe it, he really couldn’t. “Wasn’t he at least seventy when we were thirteen?”

“Yes.”

Peter ran a hand over his eyes. Then he reached into a coat pocket and extracted a maple leaf. “*Onirnan*,” he murmured, and the leaf obligingly crinkled, withered and turned to dust. With a tremendous groan, the old door opened.

The house smelled stale with a hint of decay. As he blinked, eyes adjusting to the switch from midday sun to drapery-darkened gloom, something skittered over his boot. He used up another maple leaf lighting the front hall—the electricity had clearly been shut off—and took a quick inventory. Mouse droppings. Peeling wallpaper. Water damage to the wood floor, courtesy of the broken pane.

This did not bode well.

He rushed down the hallway, looking for the entrance to the cellar and finding it catty-corner to the kitchen. A fistful of leaves, a hurried spellword, and the cavernous underground level lit up like daylight to reveal exactly what he had feared: piles of compost rather than carefully preserved magical fuel.

He said the foulest word in his vocabulary. A soft but unmistakable snort issued from behind him.

“This amuses you, does it?” He rounded on Miss Harper and she fell back a step, something he could never make her do when they were children. “I ought to have at least a year’s worth of ready leaves here. Instead, I have nothing. For five years, did *no one* in town think to ask Washington for an annual walk-through to renew the spells on this wretched place?”

She shot him a look of unadulterated disdain. “Yes. Every year, in fact. But Ellicott Mills seems to be near the bottom of the priority list.”

“So I’m left with perhaps four weeks to harvest everything I’ll need through winter.”

“Can’t you order more?”

“No,” he said.

“But Omnimancer Graham—”

“We cannot count on supplies from Washington.”

She threw up her hands. “Surely if they’ve sent you here, they’ll give you what you need to do the job!”

This was the moment for an explanation. But he didn’t feel like explaining. He felt like snapping, so he did that instead. “Who do you think is more familiar with the inner workings of the capital, Miss Harper—you or I?”

That silenced her.

“Putting this house to rights with magic is out of the question—we can’t waste the fuel.” He slammed the cellar door behind them. “Make some headway here while I see to the leaves.”

“Shouldn’t we both be harvesting until the leaves turn?” she said, no doubt seeing that job as the less disgusting of the two.

He glanced at the high heels peeking out from her ankle-length dress. “Your outfit is ill-suited for climbing trees.”

“Not by choice,” Miss Harper muttered.

“Clear the ruined leaves out of the cellar—dump them in the back yard. Work on the brewing room next, then the hallway, then the receiving room.”

He left her fuming by the front door. If he took a slight bit of malicious satisfaction from the life reversal that left a member of the high-and-mighty Harper clan cleaning *his* house, well—it wasn’t the worst thing he’d done. Not by a long shot.

By the time he returned, his haul of picked and magically preserved leaves trailing behind him like a flock of unusually obedient birds, his arms and stomach both ached. When had he last eaten? He couldn’t remember.

The hallway that greeted him when he stepped into the house bore no relation to the one he’d left. She’d cleaned the cherrywood floor until it shone, covered the rain-ruined area under the broken window pane with a throw rug and found something to restick the wallpaper to the walls. He fixed the window with two of his new leaves, deposited the rest—perhaps a week’s worth—in a cellar now smelling of lemon and thanked his lucky stars that Miss Harper believed any task was worth doing well, even if for a wizard.

He found her in the receiving room, wrestling a substantial chair behind the desk that was now his. Large

sections of her green dress were gray with grime. Wisps of hair had escaped her bun. She looked as exhausted as he felt.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m impressed.”

While he had her off-balance with that obviously unexpected courtesy, he added, “Come with me to the brewing room so we can take inventory.”

“But ...” she said to his back as he walked out.

He knew her hours at Croft’s store were eight to four-thirty, and it was now twenty minutes until six. He didn’t have a choice but to work like a maniac, and so—by extension—neither did she. At least *she* would be getting paid for it.

“Do you have anything to write on?” he asked as she trailed into the room, wiping her hands on her ruined skirt.

“No.” She managed to convey quite a bit of emotion in that one syllable.

He plucked a new oak leaf from his coat and watched for her reaction as he cast his spell. His ultimate success or failure depended largely on her true opinion of magic remaining unchanged from their childhood, when—he was almost certain—she’d disguised herself as a boy to take the magical-ability test.

The leaf disintegrated between his thumb and forefinger, re-emerging as a long, parchment-thin piece of paper. Miss Harper’s expression gave nothing away.

With a sigh, he handed her the paper and a pen fished from another pocket.

“All right,” he said, opening up cabinet doors to reveal the several hundred bottles of ingredients an omnimancer

needed for brewing requests. “It’s alphabetical; that’s a mercy.”

He made quick work of half the contents. Once fresh, they were now clearly ruined, and Miss Harper scribbled furiously to keep up with his rapid-fire recitation of items he would need to purchase. But every liquid or dried spice—from the anise seed to the zedoary oil—needed to be opened, sniffed, held up to the light and in some cases tasted. By the time they finished, it was past seven o’clock.

“I really *must* go.” There was a strangled quality to her voice, as if she were holding back what she really wanted to say. She struck him as one provocation away from stabbing him with his own pen. “My sister expected me home two hours ago.”

“Ah, yes, the famous Lydia Harper.” He plucked the list—and the pen—from her hands. “I hope she won’t disown you for—how did she put it? ‘Helping to oil the gears of the machinery that steamrolls over typics?’”

“I’m not so much oiling the gears as being ground under them,” she said, gesturing at her ruined clothing.

He pulled a pair of leaves from his pocket, heart accelerating. “Shall I fix that for you?”

“No! Don’t cast magic on me.”

Well ... shit.

He tucked the leaves back with shaking fingers. He’d miscalculated, then. Again. Not as badly as the last time, granted, but the stakes were far too high for more errors.

“Do you have a moral objection, Miss Harper?” He kept his voice steady, as if the answer hardly mattered. “I suppose



you must, considering the tenets of the Women's League for the Prohibition of Magic. Fire and brimstone await me, or so I hear."

"You can't possibly be aware of my sister without also realizing that not everyone in our organization has the same concerns," she said, eyes burning with an anger that didn't match the cool contempt in her voice.

"And yours are ...?"

"I object to the idea that only the few who can wield magic are qualified to run this country." The words were quiet. The emotion in them was not. "I object to men pointing to magic as a reason to discriminate against women, even though ninety-eight percent of them can't perform a lick of it, either."

Yes. *Yes.*

"And I very much object to being forced to work for you as punishment for backtalk," she said, hands once again clenched into fists.

He laughed, lightheaded with hope and fatigue. "That's not why I'm doing it."

"Oh? Why, then?"

"Because you're an excellent employee, Miss Harper. I'll see you tomorrow at eight. And yes," he added before she could protest, "I *am* aware tomorrow is a Saturday."

