

The background of the cover is a light tan color. It is decorated with various botanical and architectural elements. On the left, there are hanging vines with small red berries and a large red flower. On the right, there are more vines with red berries and two small purple butterflies. In the bottom right corner, there is a dark silhouette of a staircase with a railing. The author's name is at the top, and the title is in the center-right. The main illustration is a large, dark silhouette of a woman in a long, flowing dress, standing with her back to the viewer and looking to the right.

BLYTHE BAKER

THE
SINISTER
SKILL OF
DECEIT

THE LADIES SOCIETY FOR MURDER: BOOK 6

THE SINISTER SKILL OF DECEIT

BLYTHE BAKER

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Augusta Lockwood struggles to understand the significance of the hidden tunnel beneath her home and of the secretive band of men spying on her. Soon, however, she faces an even more immediate threat when her house catches fire. Driven from her home, Augusta is forced to take up residence in the strange and gloomy abode of a distant relation.

Between trying to make sense of the reclusive old man's ramblings about her father, and attempting to discover who set fire to her home, Augusta faces a new mystery. A fellow member of her secret society has found herself the target of an unknown danger.

Can Augusta uncover the identity of the person who stalks her friend, while also keeping all her own enemies at bay?



Dawn had become a friend to me, recently. I had known her always but we usually seemed to pass by one another due to other obligations or necessities. My late father used to rise before the sun, but I rarely glimpsed sunrise but through the windows of his clinic. Or perhaps I noticed dawn's golden beams upon the table in the kitchen as I prepared a small meal for my father before his patients arrived.

As my life progressed, however, I now found it quite necessary to spend time outdoors early, walking along the silent streets with dewy tree branches and patches of grass. Simply being in the soothing quiet of that time of day helped me to gather my thoughts. I found myself increasingly looking forward to peaceful strolls back and forth from the house to a nearby park.

Edith, my housemaid, had noticed a change in my disposition. "You bring home the sunshine with you every morning," she said with a bright smile as I sat down to breakfast one morning. "These walks do you good, Mistress. If I may say so."

For the past few days, though, my thoughts had been too troubled for anything to clear them entirely.

I had all but gone mad since discovering the tunnel beneath my house, hidden away for who knew how many years. Its presence was a secret that had been guarded by Mr. Hawksworth, the tenant I had given residence to

upon the suggestion of one of my father's old friends. Taking in a tenant had proven to be nothing short of disastrous, especially in light of the truth of where that tunnel led.

It had come as a shock when I recently discovered a winding staircase beneath the stone pavilion in the old, abandoned Franklin manor just a few short blocks away. It had been an even greater shock to learn that it led right to the tunnel I had found in my own cellar. The two places were connected, and I had spotted my tenant – who had somehow known of the tunnel – going to and from the old manor, as well as going down the stairwell hidden in the courtyard of the abandoned house.

These secrets he kept, then had the audacity to speak cordially with me, believing I was none the wiser.

He was not working alone, either. Those three friends of his were in on it as well, although if their latest interaction I had witnessed was any indication, they might have been more akin to colleagues than true friends. And, if Mr. Hawksworth's frustration with the others was to be believed, it seemed that these men had been brought together for some other purpose, and perhaps did not even agree on much of the circumstances.

When I had left my house earlier this morning, I had been more at peace. But the more I allowed myself to contemplate the happenings of late, the more uneasy and unsafe I felt. In my own home, I should be able to feel entirely at ease. However, knowing the tunnel ran beneath the street, through the bowels of the city, I could hardly sleep for the thought that someone – one of those wicked men, in particular – could be stalking around beneath my house, perhaps even entering it unawares.

For the past few nights, when I did finally manage to fall asleep, I would have elusive dreams of someone dangerous lurking somewhere down below, possibly then trying to make it up to my residence so they could...well, the dream always ended before I could see what those friends of Mr. Hawksworth might do. As such, only my wild imagination would provide answers, and most of the time, the intruders' intentions were anything but friendly. Were they coming to steal something from me? Were they coming

to cause either Edith or me harm? It was difficult to know, given the secretive nature of it all.

My lack of sleep had started to reveal itself in my daily activities. Not only had I found myself exhausted but I knew my worries were not likely to get better, not without an intervention of some sort.

And what that intervention was, well...I had no idea.

The nearby church tower chimed the top of the hour, which was good, as it meant that the market I had intended as my destination this morning would likely be open and ready for visitors.

Despite the trouble of the tunnel and Mr. Hawksworth's associates, life continued onward. That meant there were obligations I must keep and occasions I must remember...such as the birthday of my maid.

Edith was quite young, and though I was used to thinking of her as silly, the truth was she had matured beyond her years recently, as she devoted herself to looking after me and my home with extraordinary diligence. I had been rather fortunate in hiring a servant so loyal, especially when she continued on, despite some of the odder happenings in the house. She deserved a present of some sort, in recognition of her efforts.

I had every intention of surprising the girl, and was glad to give my mind a rest for a time from all my concerns surrounding Mr. Hawksworth. It was a relief to think about someone else for a bit and to know that I might be able to bring a smile to Edith's face if I were to find the perfect gift for her birthday.

The small market a few blocks to the east was the ideal place to go and look, as it was not often frequented by the girl. She preferred the other market that was near the candle factory. Because it was charming and had a great deal of variety, I understood why she liked to go there for her cooking ingredients and for the fresh flowers she used to decorate the house.

This market, however, seemed to attract much more artistic vendors. Perhaps it was due to the museum and gallery just a few streets over, for I had found there to be not only potters and sculptors but painters and sewers.

I breathed out a sigh as I stepped into the wide open street filled with tables and tents, the golden rays of the morning sun washing over me. The troubles with Mr. Hawksworth could wait until later, as I knew full well they were not going anywhere. My heart needed a rest from the worry. The best thing I could do would be to distract myself from it all as best I could.

“Stoneware! Fresh from the kiln and glazed to match any of your décor!” called one of the vendors.

“Artwork for your home! Any style you wish!” I heard another say.

“Need a new jumper? I have just the one for you or your dear husband!”

I paused beside the stoneware booth, the burly man standing inside the tent grinning at me as I did. “Morning, Miss. Can I help yah find somethin’?”

“Perhaps,” I said, picking up one of the delicate teacups, turning it over in my hands. “This is impressive. How did you manage to mold such a thin piece?”

He beamed, walking over to me. “It’s nothin’ really. Just some practiced hands, is all.”

“It’s lovely,” I said, eyeing the uniform color. Not a drip of glaze was out of place. “Well, I am looking for a birthday gift for my maid.”

“Ah, how wonderful,” he said. “So kind to think of your servant like that. She must be quite happy in your employ.”

“I certainly hope so,” I said. “And I mean to keep her around, if I can.”

“I see,” he said with a nod. “Well, then, is she an older woman? Or younger?”

“Younger than I,” I answered.

He nodded again, turning to a shelf behind him in the tent. “And is there a particular sort of food she likes? Or does she perhaps have a favorite tea?”

I paused. How was it that I did not know these things? The girl talked on and on and likely had mentioned some of her favorites in passing...but I could not recall any of them for the life of me. “I...suppose I am not sure,” I said. “She has not been in my employ all that long and so there is still much I do not know.”

“Fair enough,” the potter said, smiling at me. “Then I might well have the perfect gift.”

He turned and went to a trunk along the opposite side of the tent, stooping over beside it.

I looked about at the other items he had on display in front of me, frowning.

I wanted to find something suitable but it was frustrating not to be able to concentrate on the task at hand, simple as it was. I knew that I had some time before Edith’s birthday, as it was still weeks away but I did not wish to wait too long and then feel rushed to find something.

Come now, Augusta, this truly is an easy task. Why are you struggling so much to keep focused? I wondered.

I blinked, stifling a yawn as the gentleman pawed through his trunk, partially hidden behind one of the tent flaps.

My inability to concentrate had more to do with the circumstances at home – along with the lack of sleep – than it had to do with whether or not I knew the girl well enough to select a present for her.

“Here we are,” the potter said, returning to the table. He set down a beautiful dish, no bigger than the palm of my hand. It was pristine white, decorated in a delicate blue pattern of a willow tree. “It is a trinket dish. Many of the ladies who have purchased the like from me say they intend to use it to hold rings or bracelets.”

“A jewelry dish,” I said. “May I?”

He waved a hand in permission, so I picked it up.

The dish was smooth to the touch, the ceramic cool against my skin. The pattern was intricate, detailed, and looked almost perfect. “What you do not know, sir,” I said, looking up at him, while tracing the tip of my finger across the surface of the dish, “Is that my maid has spoken of a willow tree that grew in the back garden of her childhood home, a tree that she spent many afternoons climbing and playing in.”

His face softened and he looked rather affectionately at the dish. “A heartwarming story, Miss. Of course, I am always happy to make a sale but

perhaps this is a sign for you?”

I ran a thumb over the dish once more. “Perhaps it is,” I said, smiling in spite of my heavy heart. “Thank you. I believe she will truly love this.”

I paid the man and gave him a small bonus on top. I knew that I might not have a great deal of expendable income, but ever since Mr. Hawksworth had begun paying rent, I had a bit of a cushion in order to pay for some special items, such as carriage rides or even birthday gifts.

The seller appeared pleased as I walked away from the table with the small dish bundled away snug in a box, ready to wrap for Edith.

I continued down the street, feeling slightly more optimistic. Life did continue on; I was still secure and comfortable enough to continue browsing markets and preparing gifts. All in all, that was something to be celebrated. I knew that my situation could be much worse.

I decided to select a silver bracelet with a small garnet to go along with the jewelry dish, a lovely little trinket to go with the bowl. I had no idea if Edith had anything to keep in there, otherwise.

I was content that I had managed to find an acceptable gift, yet as I started for home, some of the worry returned. I wished that being in my house did not distress me so much.

Not for the first time, I debated going and finally confronting Mr. Hawksworth. I had considered it for some days now, ever since I had overheard him and the others down in the tunnels. I had even started to do exactly that, walking downstairs toward his quarters in order to speak with him, but I lost my nerve halfway to the door. It happened more than once that I chewed my lip until it bled over the idea, knowing it had to happen at some point but not believing it to be quite the right time.

What *would* the right time look like, then? What, precisely, was I waiting for?

I am a coward, that's all this is, I thought as I made my way out of the market and headed for home. *I have far too much fear. The idea of standing in front of Mr. Hawksworth and asking him outright about the tunnel seems...impossible.*

It had to happen, all the same. No matter what I felt, no matter how difficult it might appear to be, I needed to confront him. I need to find out the truth. This could not go on, not without either something terrible happening or my mind unraveling entirely.

What in the world am I to say to him? I argued with myself for what seemed the thousandth time. Would it be best to simply demand answers outright? Or should I approach it more strategically, more subtly?

I had sat down to write a letter to him, twice. Both times that I did, my mind went entirely blank. I stared at the page for nearly an hour, pen hovering above the paper as I debated how to begin.

It was infuriating, and so far, I felt as if I might simply go mad from the worry of it all.

I sighed as I rounded the corner, shaking my head. I clutched the present for Edith close to me as a gust of wind swept up the street. Poor Edith. I needed to take care of this mystery for my own sake but I knew she deserved to live in a safe place, as well. She did not deserve to have danger lurking beneath the very floorboards where she walked. She did not deserve to have the chance hovering just around the corner that she might have an intruder breaking in again at any moment –

It was because of this, as well as for my own sanity, that I must resolve this matter. I must learn the truth, before it was too late.

I swallowed hard, trying to will myself to calm down. This amount of dread was terribly unhealthy, knotting up my stomach, making me lose both sleep and appetite. It would not do and I would be remiss not to –

Augusta, is this truly all you can think about?

I paused, forcing myself to turn my face up to the sun, forced myself to close my eyes and drink in the warm air. I gave myself ten heartbeats to allow the sun to kiss my face and soothe some of the worry.

Giving in to the fear would only strengthen it. Much of it stemmed from the unknown. I needed facts. Those would quell the fear, or at the very least make it easier to deal with.

I knew the men were plotting against me in some way. They had mentioned a “she” before, and given the fact the tunnel connected beneath my house, it was not difficult to imagine that I was their target. What their plot was, I had no idea...but I *did* know that it was part of some much larger scheme I could not guess at. When I had witnessed the meeting of the men at the bottom of the stairwell, brief as it may have been, it had become clear to me that these men were acting under the orders of some other person they had only referred to as “he”. No names were mentioned, which was unfortunate for me. *If only I had managed to stay longer and listen to more of what they said...*

No, that would not have been wise. They could have discovered me and then what might have happened? I likely would have been in a great deal of danger.

For now, I simply had to try my best to learn what I could and then decide when to approach Mr. Hawksworth.

I opened my eyes, drawing in another deep breath through my nose.
That was when I smelled the smoke.

The smoke smelled thick and dark, like heavy ink and charcoal. There were unpleasant notes to it as well, like rotting food that had been charred or the acrid smell of melting wool.

I frowned up at the sky, wondering who in their right mind would be burning something so detestable on an already warm day? It was unusual for city fireplaces to be burning in the midst of summer, as there was hardly reason to heat up a whole house when the higher, humid temperatures were sure to do that already.

It did not take a great deal of effort to look around and spot the smoke, which had begun to form above the housetops like a menacing, dark spirit. It churned and belched, urged on by the wind, drifting away toward the east.

“What’s gone and caused that?” came the voice of a man nearby.

“Where is it coming from?” his female companion asked.

It was troubling to see that the origin of the smoke seemed to be coming from the west, which was near Grosvenor Square. There were, of course, many rowhouses in the area but that did not prevent my stomach from twisting into knots as I tried to place where the smoke billowed up from.

It couldn’t be... I thought, the trouble in my heart setting my feet in motion, as I started more quickly toward home.

I came to the eastern mouth of Grosvenor Square, surveying the skies once more. The smoke had attracted the attention of several onlookers, who had paused to gape up at the darkened sky. There was certainly not enough smoke for it to have been a whole street of homes ablaze but it was clear that it was coming from someone's home.

Oh, please, please do not let it be mine... I prayed desperately as I hurried on.

"How unfortunate."

Snatches of conversation bombarded me as I pushed through what felt like an inordinate number of people out for such an early morning.

"How do you suppose that happened? Lazy servants, no doubt. – "

" – far too common these days. Perhaps they should consider rebuilding some of these older homes to ensure they are safer – "

I tried my best to ignore the onlookers but it was hardly an easy task given how they had all stopped to stare, blocking the sidewalks in the process.

"Pardon me," I said, trying to push my way around a pair of older gentlemen, who seemed to consider the smoke as unexciting as a flock of geese flying in formation overhead.

The men sidestepped lazily away from one another, allowing me passage between.

"Where do you suppose that is coming from?" asked the one.

"No idea," muttered the other. "Hope it's not the church. The poor minister there has been working so hard to repair the building."

The church that was beside our house... We practically shared a wall!

There was no doubt that the smoke was indeed coming from Bard Avenue and it was also becoming clear that it was too dark to be typical chimney smoke. As I passed by a number of other houses, all of which had their upper story windows open in the hopes of catching a stray passing breeze, none of them seemed to be the cause.

Where is it? Oh, please, do not let it be my house –

The smoke grew denser in the sky above.

The knots in my stomach only grew tighter. Why was this happening now? Today of all days?

I rounded the corner of the avenue and stopped dead. Horrified, I stared up at the only home I could recall ever calling my own, watching as black billows spilled out of a window in the second story. It was the window to the sitting room.

I froze, staring up at it, hardly noticing the crowd that had begun to form on the sides of the street.

It was...my home. Somehow, out of all the houses in the city, it seemed that disaster had, once again, called upon mine.

"Oh, heavens, I do hope no one is still inside," came the voice of a woman behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder and spotted old Mrs. Lowry, staring with concern up at the house. She lived one street over but she and I often saw one another as we walked to and from our homes. I hardly knew her but I had no doubt that she would recognize –

Her eyes lit up when they met mine. "Miss Lockwood, is this not your residence?"

"Yes...it is," I managed to murmur, hardly able to believe the words myself.

"My word, what happened?"

"I...do not know..."

As I turned to stare up at the house, her first words finally sunk in.

I do hope no one is still inside...

Edith!

Without a second thought, I dashed across the street toward the front door. Every fiber of my being shouted for me to stop, listing off the dangers of breathing in such thick smoke, not to mention the fire that had likely caused it, but I ignored such thoughts. I could not leave Edith to die in this mess, not when I knew that she might still be alive in there.

I burst through the front door, expecting to see the smoke gathering along the ceiling of the foyer, but there was none. The smell had begun to

seep onto the lower level, but apart from that, the downstairs remained entirely untouched. It seemed the lower level had been spared, thanks to the open windows up in my residence.

I did not stop to evaluate any further, instead grabbing hold of the railing with one hand, my skirts with the other, and hurrying up them as quickly as my newly recovered ankle could allow. I had not put so much strain upon it since being given the clear by Dr. Morton but I had no choice now.

I reached the door and hesitated, remembering my father training me in fire safety, even as a young girl.

“The door handle is perhaps one of the most forgotten dangers,” he had said to me in his stern, quiet way, standing in precisely the same place almost twenty years before. *“It will scald your flesh if there is fire immediately on the other side. Take a great deal of care, cover your hand before you attempt to open the door, if you must open it at all.”*

I wrapped my hand in my skirts and gingerly took hold of the handle. As expected, it was locked, but it also was cool. That was a good sign. That meant there was no fire in the hallway, at least not yet. I might still be able to reach my maid...depending on where she might have been when the flames began.

Hastily, I unlocked the door and hurried inside, shouting, “Edith! Edith, where are you?”

Nothing could have truly prepared me for the sight I would see on the other side. When one enters one’s own home, they expect it to be as it was when they left...not unrecognizable as bursts of smoke so thick I could not see the other side spewed from inside...the sitting room?

I would have expected it to come from the kitchen but that was not where it seemed to originate.

I squinted as the smoke that had drifted toward the door stung my eyes. I had to bury my face in the crook of my elbow before I began to cough. “E – Edith!” I called, trying not to inhale too deeply. Remembering the other lesson my father had taught me, I bent down until my knees almost touched the floor, trying to call for her again. It was hardly any use exploring the

house in its current state when I would have so little air to breathe. I would need to be strategic in finding her.

“Edith!” I shouted one more time.

Still, she did not answer.

I had to force down the panic that threatened to well up within me. I did not have time to panic. I needed to stay focused and to move quickly.

Still ducking low, I proceeded toward the smoke, smothering a cough in my sleeve as best I could. I could hardly keep my eyes open and I could feel my chest filling with the acrid air. Fear made my heart race even faster, which was dangerous, because it would eat some of the precious strength I had.

I paused at the door to the sitting room, certain now that the smoke was coming from within, hovering just above the floor, obscuring the ceiling. I could not even see the window on the far side of the wall; no light pierced the dense cloud. The window was open, I knew, because I felt the stirring of air. But the smoke continued to fill the area as quickly as it was being drawn out into the morning sky.

“Edith,” I chanced again, using some of the precious little breath I had left.

I was not surprised that she did not hear me or answer.

Where was she? What had happened to her?

My head began to feel thick and heavy, my eyelids drooping. The smoke was beginning to take its toll. If I was not careful, it would be permanent.

But what of Edith? She has been in here much longer than I and the damage she has taken might be irreparable –

And then, I spotted her, or at least her hand. She was sprawled out on the floor behind the settee. I sank down on all fours to crawl to her. My eyes watered incessantly now, and no matter how much I blinked, it was terribly difficult to see her clearly.

She seemed unharmed, apart from the fact that she lay unconscious on the floor.

Thank you, Lord, that I found her!

I fought against the blackness that threatened to overwhelm me, as I reached for the girl. I slipped my arms underneath hers and tried to give her a good tug toward the door, but she only moved a few inches before I met resistance.

My head swam and I had to shake it to clear it. Holding my breath, I pulled on her again, trying to slide her toward safety.

She would not budge. Something was caught somewhere and I did not have the strength to dislodge her with just a pull.

I tried a third time but realized some part of her clothing was snagged on something.

It was getting difficult to think clearly. Panic flooded through me, and I drew in a breath, which I regretted immediately. I fell into a fit of coughing, and had to sit on hands and knees, trying desperately to breathe.

I could not carry her out myself, I realized. I needed help and I needed to move quickly.

I made a dash for the door, hurrying to the steps. Blessed, clean air filled my lungs as I descended the stairs, missing one and having to fumble as I reached for the railing to steady myself.

I coughed up black smoke, spittle coating my lips as I banged on the door that separated my foyer from Mr. Hawksworth's rooms. "Mr. – Mr. Hawksworth!" I hacked. "Mr. Hawksworth, please – "

The man quickly appeared, looking startled. "Miss Lockwood," he said, eyes widening. "What is wrong?"

"Have you not seen the smoke?" I barked.

He blinked at me. "Smoke? I have not seen anything, but I have certainly smelled – "

I grabbed hold of his wrist, another barking cough rising unbidden from my lungs. "My maid – she is inside," I managed to get out as we climbed the stairs. "Sitting room – caught on something – "

Mr. Hawksworth stiffened in my grip. "She's where?"

"Sitting room," I said, then coughed, doubling over with my hands on my knees. "First – first room on the right – "