

---

# Scarlet Fever

by Kiki Astor

---

## Book Synopsis (Spoiler-Free)

June Faulconer lives a meticulously curated, anonymous life in Washington, D.C., as Kate Black, the host of "Defrosted," a popular true-crime podcast that unearths cold cases with whispers of the supernatural. Despite her professional fearlessness, June is privately haunted by a bone-deep terror tied to her past and the infamous "Sangren"—a shadowy lineage of hunters rumored to possess uncanny abilities.

When an unsettling email arrives, forcing June to confront the disappearance of Georgetown intern Jasmine Robinson fifteen years ago in Pemberwick, Virginia, June is pulled back to the very place she vowed never to return. Pemberwick is steeped in secrets, the echoes of her father's disgraced legacy, and the looming presence of the Sangren—including Emmett Bingham, her childhood crush and current employer. As June delves into the mystery, she finds herself entangled in a web of small-town gossip, aristocratic cruelty, and ancient traditions, realizing that the truth about Jasmine, her father, and her own identity might be far more dangerous and personal than she ever imagined.

---

## Main Characters

- **June Faulconer / Kate Black:** The protagonist, a true-crime podcaster who investigates cold cases. She's a skeptic trying to uncover the truth about her past, her father's crimes, and her own mysterious connection to Pemberwick.
- **Emmett Bingham:** June's childhood crush and host in Pemberwick. A veterinarian, he is calm, controlled, and deeply connected to the community and its traditions, including the Sangren.
- **Mary Conway:** June's former best friend from Pemberwick. Seemingly perfect and elegant, she harbors deep-seated resentments and secrets related to her family and the hunt.
- **Geneva:** June's aunt, a complex figure who encouraged June's departure from Pemberwick but remains a connection to her past and the truth about her family.
- **Dev:** June's loyal producer for "Defrosted." Tech-savvy and supportive, he becomes increasingly aware of June's personal connection to her cases.

- **Jeb Falconer:** June's father, imprisoned for dogfighting. His perceived guilt and his past actions are central to June's motivation and internal conflict.
- **Preston Talbot:** A powerful senator and the Master of Foxhounds in Pemberwick. He represents the entrenched privilege and moral ambiguity of the community.
- **Kathleen Gordon:** A former classmate of June and Mary, now disabled. An outsider in Pemberwick society, she offers June a unique perspective and crucial information.
- **Courtney:** A kennel worker, direct and pragmatic, who becomes an unexpected ally to June.
- **Jasmine Robinson:** The Georgetown intern whose fifteen-year-old disappearance is the catalyst for June's return to Pemberwick.
- **Ephraim:** The wise, observant bartender at the hunt club, who has his own history with the community's secrets.
- **Dr. Ariana Corvin:** A university professor specializing in biocultural mythogenesis, who provides a scientific framework for understanding the Sangren.
- **Monty Bingham:** Emmett's father, a prominent figure in Pemberwick society, revealed to be problematic.

---

## Key Themes & Motifs

- **Identity and Dual Natures:** June's struggle between her anonymous, professional persona (Kate Black) and her true self (June Falconer), and the exploration of the "Sangren" as a dual biological/mythological identity.
- **Legacy and Inheritance:** The pervasive influence of family history, bloodlines, and ancestral secrets—both good and bad—on the characters' lives and choices.
- **Truth vs. Perception:** The novel constantly questions what is real versus what is believed, rumored, or deliberately concealed, especially regarding crimes and personal histories.
- **The Nature of Evil:** Explores how evil manifests—from casual cruelty and systemic cover-ups to deliberate malice and deeply ingrained predatory instincts.
- **Trauma and Healing:** The long-lasting impact of past events on individuals and communities, and the journey toward confronting and processing trauma.
- **Class and Privilege:** The stark division between Pemberwick's old money elite and those who serve them, and how privilege insulates some from consequences.
- **Loyalty and Betrayal:** The complex dynamics of relationships shaped by hidden agendas, unspoken expectations, and difficult choices.
- **The Hunt as Metaphor:** The foxhunt serves as a central metaphor for predator-prey dynamics, tradition, violence, and the characters' own drives and instincts.

- **The Body as Narrative:** Dr. Corvin's theory (and the Sangren physiology) suggests that physical and genetic traits carry stories and inherited patterns.

## Discussion Questions

### Getting Started:

1. What was your first impression of June/Kate? How did your perception of her evolve as you learned more about her past?
2. The novel introduces the "Sangren" early on. What were your initial thoughts about what they might be? How did your understanding change as more information was revealed?
3. How does June's profession as a true-crime podcaster influence her approach to the mysteries in Pemberwick, and how does it challenge her personal boundaries?

### Deeper Dive:

1. Discuss the complex relationship between June and her father, Jeb. How do her long-held beliefs about his guilt shape her initial investigation, and what impact do the revelations from his letters have?
2. Emmett is a pivotal figure in June's return to Pemberwick. Analyze their relationship—their history, their undeniable attraction, and the "rules" that seem to govern their connection. How does his "Sangren" nature complicate things?
3. Mary Conway's character is full of contradictions. How does her journey from June's childhood friend to the hunt saboteur and killer reveal the darker aspects of Pemberwick society and the Sangren legacy?
4. The novel presents several acts of betrayal (Mary's father, Preston, Ephraim's involvement in Jeb's framing). How do these betrayals connect to the larger themes of loyalty and corruption within Pemberwick?
5. Dr. Corvin's scientific explanation of the Sangren—as a biological adaptation rather than a supernatural curse—is a turning point. How does this reframe the "madness" and "fire" that June and Emmett experience?
6. The narrative frequently uses the foxhunt as a metaphor. How does the imagery and ritual of the hunt reflect the dynamics between characters and the power structures of Pemberwick?

7. Consider the motif of "listening" and "noticing" throughout the book. Who truly listens in Pemberwick, and what do they hear or choose to ignore? How does June's ability to truly listen set her apart?
8. The final reveal about Mary's motivations and her father's abuse is harrowing. How does this twist recontextualize Mary's actions, and what does it say about the insidious nature of unresolved trauma?
9. June's journey is about embracing her "two natures." How does she integrate her "June Bug" self with her "Kate Black" persona, especially in the context of her Sangren inheritance?
10. The ending leaves June and Emmett in a complicated place. What do you envision for their future, both personally and in terms of their role in Pemberwick?
11. "The fire only spares what burns willingly." Discuss the significance of this quote from Dr. Corvin in relation to June's and Emmett's choices throughout the novel.
12. What aspects of "Scarlet Fever" lingered with you most after finishing the book? What impact did the blend of true crime and biological folklore have on your reading experience?

---

## **Favorite Quotes**

- "Kate Black wasn't afraid of anything. Not of fame. Not of scrutiny... Because Kate Black wasn't real."
- "The Heart Is a Dark Mirror: Beneath the Veil, the Ordinary Waits."
- "The Sangren didn't just crave adrenaline. They fed on it. And that made them dangerous."
- "Power, money, and race weren't just abstract ideas; they could cage you."
- "He taught me that taking was power. That fear was respect. That cruelty was necessary. I've fought every day not to be him." (Emmett)
- "Animals remember what humans try to forget." (Jeb Faulconer)
- "The fire only spares what burns willingly." (Dr. Corvin)
- "Science sees what it's taught to look for. And families guarding an anomaly would hide it behind ritual and myth. Self-preservation masquerading as superstition." (Dr. Corvin)

- "What culture calls 'curse' is often adaptation without context." (Dr. Corvin)
- "It was what she had always done. Step toward the light. You get to write the next chapter. You get to decide who you become."
- "Crazy doesn't run in my family. It gallops."
- "They weren't burning. They were becoming one."
- "You were the one thing in my life I never regretted. Not for a second. You were the one choice I would make again and again, even knowing how everything ended." (Jeb Faulconer's letter)
- "Family isn't just blood; it's who stands by you, shields you, and chooses to be there when it matters most." (Jeb Faulconer's letter)
- "The Sangren. Their bloodthirsty obsession. Everyone still thinks they're some pop psychology construct. You could show the world the Sangren for what they really are." (Mary)

---

## Your Notes & Musings

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**My Rating of "Scarlet Fever":** ★★★★★ – An absolute favorite, highly recommended!  
★★★★☆ – Excellent read, thoroughly enjoyed. ★★★☆☆ – Good, but with some reservations. ★★☆☆☆ – Okay, but didn't quite grab me. ★☆☆☆☆ – Not my cup of tea.