
DARKHEARTS

Praise for *Darkhearts*

'Laugh-out-loud and tearful at the same time, Sutter's *Darkhearts* combines real characters, smart prose, and an emotional journey into one fantastically relatable read'
Charlie N. Holmberg

'A messy, joyful story about what happens when rockstars meet reality, and about finding the part of yourself that makes you whole. These boys and their love story filled up my heart – I couldn't stop reading, and I didn't want to'
Amie Kaufman

'*Darkhearts* is a delightful, boy-centric YA that doesn't shy away from Romance with a capital R. Chance is a soulful, ethereal mystery to the reader, and David a down-to-earth, weighty mystery to himself, but wherever your tastes lie, you'll find it in *Darkhearts*. Sutter has created a world that will feel starkly familiar to teens, layered with exploration and an unflinchingly real glimpse into the sometimes elusive world of the teen boy. Top everything off with an insta-fave quirky best friend, and a setting steeped with musicians' culture – Sutter is an author to watch'
Aprilynne Pike

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For my mother, Mary Lafond.

Thirty-nine years, and I still constantly
find new reasons to admire you.

1

It's hard to know what to say at a friend's funeral. It's even harder to know what to say at an enemy's.

So what do you say when it's both?

I chose the coward's way out and said nothing. When the rabbi finished his eulogy and called for stories from the mourners, I stayed silent. Honestly, it would probably have been the right choice even if I hadn't been chicken. Save for a few texts, I hadn't spoken with Elijah in over two years. Who was I to him, anymore?

It wasn't like there was a dearth of speakers. There were plenty of people who wanted to talk – family, friends, even a couple other celebrities. They said the sorts of things you always say when a kid dies: he was so bright, so talented, so full of potential. Except in Eli's case it was actually true. He wasn't just poised to do great things – he'd done them, and had the Grammys to prove it.

Chance waited until last, of course. Always the showman, never wanting to risk being upstaged, even at his best friend's funeral. He told a story about Eli getting so distracted writing a new song that he accidentally locked himself out of his hotel room in just his underwear. Security caught him trying to climb up to his own balcony, thinking he was some sort of crazed stalker. Everyone laughed through their tears, big sobbing gasps of relief.

It was the perfect ending note. But of course it was – everything about Chance Kain was perfect, from the slim black

suit to the asymmetrical flop of his straight black hair. It was what made him America's favorite asshole.

The rest of the service was a blur. I kept my distance from most of it, not wanting to intrude. At the cemetery, I joined the other mourners in forming a ring around the family, trying to shield them from the paparazzi waiting like vultures, giant camera lenses balanced on headstones.

Then it was back to Eli's parents' house for the shiva visit, taking off my shoes and rinsing my hands with the pitcher of water outside the door. If the temple had been awkward, the house itself was stifling. Eli's parents and sister shook my hand, but their eyes were far away. All the mirrors were covered with black cloth, which I knew was another Jewish tradition but just reminded me of the whole Darkhearts vampire shtick. Nobody really spoke, other than brief murmurs of sympathy and muffled tears.

When standing around in their living room got too uncomfortable, I found myself drifting away without really intending to. Nobody noticed as I wandered past the bathroom and down the stairs, retracing the route that had once been second nature.

The furniture in the rec room was right where it had always been, minus only the black bulk of the PA speakers on their spindly stick-stands. The lights were off, and the afternoon sun coming through the big picture window was so achingly familiar that it stabbed straight through me, pinning me to the bottom of the stairs.

"Weird, huh?"

I turned to find Chance tucked into the corner of the old couch, sprawled with his tailored jacket unbuttoned and legs

outstretched. Even with eyes red from crying, he looked like a cologne ad. Whereas I looked like exactly what I was: a seventeen-year-old acned ogre wearing his dad's suit.

At some point in the last two years, Chance had gotten a tattoo – a tiny silhouette of a crow in flight, just below and outside his right eye. Because of course he had. He was holding a vape pen, but the lack of candyfloss stink said he knew better than to use it in here. He waved it vaguely at the room.

"It's all the same." He looked up at the ceiling, where the footsteps of mourners clumped and dragged. "Up there, outside, everything's different. But in here, it's like we're still fourteen."

I didn't want to have this conversation. Didn't want to have *any* conversation with him. But my mouth had other ideas.

"Almost," I said.

He raised a professionally groomed eyebrow.

I pointed past him. "They fixed the drywall."

"Oh shit! You're right." He laughed, leaning forward and staring at the spot where the hole had been. "I'd forgotten about that. You jumped off the coffee table and put your guitar's headstock straight through the wall."

"Only because Eli ran into me." I smiled in spite of myself. "We tried to cover it with that poster from the Vera Project."

"Yeah, because that wasn't suspicious at *all* – just one little poster on a giant blank wall." He pulled a knee up to his chest, revealing a flash of purple dress sock with tiny black skulls. "I was sure his mom would kill us for that one. Or remember when we got all those people to come film the video, and someone backed up the toilet?"

I nodded. "The Poonami."

"There was like an inch of water soaking the carpet. My parents would have had me in boarding school like *that.*" He snapped his fingers. "But Eli – " His voice cracked, and he fell silent. There were no tears, but I could see a muscle working in his jaw.

"Yeah." Eli had been able to talk his parents into anything. I sat down on the other arm of the couch, not looking at him, the old perch still so natural.

"Hey, remember Mrs. Miller?" He pointed at the neighboring house across the tiny backyard, his tone artificially light. "Always banging on the door and yelling at us to turn down. Remember what she always used to say?"

"'My father played with Louie Armstrong! If he didn't need to be this loud, neither do you!'" It had been a running joke between the three of us. Whenever someone flubbed a note or was too loud in the mix, we'd throw something at them – a guitar pick, a couch cushion – and yell *Louie Armstrong!* Eventually it had become an all-purpose battle cry. Our own private yeet.

We both fell silent, staring out the window.

When he spoke again, his voice was tight. "We had some good times here, huh?"

"Yeah," I repeated.

Another long silence.

Suddenly Chance kicked the coffee table, heel slamming into the wooden corner and spinning it halfway around. "God *damn* it, Eli!" He covered his face with his hands.

I still had no idea what to say.

"I just wish he'd *talked* to me." The words were muffled, reverb-y. He pulled his hands away, blinking rapidly. "I knew

he was drinking too much, that he was tired of touring, but *everyone* gets tired of touring. I didn't know . . ."

He took a shuddering breath, then stood. He pulled the table back into place, then pocketed his vape and walked to the stairs. At the bottom, he turned to take a last look around the room, searching it for an answer.

"Dammit, Eli," he said again, softer. "How could you just leave us?"

Then he was up the stairs and gone.

I let out a breath. My hands unclenched, and I was suddenly flooded with gratitude that Chance had left when he did. I knew he was hurting, and as much as he pissed me off, I didn't want to make it worse. But if he'd stayed another minute, I might not have been able to keep holding my tongue.

Because I knew the answer to his rhetorical question.

How could Eli leave him behind?

The same way you both left me.

2

All right, let's rip the Band-Aid off:

My name is David Holcomb, and I was almost famous.

When I was thirteen, I started a band with my two best friends. Chance sang, I played guitar, and Elijah programmed everything else on his MacBook. Eli loved big, fake eighties drum sounds, and Chance loved vampires, and between the two we ended up at a sort of poppy goth-rock. We called ourselves Darkhearts, and titled our self-recorded demo *Sad Shit You Can Dance To.*

We got good quick, and for a while it was all I wanted to do. We played every all-ages club in the greater Seattle area, my dad dutifully hauling us and our gear around in his construction van. It was fun to rock out, and there's definitely something to be said for hitting puberty while playing guitar in your middle school's only band. When we won the eighth-grade talent show, you'd have thought we were BTS the way kids screamed. And when we played the Fremont Abbey, Maddy Everhardt threw *actual panties* onto the stage. So yeah, that part was good.

But the thing nobody tells you about being an underage band is that you hit the ceiling pretty quick. It's a ton of work just to play the same handful of all-ages venues over and over. You can't tour, because even if you could convince your parents to take time off work and drive you, who's gonna come see you? Your friends can't drive, either. And to be honest, after the initial novelty of seeing someone they know onstage, most of them

don't actually want to see you play the same songs again and again. Sure, there's always YouTube or TikTok, but do you know how many teen bands there are online? The answer is *all of them.*

Add in Eli growing steadily more tyrannical about the songwriting, plus Chance embracing every annoying lead-singer cliché … well, you get the picture. So when freshman year arrived, with all the new pressures of high school, I proposed taking a break.

Words were exchanged. Birds were flipped. When I walked out of the practice space, nobody followed.

Two months later, a rep for Interscope saw the new two-piece version of Darkhearts at a Neumos early show and signed them on the spot.

Six months after that, they were the hottest new band in North America. *Rolling Stone* described them as "if Chris Cornell returned from the dead to front the Cure." Chance leaned into his vampire act, changing his last name to "Kain" – a biblical reference I found deeply ironic, given how we'd ended things. *Entertainment Weekly* called him "the next David Bowie," while *Pitchfork* compared his glam-rock sex appeal to St. Vincent and Prince. Billie Eilish took them along on her stadium tour.

Meanwhile, I was trying not to fail social studies.

Fortunately, becoming pop stars meant the two of them dropped out of school almost immediately. Between that and the fact that we'd barely hung out since the night I left, I could almost pretend they didn't exist. Sure, it was hard to hear girls talking about how Chance Kain was the best thing to happen to eyeliner, or to hear a car drive past blasting "Midnight's Children." But it wasn't like I'd spent every moment of the last

two years jealously stewing about how my life should have been different.

That *certainly* wasn't what I was doing two days after Eli's funeral, lying on my bed recovering from a long day of stacking lumber. Junior year had ended weeks ago, and I'd consented to spending the summer working for my dad's contracting business – a fate which, if not actually *worse* than death, occasionally bore a striking resemblance to Dante's vision of Hell.

My phone chimed from where I'd dropped it on the floor. I stretched out an aching arm and flipped it over, revealing a new text.

I'm bored. Wanna get dinner?

The number wasn't in my contacts, but it seemed like a weird sort of spam, unless the robocall bots were getting lonely. On the *exceptionally* small chance that a cute girl had somehow gotten ahold of my number without my knowledge, I texted back.

That depends. Who's this?

The reply was immediate.

Chance. Had to change my number.

Chance? I let my body go limp again. On the big list of people I didn't want to grab dinner with, Chance was at the top, tied with my mom and Mr. Ullis, the skeezy gym teacher.

The dude had driven me out of my own band with his prima donna bullshit – constantly upstaging me at shows, vetoing my ideas, making unilateral decisions for the whole

group – then gotten famous and never looked back. This was literally the first time he'd texted me since the breakup. And now he was hitting me up like nothing even happened?

I was about to text back and tell him exactly what he could eat when an image of a disappointed Eli flashed through my mind.

It shouldn't have mattered. Eli hadn't invited me back aboard the Darkhearts fame train, either. But at least he'd kept in touch a little. And while Eli might screw you over, you at least knew he'd have the grace to feel bad about it. Eli felt bad about *everything*.

More importantly, he'd always been the peacemaker in the band. I knew he'd want me to play nice.

If he were still alive, I might have told *him* to get bent as well. But that's the thing about dead people: it's hard to argue with them.

My fingers seemed to move of their own accord.

When?

The phone chirped.

Now. Pick me up?

The message came with an attached Google Maps link.

The presumption of it set my teeth on edge. He assumed I'd drop everything *and* pick him up? But I shot back a thumbs-up emoji and hoisted myself out of bed. *This is for you, Eli.*

My room was technically the house's attic, which had pluses and minuses. On the one hand, it was big, running the length of our little house. On the other, the slope of the roof to either side meant there was only a six-foot-wide corridor in which I

could stand without hitting my head. I grabbed a hoodie from the not-so-dirty pile and hauled open the Floor Door, the trapdoor my dad and I had installed when I was twelve. Except for the angle, it looked exactly like an ordinary door, complete with doorknob.

Downstairs, Dad was splayed out shirtless on the couch, rewatching *Stranger Things.* He saw me come down the stairs and paused the show. "Where are *you* headed so late? I thought you'd be dead after unloading that trailer."

"Gonna go grab pizza."

"Oh yeah?" He sat up. "Want company? I could even put on a shirt."

"I'm actually meeting somebody."

"Oh *reaaaally.*" He grinned and waggled his eyebrows. "Anybody I know?"

I briefly considered lying, but decided it wasn't worth it. "Chance Ng." I wasn't about to use his stupid stage name around Dad.

"*Chance?*" Dad scowled like he'd bitten into something rotten. "What does *he* want?"

"Dad, come on." I hated this topic. "His best friend just died of alcohol poisoning. He probably just wants to talk to somebody who knew Eli as well as he did." As I said it, it suddenly seemed obvious.

"Shit. Right. Sorry." His frown evaporated, replaced by guilt. "Eli's poor parents . . . Well, that's good of you to talk to him." He gave me a sympathetic look. "How are *you* doing with all that?"

I shrugged. "Fine? I dunno. I hadn't seen him in two years."

"I know, I just . . . If you ever want to talk about it . . . I'm here, okay?"

"Yeah."

The ticking of the wall clock filled in as Dad searched for something else to say. Finally he gave up, shaking his head. "You're a good kid, David."

"I know." I opened the door, saving us both from further conversation.

Outside, the night was crisp, despite the fact that the Fourth of July had already come and gone. A streetlight shone down on my truck where it sat at the curb.

"My truck" – two of the most beautiful words in the English language. It wasn't a particularly *nice* truck – was, in fact, the same beat-up F-150 I'd been riding in since I was born, its red paint scratched all to hell by two decades of construction sites. I wasn't even a Truck Guy, one of those faux cowboys trying to stand out from the sea of Priuses and Camrys in the Franklin High School parking lot. But the day Dad handed over the keys for my exclusive use, everything changed. It was no longer *the* truck, it was *my* truck. And that, as Robert Frost wrote, made all the difference. It rumbled awake like a sleeping dragon as I turned the key.

Instead of his old house, Chance had sent me an address up near the Arboretum, where half the driveways had gates and hedges to hide from the prying eyes of normal people. Chance was leaning against one such gate, face illuminated by his phone as he scrolled, the rest of him a slim shadow in a black denim jacket. Making doing nothing look cool was one of his primary talents.

I pulled over and rolled down the passenger window. "Hey."

"Hey." Chance pocketed his phone and peeled himself off the wrought iron. He opened the door and swung up into the cab, taking it in with an appraising eye. "Nice truck."

He probably had a Porsche parked behind that hedge, if not a Lambo. I bit back a retort and pulled away from the curb. "Where we going?"

"Orbital?"

"Sure." I tapped my phone and threw on some music.

"Hey! Bleachers!" Chance let his arm hang out the window, slapping the side of the truck to the beat. "You know we actually recorded with him?"

"Oh yeah?" I kept my tone light, but my dentist would have had some choice comments about the way I was grinding my teeth.

"Yeah, his real name's Jack Antonoff. The label brought him in for a single we did, for that movie with Saoirse Ronan. Dude's a wizard."

"Cool." I cranked the volume, making it impossible to talk.

Orbital Pizza was down in Georgetown, an old industrial district still only halfway gentrified, and thus a maze of warehouses and factories turned into art spaces. Orbital fit the dive flavor to a T, with a crust-punk clientele and active train tracks running through its parking lot. We went inside and slid into a booth across from a kids' airplane ride that had been broken since I was young enough to ride it.

A heavily tattooed waitress with green hair slid us some menus. "You need drinks?"

I ordered a ginger ale, while Chance just got water.

"Will this be separate or together?" she asked.

"Separate," I said, at the same moment Chance said, "Together."

He smiled at me and held up a credit card. "This one's on me."

Irritation flared. "No thanks." I turned back to the waitress and said, "Separate checks, please."

"Sure, hon." She looked vaguely amused, then squinted at Chance. "Aren't you . . . ?"

He gave her a thousand-watt grin. "Yup."

She studied him a moment longer, one hand on her hip, then shrugged. "Cool." She turned and sauntered back to the bar.

I felt a brief flush of validation at seeing him so thoroughly dismissed, but Chance turned the same grin on me.

"Thank god for punk waitresses." He flipped up one of the menus. "I could be George Clooney and she still wouldn't give a shit."

"You *like* that?" I couldn't quite keep the surprise out of my voice.

"It's refreshing." He didn't look up from the menu. "You want garlic bread? I want garlic bread."

The idea that he could be so famous that *not* being fangirled over was a luxury did nothing to soothe my raw ego. Fortunately, the waitress returned with our drinks, forcing us to stop and order – a meaty pizza-beast called the Brooklyner that had always been our go-to. When she was gone, Chance sprawled out across his side of the booth and put his feet up, dress shoes shiny black against the red vinyl.

Sitting sideways like that perfectly displayed the little crow tattoo, swooping along the edge of one knife-sharp cheekbone like some sort of corvid prison tat. I wondered if he arranged the flop of his bangs specifically to point toward it. Anyone who gets a face tattoo is desperate to be asked about it.

I resolved to die before mentioning it.

Chance looked me over, taking in my brown Carhartts and blue plaid button-down. "You've changed up your style."

"Yeah. Guess I outgrew the eyeliner goth phase." In fact, I'd dumped it the moment Darkhearts got signed – the painted nails, the black clothes, the dye and wax to transform my wavy brown mop. The last thing I wanted was to see Chance and Eli every time I looked in the mirror.

"Ouch." Chance grinned and splayed a black-nailed hand against his chest, acknowledging the hit. "Well, at least you've still got the ghoul-pale thing going."

"True." That part of the Hot Topic look had come naturally.

"It works for you. Farmer Holcomb. Very rugged." He looked up at the old show posters on the walls, the cow skulls and retro beer ads. "Man, I miss this place. Remember when your dad used to bring us here after gigs?"

Of course I remembered. It had only been two years. "You don't come here on your own?"

He shrugged. "I'm always on the road. And whenever I'm not, Mom's so starved for family time that she wants us to either cook together or go off on vacation somewhere."

"She doesn't travel with you?"

"And leave her job? Nah. Dad comes on tour – I guess technically I'm homeschooled now. But Mom stays here with Olivia. She says at least one of us kids should have a normal life."

"I don't know what's so great about a normal life," I muttered.

"You'd be surprised." He stretched languorously, folding his hands behind his head. "I know it sounds cool, but most of touring is just travel. Getting up at four in the morning to fly

somewhere, or trying to sleep on a bus while you haul ten hours through the middle of nowhere. You don't realize how much of the country is corn until you've driven from Denver to Omaha. Ninety percent of this job is sitting around waiting for bathroom breaks."

"Yeah, and the other ten percent is playing stadiums and going on talk shows." I rubbed my fingers together. "Lemme bust out my tiny violin."

To my surprise, he laughed. "Fair enough." He swung his legs around under the table and sat up, leaning forward. "Enough about me. How's life? What's been going on?"

I squirmed beneath the force of his gaze. That was the thing about Chance: when he turned the spotlight on you, you felt the heat. It was part of what made him a great frontman.

"Nothing much," I said. "Working for my dad this summer, doing construction. Other than that, just, you know, school."

"Yeah? What's that like?"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously what?"

"You really want to hear about high school?"

"Dude, I was at Franklin less than nine months – my knowledge of high school comes primarily from teen movies. And I'm pretty sure nobody's getting laid as much as those suggest." He shot me a calculatedly devilish look. "Or *are* they? You ever ask Maddy Everhardt out?"

I flinched. "What?"

"Dude, she threw her panties at you."

"She threw them at *us.* And that was just a joke."

"Yeah, it's always a joke till it's not. And now two of us are gone. You've had two years of wide-open runway."

I barely kept my mouth closed. That bald statement – the way he so casually mentioned their abandonment of me, the not-so-subtle implication that I only had a chance with Maddy because he'd left the picture – froze over any part of me that had started to thaw under his attention. And never mind that he'd flirted shamelessly with Maddy when he'd known I liked her – the way he flirted with *all* the girls at our shows, making sure none ever had time for the rest of us, because who could compete with that dazzling smile? It had been one of the last straws that drove me out of the band.

As it turned out, I *had* dated Maddy. For three months, sophomore year. She'd been my first real kiss, and more.

And then she'd ditched me without a backward glance, like everyone eventually did. All because of – who else? – Chance Kain.

But I wasn't about to tell Chance any of that. I sat back and crossed my arms. "Yeah, well, it's not quite that easy."

He nodded sympathetically. "I feel you, bruh."

I snorted. "Sure you do."

"What? You don't believe me?"

I raised an eyebrow.

He held his hands up in surrender. "Dude, okay, yes – I meet a lot of girls. But you know what the gossip sites *don't* show? My dad and my manager chilling in the corner, waiting for me to get back on the tour bus. I'm in a different city every night. How am I supposed to date anybody?"

I hadn't really considered that angle. He ran a hand through his hair, somehow managing to mess it up while still looking like he'd just walked off a movie set.

"Trust me, man: there's freedom in staying in one place.

Your friends are always nearby. I've got a lot of numbers and mutuals, and get to hang out with a lot of cool people, but at the end of the day, it's just me and Eli." He grimaced. "Or at least it was."

"Shit."

Silence descended over the table. I folded my straw wrapper into an accordion while Chance toyed with his silverware.

"He hated the parties," Chance said at last. "I'd always try to get him to come. 'Come make friends,' I'd say, and he'd be like, 'Why would I want more friends?'"

I fought back a smile. That did sound like Eli.

"I'll never understand that," Chance continued. "Like, shy I get. If you're scared of talking to new people – okay, fine. But Eli wasn't shy. I mean, remember the Penis Game?"

The Penis Game, which had been all the rage in fifth grade, had been simple: seeing who was willing to yell "penis" loudest in a public area. "He always won."

"Every. Time. It didn't matter if you were on the bus or in a store or *what.* He's the reason people *stopped* playing." Chance shook his head. "He didn't care what anybody thought. I wish I had that kind of confidence."

I rolled my eyes. "Says Chance Kain."

"Man, I care what *everybody* thinks. All frontmen do. It's why we're out in front."

The sudden honesty caught me off guard. "Huh."

He pointed a fork at me. "You've got it too, you know. That confidence."

I scoffed. "Yeah, right."

"No, seriously." He looked me in the eye, and it was like getting blasted by Cyclops from the X-Men. "You've had it since

the day we met. You were ten years old and ready to kick my ass over Magic: The Gathering."

I grinned in spite of myself. "You traded Eli two Pitchburn Devils for a Kalonian Hydra. Someone had to teach you a lesson."

Chance grinned back. "It's not my fault he didn't look up the price guides! But you set up that whole sting operation to get them back. You were fearless."

Eli had wanted to drop the issue, but I wouldn't let him. Chance wasn't in our class, so I'd made Eli take me to the park where they hung out.

"And then you sucker-punched me," Chance said, with satisfaction.

"I did *not*! I gave you a choice! It's not a sucker punch if I tell you I'm gonna do it."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you *would.* And then I hit you with my card binder, and Eli faked that asthma attack and made us carry him all the way home."

I chuckled. Eli had gone as rigid as a wooden plank, in a preteen guess at what an asthma attack might look like. By the time the two of us managed to carry him the three blocks to his house, Chance had agreed to give Eli's cards back, and we'd all gone to eat Otter Pops and play Xbox.

"What a legend," Chance said. Then, quieter, "I still can't believe he's gone."

In that moment, the boy across the table didn't look like Chance Kain, International Sensation. He looked like a slightly larger version of Chance Ng, the boy who'd stopped in the middle of a fight to help one enemy carry another. Looking at him now, I felt the same thing I'd felt that day: that maybe there

was more to this kid than just the grinning huckster. I wanted to reach out and put a hand on his shoulder.

A plate of garlic bread slid between us, breaking the moment.

"Oh, *hells* yes!" Chance grabbed a slice, bobbling it between fingers. "Hot! Hot!" He flashed his magazine smile, sliding back into character. "Hey, did you know that when you do anything in Hollywood, they're required by union rules to have a massive catering spread? We shot this video last year, and they had like ten thousand dollars of just *snacks.* The girl in the video with us – Clara Shadid, you probably saw her in the new Bond movie – anyway, she'd been flirting with me the whole shoot, right? So she takes this whole chocolate-dipped banana, and I swear to god—"

I sighed and psychically willed the pizza to cook faster. It was going to be a long dinner.