

THE LAST HARVEST

KIM LIGGETT



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK • NEW YORK

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A Tor Teen Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

www.tor-forge.com

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The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-7653-8098-2 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-4668-7630-9 (e-book)

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First Edition: January 2017

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



PEOPLE CALL this God's country, but you can't have God without the Devil.

I see it in the cutworms threatening to take over the crops and the katydids with their bright-green wings fluttering as they drown in the troughs.

When I'm riding the combine like this, watching the sun rise over the fields, I can't help thinking about my ancestors who claimed this piece of shit parcel in the 1889 land rush. The majestic display of color and light must've felt like God himself was rising up to pass judgment on them every single day. I know it's just a bunch of particles making the light rays scatter, but it still gets to me. An Oklahoma sky will make a believer out of anybody.

I pull my sleeves down over my frozen knuckles and concentrate

on annihilating the wheat in front of me. The last harvest of the season. Man, I hate wheat. It's so old school. Soybeans—that's the wave of the future. I kept telling Dad, but he was too stuck in his ways. Now he's really stuck. Six feet under.

I glance at the Neely Cattle Ranch on the western edge of our property, and a sick feeling twists my insides. I tell myself it's only an abandoned barn now, but I swear I can feel it pressing in on me, like it's trying to suffocate me. I'll never understand why they didn't burn it to the ground after what happened. After what Dad did.

"Just keep it together, Clay," I say to myself as I twist my cap around and crank up the music. We need the money and I'm already behind schedule. I had a hard time getting the combine going again this morning. Dad's the one who was good at all this. Sometimes I catch myself daydreaming about what my life would've been like if it never happened. I'd still be playing football, looking at colleges, going down to the quarry to drink beer with my friends.

As I make my last turn to head back home and get ready for school, I catch a glimpse of something moving low through the wheat. I rise up in my seat, peering through the dusty windshield, watching it move back toward the house, when I hit something solid. The cutting blades grind to a halt, making the combine rock forward and stall out.

"Come on," I groan as I pull out my earbuds.

The sound of screaming guitars fades as I slide out of the cab and trudge toward the front of the harvester.

Hope I didn't run over my little sister's bike. I've been looking everywhere for that hunk of junk. I thought about getting her a new one, roughing it up a little, telling her I found it out by Harmon Lake, but Noodle's sharp. Dad put it together for her sixth birth-

day last year—wasn't worth a dime, just a bunch of scraps from mine and Jess's old bikes. Guess it has sentimental value.

As I lean down to look under the cutting platform, a musky copper smell flares in my nostrils. There, stuck in the blade, is a gnarled hoof. My stomach lurches; my throat feels so thick I can barely swallow. Frantically, I dig around in the discarded wheat stems to uncover the rest of it—a newborn calf, throat slit wide open, bright-red blood splattered against golden fur. My eyes well up as I try and find a pulse, but it's no use. It's just a heap of warm blood, bone, and fur.

“Jesus!” I stagger back, tearing off my work gloves to try and get away from the sweet repulsive odor, but it's all around me . . . inside me.

Pacing around the combine, I scan the fields, searching for an explanation. We don't have any cattle around here, not since Mr. Neely shut down the ranch last year. Did I do this or did somebody kill it and ditch it here for me to find, like some kind of sick joke?

Bracing my hands against my knees, I stare down at the calf, its eyes black as tar, and all I see is Dad lying on the breeding floor, arms outstretched, his last breath rattling in his throat.

“I plead the blood,” he whispered.

He looked terrified—not of death, but of me.

The wind rushes over the crops, pulling me back. It sounds like sandpaper scraping against skin.

I take off running back toward the house.

I know it's only the sun chasing my shadow, but I swear, it feels like the Devil himself is right on my heels.