

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LEVEN THUMPS*

OBERT SKYE



PILLAGAGE

# PILLAGER

OBERT SKYE



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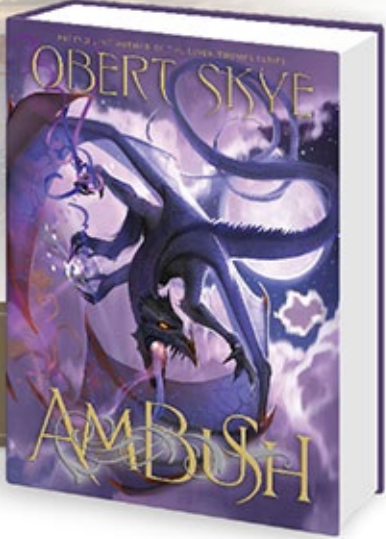
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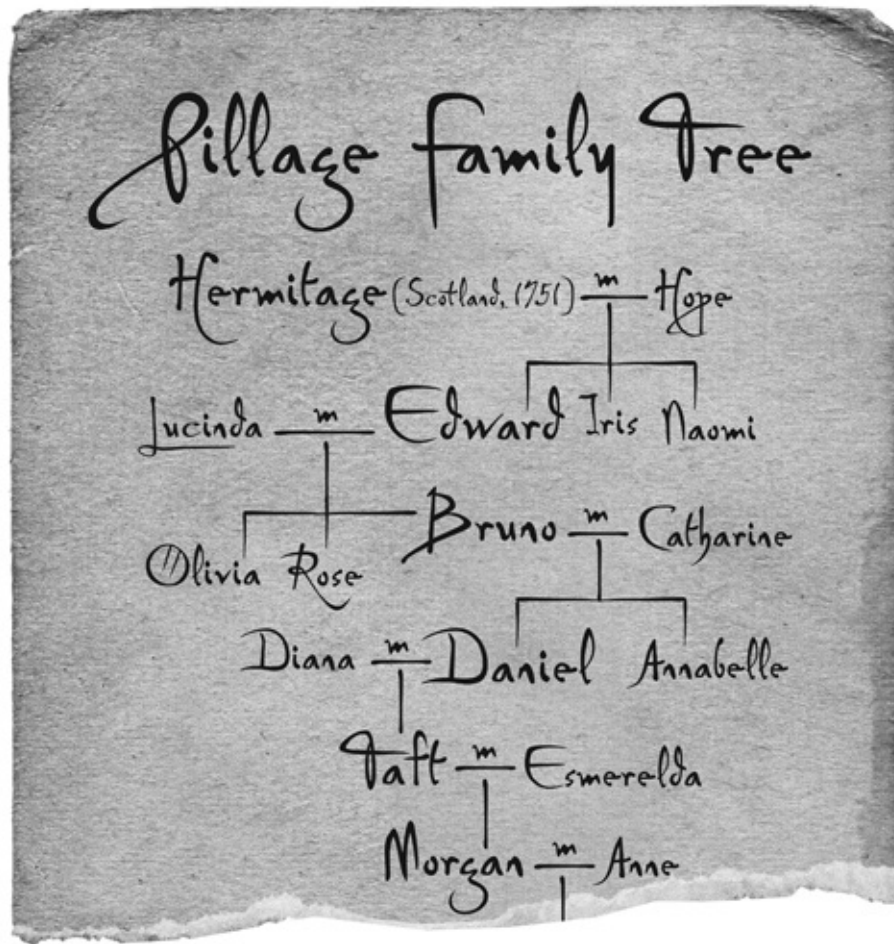
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“Then what about dragons?” I questioned, finally getting to the question I really wanted to ask.

Aeron stopped looking out the window and gazed at me. His hands shook slightly and I could see a dark change in his eyes. It was as obvious as black clouds gathering for a deadly storm.

“Dragons?” he whispered dryly.

“Dragons,” I said firmly.

Aeron breathed out slowly, letting his shoulders drop. “Dragons,” he finally said. “Well, unfortunately, they are a far different thing.”

# Table of Contents

Kind and Clever Hooligan  
I'm Miserable Now  
Nowhere Fast  
Up to the Old House  
Tonight I Am Aware  
The Headmaster Routine  
A Rush and a Push  
I Started Something  
Paint an Ugly Picture  
There Is a Glow That Won't Snuff Out  
Ask  
Two-Quarters of a Person  
I Wonder  
How Long Until Now?  
Me with a Thorn in My Side  
Is It Really So Odd?  
Still Sick  
Disgusting Lie  
Barbarism Begins  
Oscillate Madly  
Panic  
Death at One's Side  
I Know It's Ending  
Having Everything Now

## Kind and Clever Hooligan

I shouldn't have said it, but the word slipped out of my mouth as easy as air. It wasn't exactly the kind of word any well-behaved student would use, which sort of explained why I had just used it. And it certainly isn't the most elegant way to start off a story, but it honestly represents what I was feeling. Besides, I could have said something a lot stronger. But not everybody wants to read a story with those kinds of words and thoughts being expressed in the very first sentence.

"Stop swearing," Jason screamed.

"Then stop pushing," I yelled back. "I'm pinned in."

Jason pushed again.

"Seriously," I snapped. "I'm stuck."

"Then let's crawl out!" he yelled back. "It's too dark to see anymore."

"I can't move," I insisted. "I'm really stuck."

The "I" and the "I'm" in both those sentences was me: Beck Phillips. I hate to talk about myself, but a few bits of information might be helpful. I'm fifteen, but I'll be sixteen in three months. Which makes me fifteen and three-quarters, but only a child would describe it that way—and I don't think of myself as a child. Unless of course you are using the word *child* as in, "He's an only child."

In that case, it's completely true.

I am an only child with an unbalanced single mother. I suppose both of those things could have something to do with the mess I was in, but my mother, Francine, watches a lot of *Oprah* so I've heard how "it's important for people to take responsibility for their own actions."

That said, I, Beck Phillips, take full responsibility for being stuck in my school's pitch-black venting system with my friend, Jason, behind me and a garbage bag full of angry bees in front of me.

The idea had seemed so simple: bag the huge beehive that had been hanging low in a fast-growing tree near my apartment, release it into the school's ventilation system, and enjoy a couple of days off as they try to exterminate the pests. Jason thought we should release the assailants at the vent's outside opening, but I believe "a job worth doing is worth doing well." Again, my mom watches a lot of *Oprah*.

So I insisted we crawl into the ducts as far as possible. That way we could achieve maximum pandemonium. My insistence now seemed stupid. In fact, the entire plan was beginning to feel foolish.

I'd like to say I was simply doing what I was doing to make everyone's life more exciting, but even I didn't believe that. In the words of my school's counselor, I was acting out to be heard. She thought that because I had moved around so much and

attended so many different schools no one ever really got to know me. She thought that my subconscious didn't enjoy this. She thought that's why I was "acting out." I thought she, like my mother, watched too much *Oprah*.

Of course, there may have been some truth to what she said. After all, I had been at this school for a month and I don't think anyone aside from Jason knew my name. I didn't have a grudge against any single student, I was just tired of being invisible. I figured this would get my name out there.

Beck Phillips, bee wrangler.

Had I been standing out in the open on a sunny day I would look like most almost-sixteen-year-old boys. My brown hair is a bit too long and hangs over my ears; it blocks about twenty percent of what my brown eyes take in. My ears stick out a bit and I probably have more confidence than a person in my shoes should. I'm taller than most guys my age and even though I'm never one to brag I should point out that a seventeen-year-old girl at the community pool told her friend that I was cute.

"I'm not staying in here, Beck," Jason panicked, bringing me back to the situation at hand. "I'm getting out."

"Quiet," I said firmly. "Someone will hear us. We're probably right above Mr. Shin's class."

"I don't care," Jason said. "This stinks. I never wanted to do this anyway."

"But you are," I pointed out, still trying to free myself from the tight duct. "Now pull me out, I can't move!"

"No," Jason said.

"I'm stuck," I hissed. "Pull me out."

"No."

I could hear Jason begin to move away, backing down the duct.

"You can't just leave me," I said as quietly as my worried soul would let me. "Some friend."

"Whatever," Jason said. "I barely know you, Beck."

Jason was right about that. He was a skinny kid with big teeth and a large, flat forehead. He seemed to wear a lot of green shirts and his father worked for the city auditing books. I had met Jason while playing basketball at the park. I was desperately trying to impress a couple of girls with my moves when I ran into him crossing the court. We fell to the ground, got up and yelled at each other for a couple of minutes, and then decided it would probably be easier to be friends. We weren't terribly alike, but I thought that, with enough time, we could get along.

Apparently, I was wrong.

"I'll tell them it was your idea," I yelled, not able to keep my voice down any longer. "You'll be busted for sure."

If Jason replied I couldn't hear it. He was long gone. He had left me alone, in a dark duct with a bag full of increasingly ticked-off bees.

"Nice," I mumbled to myself. "Thanks a lot, jerk."

I thought about yelling for help, but I still wasn't convinced that I couldn't find a way out of the situation unscathed. My right hand was stretched out in front of me



holding the cinched black bag and my left arm was pinned to my left side. I twisted my legs, trying to get some movement, but I was stuck tight. Sweat began to slowly and annoyingly drip down into my eyes.

“Perfect.”

I breathed deep, trying not to panic.

“I’m going to die here,” I said nervously, halfway believing it. “What a nice way \_\_\_”

*Thwump!*

Somewhere behind me the heat kicked on. Almost instantly large waves of warm air washed through and around my captive body. The sweat dripping into my eyes increased but I couldn’t reach to wipe it away.

“I’m in trouble,” I said needlessly into the warm dark.

I remembered some teacher at one of the many schools I had been shuffled through over my life having said something about heat making things expand. With that tiny bit of vague knowledge, I begged the universe to please expand the metal duct currently trapping me. In return, I promised not to release the bees.

The duct didn’t expand.

I upped my commitment and promised I would start to care about others and I would try not to swear so much.

The duct felt even tighter. I could feel myself cooking.

“Son of a . . .” I stopped myself.

I made one last promise, but even before I finished it in my head, I knew I wouldn’t keep that particular promise.

I closed my eyes, hoping that in my last moments of life some wise wizard would appear to me in my delirium and invite me to enter a portal to some place much cooler and filled with light.

The sweat on my face and skin felt like boiling water. My head rang from the noise of the hot air. I began to thrash and scream. I would have liked to go out in a much braver and dignified way, but I couldn’t take it anymore. I hollered as loud as I could, hoping someone would hear and come to my rescue.

In my state of panic and confusion I mistakenly forgot how important it was to keep holding onto the bag. I began to beat my fists against the side of the duct.

“Somebody! Help!”

The furnace stopped. I couldn’t see anything in the dark, but the cooler air felt like a positive sign.

“Hello!” I yelled. “Anyone!”

I thought I could hear someone hollering far away down another duct. I stopped yelling to listen.

I remembered the bees.

Something light tickled my right arm at the same moment tiny wings brushed against my nose. I grabbed for the bag in the dark, but the heat moving through the vent had blown it just out of my reach. My heart began to beat so hard I could hear it pounding against the metal duct.

I don't like bees. I never have. I find their tiny striped bodies to be as frightening as almost anything I had ever seen in a horror movie. Now, thanks to my panic, the bag was open and the bees were free. I could feel more and more of them moving up my arm. I knew if I moved it would only make things worse, so I kept still, forced to endure the horrid feeling of prickly bee feet inching their way up my arm.

They made it to my face.

One crawled over my lips and down my neck.

"Heeeellp," I tried to scream through the corner of my sealed lips. "Heeeeeelpp meeee."

My plea came out like a slow leak.

Bees began moving under my collar and down the back of my neck. I could hear them buzzing near my ears. Their wings sounded like a hundred chain saws. I had been mad at myself for wishing the heat would turn off. Now I wanted it to flip back on and blow the bees away.

I could feel one on my ankle.

It was too much. The sweat on my face and the thousands of tiny legs crawling over me was more than I could take. I'd always thought if I were ever faced with some terrible situation I would take the high road and bravely make the best of it.

It turns out that's not true.

I went from a boy of fifteen and three-quarters to a child of five and a half in an instant. I screamed like a tiny kid getting his hair pulled by the monster under the bed. I violently kicked my legs and bucked my body up and down as hard as I could.

Apparently the bees didn't like that. I could feel them sting my ankle, my cheek, my arm, and my back.

I freaked out.

I rocked so hard I knocked my right shoulder out of joint and banged my head against the duct. All I could hear was the noise of me shouting and what sounded like two billion bees shouting back at me.

I suppose it was lucky for me that most heating ducts weren't designed to hold the weight of a person. I felt fortunate—I also felt the duct break loose beneath my waist. My right leg slipped out. I kicked harder, banging my head with such force that I could see stars and hear the sound of angels screaming.

The duct floor beneath my head broke open and the weight of my body shifted wildly as the entire section came loose. I could feel a terrible scraping on my right hip as the bottom dropped out from under me. The section of broken duct crashed down against a large counter filled with dishes and bottles. I would have fallen with the duct had it not been for the large metal seam where the duct had once been attached catching at the waistband of my jeans. I dangled from the vent like a human piñata.

Bees burst out of the broken vent and into the room. I could see I had been wrong about a couple of things: one, I was not above Mr. Shin's room. I was above Miss Harpthorn's home economics class. And two, it had not been a bunch of angels screaming, but a large group of girls—some of the very girls I had once unimpressed on a basketball court.

Miss Harpthorn and her class looked up at me like I was a mangled animal that