

A person with a backpack stands in a dark, rocky cave, looking out at a futuristic city built on a planet's surface. The city is illuminated with a bright blue light, and the sky is filled with stars. The title 'HIS SILENT KILLER' is written in large, white, brush-stroke font across the top of the image.

HIS SILENT KILLER

RICH UNKEL

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Rich Unkel](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Prologue

Burton Sloan's life was as typical as life could be. In fact, it was better than average. At least, what he showed everyone else. That is not how it started, though.

Burton's morning couldn't have come quick enough for him. Springing out of bed, he was still wearing his clothes from the previous day. It didn't matter much, as the fashion police didn't surface until sixth grade or so and that was another year away. Because he probably needed a shower, he pulled his already-tied sneakers on and wiggled his feet into them as he walked down the hallway. Unbeknownst to him, the heel of his sneakers looked to be an accordion. He didn't care; as footwear was the least of his worries.

He had life pretty much figured out. Some people liked him and others didn't. Those who didn't like him weren't a concern. His friends and family saw him as a go-getter, who could engage in most conversations. Interesting and socially apt, his friends ranged from toddlers to the elderly. His range of knowledge was vast; related to his endless passion for collecting antiques.

What eleven-year-old do you know who can't wait to get to an estate sale? Who goes to those, anyway? Burton did, and his wealth of knowledge and trinkets had spring-boarded him into entrepreneurship after only living a decade. His newfound focus was based on his favorite television show. It was about two guys, who travel the United States, buying antiques from fascinating people of all occupations. Burton found this way of living riveting, as there were so many treasures to buy, learn about and trade. He loved history and appreciated it. In fact, his dream was to open a museum of history, using his massive collection. Not a bad idea for a fifth grader.

He usually flew solo in his endeavors. His family wasn't really interested. Burton's mother and father supported him but they didn't have the same tenacity as he did. That was OK with him. At least they supported him and were semi-interested.

Burton lived for these sales. Part of the joy in collecting was bringing home his new discoveries and learning about them. The value of them was both in the resale and in researching them. His two siblings, one older and the other one younger, were equally uninterested but they didn't mind the clutter.

He had his own room and it was filled with endless hours of knowledge and conversations. He had friends over but Burton was more of the tour guide of his room and people were fascinated with his finds. They would constantly ask, “What is this?” and “What is that?” He enjoyed the opportunity to explain where he found each item and its history. He could tell when he was talking too much; they would start to get a blank look on their face. He understood.

Chapter 1

“I need to be out the door in ten minutes, Mom,” proclaimed Burton in his business-like voice. “I want to be first in line.”

Today was a unique estate sale. Jack Rider, the local hermit, had passed away and his whole house and its contents were for sale. Local townspeople called him Wacky Jacky, as he was just that. Eccentric and introverted, Jack was always inside and rarely seen out and about around town. His house was run-down and hadn't had renovations done to it in years; however, people claimed he used to be the town socialite and a friend to all.

As the local legend goes, thirty or so years prior, Jack had returned from a trip to India and he was never the same after that. He had amassed a fortune from a rich uncle and he had enough to live and travel the world. For some reason, his whole demeanor changed within months of his return. People started seeing him less and less. He never spoke to anyone and never had guests. The mail was dropped off on his front porch and it would be gone the next moment. When Jack died, there was no funeral or calling hours. No family came to claim any of his belongings. Soon, the house was turned over to an auction house.

“I know that house will be filled with history and antiques.”

“Burton, your room is almost full. You need to sell some of your collection to make some room,” Mom said, with an all-too-familiar tone of voice. “I don't want you ending up being one of those hoarders you see on television.”

“Mom, I have a small room and everything in there has a purpose, a story, and value,” Burton said, feeling as if he had been down this road with his mother many times.

“That is true Burr and you have paid for this entire hobby with your own money. I just am worried it will get out of control and you will make your antiques more important than your family or friends.”

“I play sports and get good grades, especially in social studies. I have never been in trouble at school and the teacher loves it when I bring in artifacts and explain them to the class. It's a win-win situation, Mom.”

“Hurry and get ready, then. You have much to discover at Mr. Rider's house. Just promise me you won't turn into him,” Mom said, half-smiling and half-hoping he wouldn't get as bad as Jack had been.

Burton counted his cash in his wallet, grabbed his favorite hat and walked out the back door. As always, he had a business plan and approached each sale the same way. He would buy only good deals and not buy just because he liked something. Then, he would try to resell it online, usually doubling his money. He would take half of his profit and use that to buy more. The other half went into his savings account.

His bike was rigged with a box set above his rear wheel. He could fit much in it. One time, he had the box filled and had to hold a World War II plane prop across his handlebars as he rode across town to his house. There were times where he bought a box of stuff so big his dad had to borrow a pickup truck to get it home.

At the Rider house, there were a few people waiting. Burton was well-known among the auction and estate regulars. They were impressed with his knowledge and drive to “get a bargain”. He had the confidence to talk down the price with anyone. The line getting into the front door wasn’t long and Burton knew he could scan the house quicker than anyone else. He felt relieved, as he always did, when he finally got his body inside. The anticipation was always a rush, especially today. There were so many tales attached to this spooky house.

Something about it stopped him in his tracks. “Whoa.”

Surprisingly, the inside didn’t really match the outside. There were plain white walls with oversized furniture, which looked more comfortable than anything he had seen before. It was almost as if he were a small toddler learning how to walk. The carpet was tall and fuzzy. Everything had a sense of softness to the touch. There were no sharp edges.

The air was unexpectedly clean, with an agreeable odor of fresh linens. Burton was confused whether this was the right house. The inside was not as he had expected. He had always hoped for a glimpse of Mr. Rider from outside. He never was there. Now that Burton was finally in his house, he was even more confused. *I guess this is what they mean when people say don’t judge a book by its cover*, Burton thought. *I was downright wrong with my prediction.*

Buyers dispersed throughout the house in an organized frenzy to get to a specific room or area to try to be the first to get a high-value item. Burton always went to the basement first. It was usually where the cool stuff was found. He always scored his biggest items down below. The carpeting went right to the door leading to the cellar. The stairs leading down were carpeted

as well. Also, there was a rail on both sides, making it almost impossible to fall. Burton felt safe. *Mr. Rider must have grandchildren*, he thought, as this whole house was entirely “baby-proof”, as his mom would put it. He remembered his parents doing that to their house when his baby sister started crawling and climbing but he didn’t recall them being this extreme. Mr. Rider made everything secure. Oddly, Burton didn’t see any children’s toys or any signs children lived in this house.

As he was transitioning through the kitchen, Burton’s eyes were fixated on the basement door. The basement was always a roll of the dice. Sometimes things were hidden because they were either exceptionally valuable or an eyesore. Busy making his way to his destination, Burton hadn’t noticed Mrs. Hilbert standing in front of the kitchen sink.

“Well, it is so nice to see the next generation appreciating antiques.” Without pausing or letting Burton react, she continued, “All these valuables are from when I was a child. It is funny to think I used to be your age. Back then, we didn’t realize our day-to-day stuff would be what everyone would be scurrying around to snatch up and sell. Ah, those were the good old days. My husband, he will take anything. I am a little pickier.”

Burton wasn’t even sure if she took a breath or added any pauses in that statement. Why did older people use the phrase “the good old days”? From what Burton could gather, polio, depression, ration stamps and world wars weren’t what he would consider going to Disney World.

“Yes, Mrs. Hilbert. These are valuable. You can’t put a price on memories,” he said, wondering if he was sounding as a Hallmark card.

“So true, Burton. You and my husband know a good find when you see one. Good luck,” she said, as he turned to retreat to the cellar.

Burton made his way down the stairs. Mr. Rider’s upstairs seemed odd but he had a typical basement. Damp air, boxes stacked, old light fixtures hanging; and, of course, cobwebs, floating as sheets out on a clothesline. Burton started doing what he did best, unearthing.

The boxes contained the usual items, old appliances, books and newspapers. There wasn’t much to grab Burton’s attention. Mr. Rider seemed plain and ordinary. His mystique as a hermit wasn’t unique to Burton. There wasn’t much in this basement and he was starting to feel himself getting tired. He usually got tired when he was getting bored at a sale. Typically, when he knew he was getting to the end of his rope, he

would just leave and head home. It was the same as when the game was over and the final buzzer went off. Nothing was catching his eye.

Mr. Rider's house was so old, half of the basement was dirt and the other half was concrete. Burton saw this set-up in many houses in his area. They were houses from the 1800s and they were just built that way. The back half of the house was dirt and Burton decided to peek around back, just in case something was forgotten back there. There was a light in the far corner, so he felt around in the dark and clicked the hanging light on. There was nothing there, so he went to turn the light out when he looked down at his sneakers. They had ashes on them. Something must have been burned over here. Why would Mr. Rider burn something down here? His wonder turned to worry. *That is strange*, he thought. *Why would he do something like that?* Holding the light, he moved it around to get a better perspective. There was an old shovel and a small container of what looked to be gas. He picked it up and lifted the lid. It was definitely gasoline. Stepping back to return the gas to its place, he noticed the ground was soft and there was another pile of ashes. This raised his suspicions. It was eerie and this small corner of the house matched the outside of the house. *What was burned and buried here?* Burton's normal self said, *Get out of there and get back to the sale.* His other side said, *What if this were a cover-up of a crime?* He didn't know what to do or believe so he turned off the light and walked back to the cement side of the basement. He wiped his sneakers off on a mat right where the dirt met the concrete. He went upstairs to get out of there, when Mr. Hilbert stopped him at the door.

"Burton, since you are such an early bird, can you do me a huge favor?" Mr. Hilbert had always been pleasant to Burton and taught him a lot. He was a retired social studies teacher, who shared Burton's same passion for antiques. He ran many of these sales and worked for the local auction house.

Burton stopped and changed his expression to a less startled one. "Yes, Mr. H." Burton was honored Mr. Hilbert would consider him, even though it was a huge inconvenience. He didn't let that show.

"I have to run this sale all day tomorrow and I need to go to an appointment first thing in the morning. If I give you the keys to the house, can you open up for me and answer people's questions? I don't think there will be many people here tomorrow. There usually isn't on the second day."

He was right, everything good was usually picked clean the first day and there wasn't much here to begin with.

"Sure," Burton said in response to his question, without really thinking he was just creeping out by the corner of the dirt floor in the cellar.

"Thanks Burt, I have an extra key, so you can take this." Mr. Hilbert handed him a key. "Just open up at 8 o'clock sharp and I should be around 8:30."

"I won't let you down, Mr. H." It was an honor to be trusted with this but Burton didn't really want this responsibility.

"I'll let you have something for free for doing this for me, Burt," Mr. H responded, with a smile as he turned to help a buyer with a question.

Putting the key in his pocket, Burton got on his bike and was glad to be departing from that sale. He thought it was somewhat creepy and a waste of his time but that was part of the deal when it came to buying antiques. Some houses were productive; some didn't have much. He was glad he had finally seen the inside of Mr. Rider's house. Thankfully, he only had to go in there tomorrow morning for a half an hour. Plus, Burton would get something free from the deal. *That makes it worth it*, he supposed.

Burton headed south up Elm Street, knowing there were a couple of yard sales there. Hopefully, he would have better luck at those. Totally striking out at the Rider Estate Sale surprised him. He figured a strange old man would have treasures and valuables. To their whole town, he was an enigma. *I guess his big mystery was he didn't have one*, Burton thought.

Chapter 2

“So, how were your findings today, Burr?” Those words came spitting out the same as debris getting kicked out of a spinning tornado. Dinner at the Sloan house was always together on Saturday night. Burton and his family usually had a typical meat-and-potatoes-type-meal. The milliseconds spoken to Burton were just a pause in the action. He wasn’t even sure who had asked the question.

It was interesting with an older sister and a younger sister. Burton’s older sister complained about life. Each day, she took on her dramatic, life-ending circumstances, as if she finished second place in the beauty pageant she should have won easily. She conducted herself as if she were life’s homecoming queen. The funny thing was nobody was signing up to vie for the part of the king. Burton had some ironclad theories on why she was a solo act but didn’t offer them to her.

His younger sister usually screamed and threw down her dinner if she didn’t like it. It was the same as when you see the rich and famous at a restaurant and they act furious their food wasn’t perfect. This wasn’t a fancy restaurant, nor was it ever. The fanciest Burton’s family ever got was Dijon mustard slapped on a burger. She was more than picky about food. It was a love-hate relationship. So, Burton was usually the last one to speak. It didn’t upset him at all. He enjoyed watching the show.

Being the middle child definitely had its perks. Also, being the only boy among the children made it even better. He could be just as he wanted. He wasn’t compared to any siblings, which he thought was crazy, anyway. Burton was the meat sandwiched in between a roll seasoned with crazy.

“Not much today; a couple of old greeting cards and not much else. Oh yeah, I went to the Rider estate sale. It was pretty boring but Mr. H asked me to open up the sale for him in the morning.”

“Good for you, Burr,” his dad said, as he picked up Lilly’s doll, which had just fallen off her tray onto the floor. “Mr. H trusts you. Don’t forget we leave for church at 10:15 a.m.”

“Yes, Dad. He said I would be done at 8:30 a.m., so that gives me plenty of time to get home. Plus, he said I could get a free item for my work,” Burton said, showing some excitement. His sister was in the process of hurling her spaghetti across the room, so Burton was sure nobody heard him. In some ways, he didn’t blame her.

Burton retreated to his room and got busy researching the value of his day's findings. He couldn't help but let his mind drift to Mr. Rider's house. *How odd. The inside of the house was so strange. I've been in dozens of houses in my short career as a collector and this was clearly the weirdest. It wasn't terrifying but more as a young child's bedroom. My sister's room and Jack's house were almost identical; soft and set up for someone who wasn't good at walking. Maybe Mr. Rider was old and couldn't walk well and set his house up in a way that would make it less dangerous if he fell; but I didn't see one cane or walker in his house. Usually, I'd see those at estate sales when the seller was an older person who had died. Well, whatever it was, it wasn't as strange as what I had found in the basement corner.*

The whole idea of a corner in a dirt cellar was bothering him for some reason. It sounded to be something from a cheesy horror movie. *Each sale has its own bizarre thing that stuck out. One time, a sale had a bunch of dead, "stuffed" animals from all around the world. At another sale, this lady had lived to be one hundred and four and had all the ashes from family members who had died. They were in these different urns on the mantle in the living room. That totally freaked me out. Everyone is different, and I accept that; yet what was Mr. Rider trying to burn in the corner? Also, there was the risk of burning something inside the house. That was both dangerous and peculiar.*

Now he thought about it, it wasn't right at all. *People don't tend to try to burn things inside. Why didn't he use the fireplace upstairs if he wanted to burn something? Why was the dirt soft in that corner but not in any other place in the dirt portion of the cellar? Wow, now this is really bothering me,* Burton thought. He sat there on his bed with a hundred different conspiracies zipping through his mind; also, it was beginning to bother him that he actually cared this much. *Mr. Rider was a myth and people usually joked about him around town. That made sense, then. He just was simply abnormal.*

Lying down, he put his hands to his sides, thinking of all the possibilities for the pile of ashes in the corner. Drifting off, Burton recognized he had the key to Mr. Rider's house in his pocket. He had totally forgotten that he had to open the house early in the morning. Taking the key out for the first time, he noticed it was an odd-shaped key. He held it up to his desk lamp to get a better look at it. All the sides were smooth. There

were no jagged edges. Even his house key was peculiar. He was having a hard time finding something normal about Mr. Jack Rider.

Burton's overall feeling about this finding was spinning from simple wonder to a deep annoyance. He was perplexed as to what he had discovered in that basement. He now had a fiery desire to know. When Burton needed to know something, he couldn't rest until he found the answer. It was just who he was. When he came home with an old lamp or plate, he researched and investigated until he had found out more about that object. This was difficult. He didn't know and the answer was beyond reach. Was there something buried there? Did Mr. Rider burn some type of evidence then dig a hole in an attempt to hide it? These endless questions were starting to annoy him. Burton didn't have the answers but he had a key. Wait. In his pocket was the actual key to Mr. Rider's house. What was he saying? He could go to his house now and look for himself. That was where the answer was buried, literally. That would be dangerous and potentially ruin the trust of Mr. Hilbert.

This is all crazy, he thought. I'm just making a big deal about nothing. Before he could argue with himself anymore, he drifted off with the key still in his hand.

His head nodded once and the next thing he knew, his alarm clock was blaring in his right ear. It was 7 o'clock in the morning and he bounded out of bed with such startling ferocity; it was as if it were a fire alarm blaring. He needed to get to Mr. Rider's house immediately. Burton's mind was on that dirt and he was going to go there now before anyone else got there. He grabbed his flashlight and pocket knife and jumped on his bike as if he were a firefighter heading to an emergency.

This notion had morphed into a crisis. He needed his answer.

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