*Jacob, your best friend of eight years was killed by a street pole.*

As alarm clocks go, that one had room for improvement.

*What happened? Well, it’s sort of hard to explain, you’d need to see it yourself.*

*Yes, it was an accident. Not a car accident, a—a regular accident.*

*No, there weren’t any witnesses.*

*I can give you an address, if you like, but it’s currently under police investigation.*

*No, there are no next of kin. The state is holding a funeral on Tuesday.*

*No problem, sir. I’m sorry for your loss. Thank you for your time.*

Jacob hung up the phone and rolled out of bed, letting an empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s clatter onto the floor.

Mechanically, he brushed his teeth, got dressed, fed the dog, picked up his keys, and put his hand on the doorknob.

No.

No, he would not go to work today.

Mechanically, he stowed his keys, he set his hat back on the stand, hung up his coat, and began to untie his shoes.

No.

No, he *would* leave the house today.

He grabbed his coat and keys, leaving his hat on the stand and his shoe untied. In his hand he held a slip of paper, and the paper held an address.

The weather outside looked like Jacob felt. There was a thick layer of rain pelting down on the city, like God was offended by how tall they made the buildings these days. The wipers on his windshield could barely keep up with the deluge, but he managed to snake his way through the early morning traffic to reach the place where Henry Richter had lost his life to a street light.

On a whim, he had bought coffee from a fast food joint on the way. It had been an unbearably normal thing to do, and as he sat there, staring into the dregs of his shitty one-dollar coffee, he wondered if he should have bought something more ceremonial.

Not for less than a buck, anyway. As he reached the last turn, he threw the nearly-empty cup out the window in disgust.

When he pulled up to the address, he was surprised to note that the scene of Henry’s death was not the side of the road, despite the fact that was where one usually encountered street lamps. It was an antique shop. Protruding through one of the large glass display windows was the tail end of a huge metal pole, hanging in the air. It had been thrust through the display like a lance. The road itself was clogged by the dump truck that had done the deed and a police car there to investigate, so Jacob parked down the road and dove into the downpour. Ducking under some yellow police tape, he stepped inside.

The interior was a mess. Bunch of shelves, lined up like a grocery store, covered in ancient artifacts of dubious value; all of it tossed around by the impact, leaving only one item in twenty still intact. The iron rod of the street pole dominated a part of the store, and seeing it this close finally got through to Jacob.

This was quite possibly the stupidest way anyone could have died, ever, throughout history. For a half a moment, Jacob was able to forget it was Henry who had died, forget it was Henry who was gone, and he simply saw this impossible act for what it was. For a half a moment, Jacob was able to laugh.

The bark he let loose attracted the attention of the police officer standing deeper into the store, who turned around and addressed Jacob sharply, “Who are you? This is a police investigation, sir. You’re not allowed in here.”

Jacob glanced at him, and noticed the blood on the floor near the officer’s feet. Reality began to wash back down over him, and by the time he answered there wasn’t a trace of a smile on his face. “I’m a friend of the deceased.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, sir, but you’re not allowed—”

Jacob reached into his jacket pocket and removed his wallet. “I’m also a private investigator.”

He flipped open the wallet to display the identification he had earned that verified him as such. Predictably, the officer took his wallet and stared at it with the aid of a flashlight for several seconds. Looking for magic pixie dust, no doubt, or whatever it is that they always seem to expect to find by staring so intensely. Maybe they thought it might do a trick.

Finally, the man handed it back to him, and Jacob slipped it all back in his pocket. “So,” Jacob started, intending to get things moving before more bullshit could maneuver itself into his way, “what happened?”

The officer turned and surveyed the scene, then said, “The dump truck over there hit a street lamp, it flew through the glass there, and hit the victim. He died instantly.”

He gestured helpfully at the gigantic metal rod running the length of the room. Jacob rubbed his eyes and said, “No shit.”

The police officer looked back at him quizzically, probably gauging whether or not Jacob was being sarcastic. Jacob took the opportunity to look around.

The first place to look was the last place Jacob wanted to see, but he knew how these things worked. Turning the corner, past a bookshelf, he came to the point where the pole intersected with the floor, and where Henry’s body had briefly interposed.

There it was. He was. The iron shaft had struck him right in the head, where he had been sitting on the floor. Reading a book, it looked like. Henry had liked books. It fit. It fit that he died this way. Even though it was completely impossible, it fit him. Died how he lived, and all that bullshit.

Whatever. His head was gone, the street lamp cleanly destroying it, leaving only a little bit of chunky meat where the neck hit the body. A foot to the left and it would be a story he could tell his grandkids about, but instead…instead. Dead as they come, for no goddamn reason at all.

Jacob knew what he was going to do next. He felt his body going through the motions, helpless to prevent himself from looking like an idiot. Look around the body. Check pockets for evidence. Look up. Look down. Left, and right. All around. Scan the scene. Construct a visual of the crime…but there was no crime. He knew this was exactly as had been described: an accident.

There was nothing he could do. There was nothing *to be done*. Only thing left was to rent a suit and try to be sober by Tuesday.

He felt his body slide down a display case and onto the floor, and he discovered he was sitting down. Staring down his legs at the body of his friend. His dead friend. Dead, dead, dead.

Jacob blinked. Henry hadn’t be reading a book, he had just been holding it. It was even tied shut. Fucker, he had destroyed the unbearable poetry of this shitty death scene. Leaning forward, Jacob plucked the book from Henry’s loose grip and reached for the drawstring, perhaps intending to open it and fake to the world that things happened differently. In the process, though, he noticed that Henry’s other hand was holding a VHS tape, and that instead of a title the tape had Jacob’s name penciled in.

Huh.

Jacob grabbed the tape and the book—string still tied—and left in a hurry, before he had to punch out a police officer due to a fatal lack of patience.

It was still raining outside, and the windshield wipers continued to display their inability to do their job as Jacob tried to make his way through the rush-hour traffic. The book and tape were burning a hole in his passenger seat, and every red light brought him within inches of tearing open the string and trying to read. It was stupid, of course. The book was probably something stupid and normal, like *War and Peace* or some shit, and the tape was probably just some homemade pornography or something else equally disappointing. People don’t leave vital clues to explain their *random accidental deaths*. There was nothing to clue into. He got hit by a street lamp pole, and his brain was crushed into vapor.

And yet, Jacob’s heart skipped a beat every time he looked at his passenger seat. Eventually he couldn’t stand it anymore, and, as the slowly pondering traffic ground to a halt yet again, he snapped up the thin little book, untied the string, and opened it to read the title.

It didn’t have a title: it was a journal. And a page had been torn out and moved to the front of the book. Upon opening the book, this page fell free of the journal and into Jacob’s lap, and, involuntarily, he read the first few words:

*Jacob, I am going to die.*

Jacob wasn’t a private investigator because it was fun or it paid well, because it was not fun, and it did not pay well. He didn’t do it because he got to carry a gun and shoot it at people on very rare occasions, though he did, in fact, get to do both of those things. He was a PI because stuff happened, and if he didn’t know *why that stuff happened*, it would bug him. It would bug him more, and more, and more, and as time went on it would bug him even more, and even more, and eventually he would no longer be able to sleep.

And then he would solve murders.

Sitting in the car, reading just that slip of paper, a switch had been flicked in Jacob’s brain. Henry’s death had gone from a thing he understood, to, somehow, a thing he didn’t understand. A thing that didn’t make sense, a thing that *could* make sense if he knew more. A thing that he would understand. Eventually. No matter the cost. A thing that, given time, he would begin to lose sleep to. Henry’s death became a murder he would solve.

Driving through the pouring rain, Jacob cracked a tiny smile, and a little mania lodged itself into his mind.

He would definitely not be sober by Tuesday.

He had a *case*.