

## 8. Negative Data

In the somber atmosphere of 1969, Sheriff Ed Jackson and Deputy Joe Purdue faced the daunting task of accompanying the bereaved family of Chase, including his widow Pearl and his parents, Patti Love and Sam, to confront the grim reality of loss at the clinic's makeshift morgue. The chilled silence of the room was pierced by the grief-stricken sobs of Pearl and Patti Love, forcing them to retreat from the unbearable sight of Chase's lifeless form. The air carried a weight too heavy for words, leaving Sam enveloped in a silence that hinted at a depth of sorrow beyond expression.

Back in the sheriff's office, which bore the scars of nature's relentless assault from saltwater marsh, the mood was bleak. Amidst the spread of mildew and the odd sight of mushrooms thriving in the corners, the two men shared a drink, seeking solace in the golden warmth of bourbon as the day surrendered to the night.

Four days had passed in the haze of their investigative duties when a flicker of hope seemed to arise with the arrival of the lab reports, brandished by Joe as he burst into the office. Yet, as they delved into the contents, hope quickly dissipated, replaced by frustration. The report provided a timeframe for Chase's death but offered nothing more. The term "negative data" encapsulated their predicament perfectly – an absence of evidence, a void where there should have been clues. The meticulous absence of fingerprints, including Chase's own, at the scene suggested a calculated effort to erase any traces, raising more questions than answers. The sterile language of the report contrasted sharply with the complexity of their task, leaving them pondering the skill or motive behind such thoroughness in obscuring the truth. The investigation was at a standstill, with every new discovery leading only to dead ends and the haunting realization that they were far from uncovering the story beneath the surface.