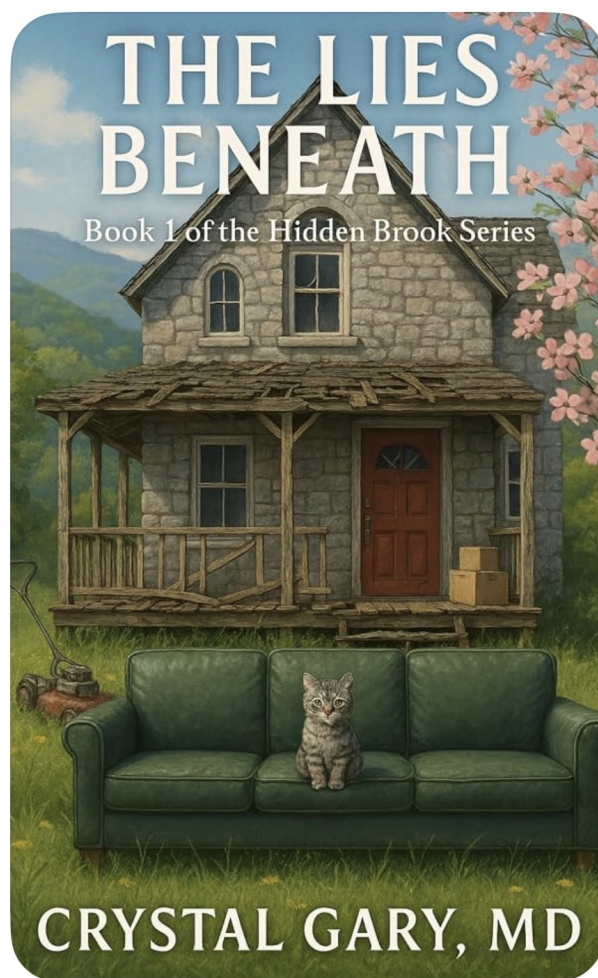




The Lies Beneath

Crystal Gary

BookGist Summary

The Lies Beneath

by Crystal Gary

Genre: Women's fiction

Key Takeaways

- Mallory Jennings's move to Hidden Brook offers her and her three sons a chance to rebuild after divorce, but the inherited rock house also opens a window into family history and unanswered questions.
- A physician's responsibility extends beyond treating individual symptoms: Mallory notices an unusual concentration of kidney disease, cancers, reproductive problems, fatigue, and other conditions among her patients.
- Aunt Mildred's papers connect those illnesses to Creek Bend, a subdivision built over a former copper-mine tailings pond where toxic waste may have been inadequately contained.
- The novel links environmental harm to corporate deception: Summit Corporation and its affiliated company GreenCare conceal troubling test results and press ahead with development for profit.
- Community investigation depends on cooperation. Mallory's medical observations, Taylor's research, Wes's practical help, Jackson's legal knowledge, and residents' testimony each contribute to uncovering the truth.
- Speaking up carries personal costs: Mallory faces professional retaliation, a threat to her son, the destruction of her clinic, and a wrongful arrest.
- Wes's steady care helps Mallory reconsider what a relationship and family support can look like after betrayal, while her sons gradually form their own bonds with him.

- The story emphasizes that evidence and public accountability can challenge even powerful institutions, especially when whistleblowers, journalists, lawyers, and residents work together.
- Mallory's deeper journey is not only to repair an old house but to create a sense of belonging and safety for herself and her children.

Who Should Read This Book

Readers who like protagonists rebuilding their lives will also appreciate Mallory's arc from wary newcomer to determined advocate, alongside the gradual development of her relationship with Wes. The novel may appeal to fans of contemporary small-town romantic suspense, but it puts more emphasis on the environmental and corporate conspiracy than on romance alone. Its blend of medical clues, family dynamics, faith, community solidarity, and cliffhanger-ready intrigue makes it a natural choice for readers who want an emotionally grounded series opener with a strong sense of place.

Chapter Summaries

Prologue and Chapter One: A Buried Past and a New Home

Mallory Jennings arrives in Hidden Brook with her sons Caleb, Will, and Sam after inheriting her late Aunt Mildred's neglected rock house. The property promises a fresh start, but it holds unsettling clues to Mildred's troubled life: multiple locks, psychiatric medication, and walls covered in Bible verses and handwritten notes. A mysterious bobtailed cat, later identified as Houdini, becomes part of the household. As the family cleans and begins making the place livable, Mallory also starts to reconsider whether Mildred's illness, rather than indifference, kept her from taking Mallory in when she was orphaned.

Chapters Two to Four: Repair Work, Family Strain, and New Connections

Dan's early-morning call exposes the damage his infidelity and departure have caused. Mallory refuses to force the boys to speak to him, while still encouraging them to decide for themselves whether to offer him a chance. As the family adjusts to a new school and Mallory prepares to work at the Youngstown clinic, her life takes shape around responsibility, humor, and cautious hope. The chapter arc establishes the Callahan brothers as possible allies and contrasts Dan's abandonment with the dependable support Mallory is beginning to find.

Chapters Five to Eight: Clinic Life and the First Warning Signs

Celest Steele, a state senator and member of the powerful family behind Summit Corporation, welcomes Mallory to town and presents the Steeles as benefactors who helped Youngstown recover after the copper mines closed. Mallory senses authority beneath Celest's polished friendliness. She also buys a low-mileage used car from a patient's family, easing the family's transportation difficulties. Meanwhile, the house becomes more welcoming, the boys' energy fills it, and Mallory learns more about her past as she tells Wes and Jackson about foster care, her parents' deaths, Mildred's illness, and her marriage.

Chapters Nine to Eleven: The Pattern Emerges

Searching Mildred's basement, Mallory finds a folder of Summit Corporation records, old environmental reports, maps, and water tests. Some show concerning cadmium levels; others from the same periods show suspiciously reassuring results. Local history at the library confirms that Creek Bend was built on or near a former mining tailings pond. Mallory maps her patients' addresses and finds that many of the people with unusual health problems live in or near the subdivision. A password-protected thumb drive hints that Mildred was preserving evidence, but Mallory cannot initially access it.

Chapters Twelve to Fifteen: Building a Case

With Jackson's legal contacts, Mallory and the Callahan brothers consult Dr. Ray Hensley, an environmental reclamation expert. He explains how tailings sites should be stabilized, lined, covered, and monitored, and says the records suggest Summit may have skipped essential safeguards. The group starts planning water and soil sampling and ways to document health impacts. Mallory's investigation becomes a community effort, while Wes's admiration for her deepens and Jackson's interest in her creates an undercurrent of rivalry between the brothers.

Chapters Sixteen to Eighteen: Evidence, Threats, and a Turning Point

The evidence becomes stronger: water and blood samples show troubling cadmium levels, and Will cracks the password to Mildred's thumb drive by trying the cat's name, Houdini. The drive reveals a 2014 email in which Summit regional director Harold Newsome raised concerns about conflicting water tests and was told by corporate counsel Carter Tanning to trust GreenCare and stop questioning the issue. As Mallory prepares to bring the findings to the town, she and Wes finally act on their mutual attraction, though she remains wary of adding a new relationship to an already complicated life.

Chapters Nineteen to Twenty: Public Warning and an Attack

On the mountain road, a vehicle follows Caleb, blinds him with its headlights, and deliberately forces his Tahoe off the road. Caleb survives the rollover and manages to climb back to the road, where Jackson finds him. Mallory's relief at learning he is alive quickly becomes fury and fear: the attack appears to be retaliation for exposing Summit. At the hospital, Caleb is

treated for bruises and scrapes, while his family gathers around him. Mallory concludes that the intimidation has crossed a line and resolves not to back down.

Chapters Twenty-One to Twenty-Four: Retaliation and the Clinic Fire

Margaret Tate, Newsome's assistant, secretly gives Mallory documents about Phase Three, the planned expansion, and the financial entanglements connecting the Steeles, Summit, and the Quakes. That night the clinic is destroyed in a deliberately set fire designed to resemble an electrical accident. Mallory loses her workplace just as she has been threatened with losing her job. The fire marks an escalation from intimidation to direct sabotage and leaves the clinic staff, patients, and residents without their usual medical center.

Chapters Twenty-Five to Twenty-Nine: Arson, a Frame-Up, and Public Exposure

Anita Sanders, Ted's investigative-journalist wife, begins tracing the corporate structure behind GreenCare and discovers that it is connected to Summit through shell companies. Her reporting connects environmental sign-offs and cleanup work to companies under Summit's control. As residents organize and a class-action firm prepares to represent them, Mallory remains in custody while Jackson challenges the arrest. The investigation is no longer just about contaminated water: it now encompasses corporate fraud, arson, political influence, and an effort to silence a whistleblower.

Chapters Thirty to Thirty-Three: The Community Pushes Back

The authorities try to frame Mallory for the clinic fire, but the case collapses when prosecutors find no adequate evidence. Witnesses confirm that Mallory's thermite notes were made after Ted identified the suspected accelerant, and Taylor's account redirects attention to the unidentified IT visitor. Mallory is released, greeted by a crowd of patients and residents who have come to support her. Her arrest and the attack on her son have tested her resolve, but the community's response confirms that she is no longer carrying the fight alone.

Chapter Thirty-Four and Epilogue: Home, Accountability, and a New Beginning

Six months later, a new clinic opens in Hidden Brook to serve the surrounding region. Mallory returns to medicine with Becky and Taylor nearby, and the building represents the community's determination to restore what was lost. Her relationship with Wes has become a source of steady support, and the boys have grown to trust and care for him. The final image redefines home: it is not a perfectly repaired house but the people who make Mallory feel loved, safe, and able to belong.

Notable Quotes

““They chose profit over people.””

““You’re not an island, Mallory. You can trust me. With your heart, with your family.””

““Home wasn’t a building. It was the people who filled it.””

Full Summary

A signature set the story’s danger in motion. At a meeting staged to secure approval for Phase Three of Creek Bend, Summit Corporation’s Carter Tanning watched nervously as Alan McCaffrey hesitated over the final page. Forty years earlier, Summit had capped a 27-acre copper-mine tailings pond and built a neighborhood over it. GreenCare, presented as an environmental firm, had certified the work; Summit then added Phase Two. Now Phase Three would cover the remaining seven acres of the original site and another 29 acres acquired through Steele Development. When McCaffrey asked about a groundwater sample near the southern retention wall that had been flagged in the 1990s, GreenCare’s Wendell Graves dismissed it as an anomaly already addressed. Reassured by Houston Winslow Steele and the others around the table, McCaffrey signed. The people at the meeting were intent on keeping the project moving, and on keeping the buried history buried.

At the same time, in Youngstown, Hannah Brunswick stared at a positive pregnancy test, hopeful after two previous miscarriages. She sent her husband, Braydon, a message asking him to come home early. Their excitement and Summit’s deal unfolded side by side, without either of them knowing that the past beneath Creek Bend might reach into their future.

Mallory Jennings arrives at her inherited rock house with her three sons, hoping the move to Hidden Brook can give them a fresh start after an ugly divorce left her financially and emotionally drained. The house comes to her unexpectedly: she is the only heir of her late Aunt Mildred, her father’s sister, whom Mallory never knew. A rural family-practice job at a satellite clinic in Youngstown helps make the move possible. The house has sturdy stone walls and a beautiful mountain view, but the porch is unsafe, the front door is patched with plexiglass and secured by four locks, and a glass door opens onto a four-foot drop.

Inside, the family finds unsettling traces of Mildred’s private life. A locked upstairs room is covered with hundreds of Bible verses and scraps of writing; its medicine cabinet holds psychiatric prescriptions, including lithium, risperidone, quetiapine, and Depakote, all prescribed to Mildred by Dr. Sutherland. Mallory suspects her aunt had a serious mental illness and wonders whether that might explain why Mildred never took her in after Mallory’s parents died. Mallory was only three when her parents were killed in a car accident that she alone survived, and she grew up in foster care. In the basement, she finds neatly labeled bins, but no immediate explanation for Mildred’s life. A bobtailed gray tabby repeatedly appears and disappears around the house. Will eventually catches it and discovers its tag reads Houdini;

the cat quickly wins a place in the household.

The boys' distinct temperaments shape the effort to make the house livable. Seventeen-year-old Caleb is withdrawn and burdened by the upheaval; fourteen-year-old Will is observant and dryly funny; eight-year-old Sam is a restless, exuberant force. They clear out Mildred's room, haul away the battered furniture, and settle into sleeping bags before the moving truck arrives. As they unpack, Mallory sees the work as more than repairs: she is trying to build the home she never had.

When Mallory's attempt to mount the television sends it crashing through the wall, handyman Wes Callahan arrives to inspect the damage. His calm practicality and easy humor contrast with the polished, self-absorbed Dan she has left behind. Wes helps get the lawn mower running, points out her misplaced "studs," and begins rebuilding the dangerous porch and replacing the front door. Their teasing grows warmer, though Mallory reminds herself she is not ready for complications. Wes, a former finance-school graduate who supports himself through investments but loves hands-on restoration, is drawn to the house and its new occupants. His brother Jackson returns from hiking the Appalachian Trail, troubled by guilt after defending Stoney Wakefield, who was acquitted of murder and then shot a young woman. Jackson is considering leaving his Atlanta law practice for quieter work in Hidden Brook.

The boys also face the emotional strain of the divorce. Dan calls from Japan, where he is supposedly building earthquake-resistant apartments, demanding to speak to them. Mallory refuses to force contact: the boys have seen the damage his infidelity and departure caused, and they can decide for themselves when they are ready. Their first days at their new schools bring familiar bickering as well as tentative new connections. At the clinic, Mallory meets nurse Becky Wilson and receptionist Taylor, while the boys explore despite her warnings to behave. Mallory's first workdays are busy but rewarding, and she takes seriously both routine care and unsettling details, such as a boy's suspicious bruise.

A visit from State Senator Celest Steele seems at first like a friendly welcome. Over lunch, Celest describes her family's history in Youngstown and says her grandfather created Summit to revitalize the town after copper mining declined. Her gracious manner carries an undertone of authority. In private, she tells Houston that the new doctor seems harmless. Houston and Carter, meanwhile, discuss Summit's broader approach: acquire cheap former industrial land, let GreenCare produce reassuring reports, and move on before residents uncover contamination.

The first stronger warning signs emerge in Mallory's patients. She sees two people with kidney cancer in a short time, including a middle-aged woman whose diagnosis is poorly documented. Hannah arrives bleeding at roughly fourteen or fifteen weeks of pregnancy. Mallory confirms that Hannah is miscarrying for the third time and orders tests to investigate

possible underlying causes. When the results return, Hannah's creatinine is abnormally high; she also reveals that a health-department test had previously raised concerns about her kidneys. Mallory arranges further bloodwork, a renal ultrasound, and blood-pressure monitoring.

As she reviews other records, Mallory notices more elevated creatinine levels, including among people in their thirties and forties. One patient complains of a metallic taste, a young man has unusually low testosterone, and another has unexplained fatigue. The pattern feels increasingly difficult to dismiss, especially because Mildred herself died of renal cell cancer. When Mallory raises her concerns with hospital chief of staff Dr. David Quake, he brushes her off, blaming unhealthy habits and warning her against conspiracy thinking. He tells her to focus on her work.

Instead, Mallory asks Taylor to search for patients with creatinine above 1.3, then visits the public library to investigate local copper-mining history. Librarian Edith recalls that mining left scars on the land and that tailings ponds were covered over and "reclaimed," including the site beneath Creek Bend. In Mildred's basement files, Mallory finds a Summit folder with old development clippings, testing invoices, mine photographs, and a reclamation document stating that a synthetic liner was rejected because of cost. Of six water tests, four show high cadmium while two matching reports show normal levels. Her research identifies cadmium as a toxic metal linked to kidney damage and cancer.

Mallory begins listing patients by fatigue, cancer, kidney failure, and other unusual conditions, then plots their addresses. Many live in or near Creek Bend, where a former tailings pond once lay. The records suggest that Mildred had been investigating the same place, perhaps after years working at the county clerk's office downstream from it. Mallory's suspicion now has a geography: the illnesses may cluster around the buried pond. Will secretly takes the password-protected thumb drive from the table, determined to crack the mystery Mildred left behind.

Mallory's suspicions soon became a coordinated investigation. As she began trusting Caleb to drive his brothers to school, she prepared a questionnaire for patients who might have been exposed to cadmium and asked Becky to price the necessary blood tests. Becky added a crucial clue: the clinic's previous doctor, Dr. Sutherland, had left Creek Bend after discovering that his own well water contained high cadmium levels. His house was in the subdivision's newer phase, where flooding and a sulfurous, metallic smell had accompanied the water problem. Mallory contacted Sutherland, who confirmed he had seen unexplained fatigue and kidney dysfunction among patients, too. He had eventually abandoned his Creek Bend home at a steep financial loss, after Summit Corporation kept the money he had paid toward it.

Sutherland also warned Mallory that the Steeles controlled Summit and had little regard for residents' welfare. Her efforts to question the company produced no useful answers, so she

enlisted Taylor to investigate its history. Taylor found a polished public image of charity and “environmental stewardship,” but few details about the actual cleanup of Creek Bend. She traced Summit’s plans beyond the existing development: the company had bought adjacent Steele family land and hired GreenCare Solutions to prepare it for expansion. GreenCare’s claims of successful remediation looked less reassuring when Taylor found projects where groundwater problems and residents’ health complaints appeared after the company had declared sites safe.

Mallory compared those claims with old reclamation guidelines. Properly closing a tailings pond required draining and treating its water, stabilizing the waste, installing a liner to stop heavy metals reaching groundwater, covering the material with clean soil, restoring vegetation, and monitoring the site over time. Mildred’s papers indicated that Summit had rejected a synthetic liner as too expensive. To assess what that meant, Jackson contacted his law-school friend Eli, who connected them with Dr. Ray Hensley, an environmental reclamation specialist. At their meeting in Asheville, Hensley explained that omitting a liner from a pond as large as Creek Bend’s could allow cadmium and other metals to seep into the water table. He suspected Summit had also used inadequate cover material and failed to monitor the site. His advice was straightforward: collect more water and soil samples and build the case with hard evidence.

The investigation now depended on different kinds of help. Mallory identified patients and explained the medical concerns; Taylor dug through records; Wes distributed sample kits and spoke with Creek Bend residents; Jackson brought legal expertise; and Hensley supplied technical knowledge. In the clinic, Hannah and Braydon agreed to testing after Mallory explained the potential connection between cadmium exposure, Hannah’s kidney dysfunction, and her three miscarriages. Mallory ordered blood and urine tests, kidney-function studies, and a test for tubular damage, while urging the couple to use bottled water and have their tap water independently tested.

As results accumulated, the evidence became harder to dismiss. More than a dozen household water samples showed dangerously elevated cadmium, and the patients Mallory tested had high cadmium burdens. Kidney tests showed damage concentrated in the renal tubules, consistent with heavy-metal exposure. One patient’s removed kidney contained a substantial amount of elemental cadmium. Mallory could not prove every illness was caused by the contamination, but the findings connected the poisoned water to a troubling pattern of harm.

She also confronted the human cost directly. After further research, Mallory warned Hannah and Braydon that cadmium stored in the body could remain for years and might threaten a future pregnancy. Hannah was devastated by the possibility that her damaged kidneys and past exposure could endanger a baby. Mallory offered referrals and second opinions, but

could not promise a safe outcome. Their grief made her more determined to warn the community.

Celest Steele called to discourage her, insisting that Summit had always acted responsibly and that Mallory's claims were conjecture. When Mallory stood by the test results, Celest raised the possibility of defamation and advised her to stay focused on clinic work. The cordial welcome Celest had once offered now looked like an attempt to manage a potential problem. She alerted Houston Steele and Carter Tanning, who agreed Mallory threatened the next Creek Bend phase. Carter promised to apply pressure and arranged for Mallory's contract to be challenged. Dr. David Quake, a hospital board member with a financial stake in Summit, was instructed to tell Mallory that her job was in jeopardy, using accusations that she was neglecting patients for an environmental crusade.

Meanwhile, Will secretly worked on Mildred's locked thumb drive. After repeated failures with names and dates, he guessed the password from the cat's collar: Houdini. The drive opened to an email exchange revealing that Summit regional director Harold Newsome had reported GreenCare's reassuring water results conflicted with independent tests showing elevated heavy metals, especially cadmium. Carter dismissed his concern and dangled a promotion, telling Newsome to let GreenCare handle the matter. Mallory now had direct evidence that Summit had been warned—and chose profit over further investigation.

Before the family could fully absorb what the emails meant, Mallory and Wes's feelings broke through their restraint. While he helped her prepare slides for a public meeting, they kissed, then pulled apart, both aware of the complications: her recent divorce, her sons' needs, and the danger surrounding the investigation. Sam saw the kiss and told his brothers he did not want another father, though Will and Caleb reminded him that Wes had been good to them. The moment underscored what Mallory feared losing, even as Wes's steady presence increasingly felt like support rather than a threat to her independence.

Mallory and Wes organized a town meeting at First Baptist's fellowship hall, with Hensley explaining the failed reclamation and Jackson arranging a class-action firm. At the meeting, Mallory showed residents how the old tailings-pond map aligned beneath the Creek Bend houses, and presented water and medical evidence. She urged residents to test their water, avoid drinking it, and seek medical advice. Angry residents demanded answers from Summit. Jackson was supposed to speak about the lawsuit, but failed to arrive; Wes stepped in, offering residents information about legal representation. Mallory's presentation had made the danger public, but as the crowd dispersed, her attention fixed on Caleb, who had still not arrived.

Driving to the meeting, Caleb was pursued by a vehicle whose high beams filled his mirrors. When he slowed to let it pass, the vehicle struck the Tahoe from behind and then hit it again, forcing it off the mountain road. The truck rolled and came to rest on its side among the trees.

Caleb escaped, climbed to the road, and began walking for help. Jackson found him along the highway and called Mallory and the sheriff. At the hospital, doctors found Caleb bruised and scraped but without broken bones or a serious head injury. Mallory was relieved he was alive, yet furious: the crash felt like a warning aimed at her through her son. Wes and Jackson stood with her as she resolved that Summit's intimidation would not stop the fight.

The next morning, Mallory stormed into Summit's regional office and confronted Harold Newsome. She told him she knew he had seen the genuine water tests showing dangerous cadmium levels, questioned GreenCare's reassuring results, and then stayed silent after Carter Tanning offered him a promotion. She also demanded to know whether anyone at Summit had been involved in the attack on Caleb. Newsome denied knowing anything about the crash, but his composure faltered when Mallory described the emails. She left him with a warning: she would not let him or Summit escape responsibility.

Sheriff Tom Wheeler thought Caleb's wreck looked deliberate, but the lack of skid marks, debris, or witnesses made it difficult to identify the driver. In Youngstown, Mayor Deana Candler recognized the danger the incident posed to Summit's plans. She berated Newsome for allowing the attack to happen outside the city limits, where her brother, Police Chief Dillard Hanson, could not quietly contain the investigation. Carter, meanwhile, decided Mallory needed to be stopped. When an investigator found no damaging secrets in her past, Carter turned to other means: he arranged for the clinic to be destroyed and pressed Cherokee Regional's David Quake to threaten her job.

Mallory kept treating patients, including Hannah Brunswick, whose kidney damage had progressed to stage-three disease, possibly nearing stage four. Hannah feared that her health had been permanently damaged and that she might never have the family she and Braydon had hoped for. Mallory reminded her that the contamination was not her fault and asked directly whether she was at risk of harming herself. Hannah denied wanting to die, though she admitted wishing the nightmare would end. She was determined to fight for accountability.

Quake soon appeared at the clinic and told Mallory that her contract would be terminated, claiming she had neglected patient care to pursue an environmental agenda. The accusation was false: she had seen every patient in town. That evening she returned home to find water flooding the kitchen because she had installed the refrigerator filter incorrectly. Wes and the boys helped mop up the mess, and Wes promised to bring another dehumidifier. Mallory hid the news about her job from her sons, unable to burden them with yet another disruption.

The following night, Margaret Tate, Newsome's administrative assistant, called Mallory with a warning about Phase Three of Creek Bend. The planned development would be larger than the previous phases combined, and Summit needed the contamination kept quiet to protect the project. Margaret explained how the Steele and Quake families' tangled ownership stakes meant they could profit from both the land sale and Summit's development. She believed the

EPA had already approved Phase Three on the strength of GreenCare's reports, and she feared Summit was willing to do anything to prevent scrutiny. At the Bluebird Diner, she gave Mallory a folder and a password-protected drive containing documents, emails, and call logs. Margaret had resigned and offered to testify if needed.

While Mallory was meeting Margaret, an impostor posing as a Cherokee Regional IT technician entered the clinic. He used the opportunity to tamper with its server equipment, setting a delayed fire. Before dawn, thermite ignited in the mainframe room, burning so hot that it melted the electrical equipment and spread through the building. By the time firefighters arrived, the clinic had been reduced to rubble.

At the site, a retired ATF investigator named Ted Sanders identified the telltale slag and burn pattern. The fire had been deliberately set with thermite, then staged to resemble an electrical accident. Taylor recognized the likely culprit as the "Ray Carter" impostor who had visited the clinic. Ted brought in the fire marshal, Ben Lark, who had been prepared to blame faulty wiring. Confronted with the evidence, Lark changed course and opened an arson investigation. Ted also connected Mallory with his wife, investigative reporter Anita Sanders, who saw the case as a major story with national implications.

Anita's digging exposed the structure behind GreenCare: through layers of shell companies, it was owned by Summit. The supposed cleanup firm had effectively been certifying Summit's own developments, while an affiliated company, Reclaim, Inc., handled reclamation work and was also tied to Summit. The arrangement made environmental oversight a sham. By the time Anita arrived at Mallory's home to record her account, Mallory had gathered Aunt Mildred's papers, the water tests, and Margaret's files. She handed them over, accepting that the story was now bigger than she could carry alone.

Meanwhile, Mallory's clinic job and home life both came under attack. Cherokee Regional reassigned Taylor and sent Becky to cover a distant clinic. After Chief Hanson learned that Mallory had been told her contract was ending, Mayor Candler encouraged him to treat her as the likely arsonist. Hanson's officers searched Mallory's home and seized her computers and files. They arrested her after finding her handwritten notes about thermite, mistaking research she had done after the fire for a plan to set it. Mallory insisted she was innocent and asked Wes to stay with her sons. He promised to keep them safe.

Jackson represented her at the station, where Mallory refused to answer questions without counsel. Her thermite notes, she explained, came from trying to understand Ted's findings. Her staff confirmed that she had been upset about the threatened dismissal but had not acted like someone preparing to burn the clinic. More importantly, Taylor told investigators about the suspicious visitor. The man had worn a badge bearing the name Ray Carter, but the real hospital employee with that name had misplaced his badge and had never visited the clinic. Even the district attorney questioned Hanson's case, which rested on circumstantial evidence.

The community refused to let Mallory's arrest bury the investigation. At an emergency town meeting, residents packed the community center while Anita recorded the proceedings. Jackson explained that Mallory had uncovered the danger but that the fight now belonged to the whole town. Lawyers from Bell, Hancock, and Assad presented the class-action case. Facing the crowd's anger, Candler claimed Summit had misled her. Newsome seized the moment to remove his Summit badge and admit that he had raised concerns but been told to stay quiet. He offered to cooperate and turn over internal communications. Candler promised to sever the town's ties with Summit and seek a state investigation.

The next morning, the state brought no formal charges against Mallory, and the judge dismissed the case. Outside the courthouse, hundreds of residents, including many of her patients, welcomed her with signs and cheers. She thanked Jackson, then noticed Wes standing with her sons. Mallory went to him and told him she needed him in her life. She could not put him down either.

Anita's reporting revealed GreenCare's connection to Summit and helped bring federal investigators into the case. Executives Wendell Graves, Houston and Celest Steele, and Carter Tanning faced investigation or federal charges, while the Steeles and Tanning fled before being traced to Costa Rica and extradited. Candler, Hanson, and Newsome later pleaded guilty to corruption and obstruction-related charges and agreed to testify. Bell, Hancock, and Assad secured a twenty-four-million-dollar settlement for residents, while another forty-seven million dollars in seized assets went into a community health fund. A government-supported water system eventually brought clean water to Creek Bend.

Six months later, a new clinic opened in Hidden Brook, built with local labor and led by Wes. Cherokee Regional made it a satellite clinic serving both Hidden Brook and nearby Youngstown. Becky and Taylor returned to work alongside Mallory, while residents gathered to celebrate a new beginning. At home, the boys' lives had found their own rhythms: Caleb was growing closer to Charlie, Will and Sam settled beside Mallory for a movie, and Wes sat at her side. Mallory understood that home was not the repaired house or its walls, but the people who stayed, supported one another, and made belonging possible.