

THE FIRST  
RESIDENT  
OF  
BRIAR GLEN


A NOVEL




LARRY LOWE



# THE FIRST RESIDENT OF BRIAR GLEN



LARRY LOWE




Nine-year-old Chelsea Parker knows something is wrong at Briar Glen before anyone else is ready to admit it.

In the spring of 1984, Chelsea visits her grandmother at a quiet Virginia residence for the elderly, where polite voices, clean curtains, and afternoon gossip make the place seem harmless enough. But Chelsea begins to notice a quiet menace when no one else is looking. A presence that should not frighten her, but does. Something still and watchful that makes her feel, deep in the private place where children know things before they can explain them, that she is the only one in on a terrible secret.


The adults have reasons for everything. Old knees. Bad balance. Staff moving things from room to room. The ordinary explanations people reach for when the alternative is too strange to name.

But when Nana Charlotte is hurt while no one is watching, Chelsea suspects more than age, accident, or bad luck. And when she returns to Briar Glen days later, what waits there seems to know she has come back.

A tale that began more than a hundred years before Chelsea was born has not ended. Something has endured quietly, long enough to be mistaken for part of the place itself. Something that has been waiting for this family to return.



*The First Resident of Briar Glen* is a work of horror about what gets carried forward, what refuses to remain hidden, and the child who recognizes the danger before anyone else is willing to believe her.





# THE FIRST RESIDENT OF BRIAR GLEN



*A Novel*




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First Digital Sample Edition

*[www.thefirstresident.com](http://www.thefirstresident.com)*



*For my children,  
who push me forward and give me life more than they know.*

*And for the ancestors,  
whose names, stories, and silences still ask to be remembered.*



# PRELUDE

*The Woman in the Chair*

Virginia, Spring 1984



## PRELUDE



### *The Woman in the Chair*

*Virginia, Spring 1984*

“And finally, we come to the Number One song in the country. Phil Collins climbs into the top spot this week with ‘Against All Odds.’”

Then the music came in soft and sad through the dash speaker, and Chelsea Parker, all knees and bright Sunday socks on a Saturday, leaned her forehead against the warm window glass and watched the world unspool in green.

The road out to Briar Glen bent through fresh spring countryside, two-lane blacktop cutting across fields greening up after winter. Dogwoods had come out in white along the tree line. Red clay showed through in the ditches where the last rain had chewed at the shoulder. A weathered barn leaned in the distance, and cows stood about in a pasture with the same blank expression as old men outside the feed store.

Chelsea loved this drive.

She loved the way it felt like the whole world had opened up and laid itself flat just for her and Mama’s beige sedan. She loved the radio. She loved the smell of Mama’s Jean Naté and the paper sack on the front seat with Nana’s crossword books, a tin of butter cookies, and a fresh jar of that peach preserve Nana liked to put on toast though the doctor had told her to leave sugar alone. Nana said doctors were fine men for other people.


Chelsea tucked one foot up under her and turned from the window.

“How much longer?”

Ellen Parker smiled without taking her eyes off the road. Her brown hair was clipped back, and both hands stayed at ten and two as if the state trooper himself might materialize from the pines and grade her form.

“Baby, you asked me that same question not two minutes ago.”





“I know, but how much longer now?”

“Ten minutes, give or take.”

“That means fifteen.”

“That means ten, if you quit countin’ against me.”

Chelsea grinned. “Nana says you always drive slow on purpose.”

“Nana says a great many things that keep her entertained.”

“She says if molasses had a driver’s license, it’d be you.”

Ellen gave a tired little laugh. “Your nana has been waitin’ forty years for somebody to appreciate her meanness.”

“It ain’t meanness,” Chelsea said. “It’s humor.”

“Well. Listen to Miss Dorothy Parker back there.”


Chelsea did not know who Dorothy Parker was, but she knew from Mama’s tone that the lady must have been clever, and Chelsea liked the sound of that.

Outside, the countryside rolled by in lovely pieces. A church sign with half the letters crooked. A man on a tractor. Laundry snapping on a line behind a white house with a rusted roof. Everything looked clean in the spring light, though not fancy. Chelsea thought of Briar Glen the same way. It was not pretty exactly, not in the magazine sense. But it had flowers out front and curtains in the windows and old people who called her sugar and darlin’ and asked after school as if it were serious government business.

Best of all, it had Nana Charlotte.

Saturday was their day.

Not every Saturday, but enough of them that it felt ordained. Mama would bring Chelsea after lunch or just before, and they would stay till early evening. Sometimes all three of them sat together, but plenty of times Ellen would step out to run an errand in town or talk to Missus Jenkins down the hall, leaving Chelsea curled up beside Charlotte on the little couch in her room while the two of them traded stories.



Charlotte always had stories.

Stories about school in 1921, when she was still a girl with braids and shoes as hard as the bread. Stories about sugar rationing. Stories about a girl named Faye Delacroix who had once sung a solo at church and fainted dead away because her girdle was laced too tight. Stories about men who drank too much and women who knew it and married them anyhow. And, most precious of all, funny gossip from Briar Glen.

Not ugly gossip. Not usually. Just the sort that made Chelsea's eyes go wide.

Miss Lurlene claiming Mr. Bledsoe had stolen her denture cream.

Mr. Bledsoe claiming Miss Lurlene had accused him because he turned her down for dominoes.

Mrs. Wicker putting on lipstick before breakfast in case the undertaker ever "dropped by unannounced."

Nana delivered it all with a holy straight face, and Chelsea loved her for it.

The Phil Collins song carried on from the radio, soft and full of grown-up sorrow. Chelsea did not know what against all odds meant exactly, but she knew it sounded lonely. She swung the phrase around in her head while they passed the old feed mill.

"Mama?"

"Mmm-hmm?"

"Why do old folks fall asleep so much?"

Ellen glanced in the rearview mirror. "Because when you get old, your body tires out easier."

"But Nana says she ain't old."

"Nana is seventy-six years old."


"She says seventy-six is seasoned."

"That does sound like her."

Chelsea traced a line in the fog of her own breath on the window. "Will I get seasoned?"

"If you're lucky."

Chelsea let that sit awhile. She liked the sound of lucky better than old.



By the time they turned in at the narrow road to Briar Glen, the song was over and commercials had come on. Chelsea sat up straight. The house appeared through the trees in pieces at first, white-painted trim, deep porch, dark shutters, and the long familiar body of an old plantation place later dressed up in Victorian styling, too large for one family now and a little too proud to admit it. There were azaleas blooming by the walkway, fat and pink. A side porch held three rockers and a little metal table with an ashtray nobody had used in years but nobody had thrown out either.

The sign out front read:

BRIAR GLEN RESIDENCE  
*A Home for Independent Senior Living*

The last word on the sign had peeled some. It looked faint. Chelsea liked that. It made the place seem old enough to have a memory.

Ellen parked near a tan Buick with a handicapped placard and killed the engine.

“All right,” she said, turning. “You got Nana’s crossword books?”

Chelsea held them up.

“The cookies?”

“In the sack.”

“And your manners?”

Chelsea gave her a look of high insult. “I always bring my manners.”

“You left ’em at home two Wednesdays ago.”

“I was havin’ a difficult day.”

Ellen laughed outright at that. “Lord, help me. Come on.”

Inside, Briar Glen smelled as it always did, a blend of lemon cleaner, old carpet, talcum powder, coffee that had sat on the burner too long, and something underneath all of it that Chelsea would later learn was time itself. The air was quieter than outside. Even when people spoke, they seemed to do it with the softness of a place where naps might be in progress behind any door.

Missus Jenkins stood at the desk in the front hall, spectacles low on her nose, a pencil stuck through her steel-gray bun like a weapon.

“Well, look what the cat dragged up from civilization,” she said.

She had called Chelsea that since Chelsea was six. Chelsea adored her.

“Hello, Missus Jenkins.”

“Hello yourself. You here to keep these old folks from turnin’ feral?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. We were one biscuit away from savagery.”

Ellen shook her head. “You ought not tell her such foolishness.”

“I ought too. Child’s the only one here listens.” Missus Jenkins leaned over the desk. “Your nana’s in rare form today. Been waitin’ on you since breakfast and insultin’ everybody else to pass the time.”

“That means she feels good,” Chelsea said.

“That means she’s dangerous,” Missus Jenkins replied.

They moved down the corridor to Charlotte’s room. On the way, Chelsea passed the common room and glanced in.

There sat Emma.

In the far corner near the window.

Hands folded.

Head slightly tilted.

Ruby lips set in a smile as though she had overheard something worth keeping.

Chelsea slowed.

Emma was a resident at Briar Glen in the same way the others were, except Emma was a doll. Near life-size when seated, dressed in old lace and a dark coat with fur at the collar, with a wig styled like some grand lady from a much older time. She was always somewhere, and no one ever explained why.

The room held two card tables, a television in a wooden cabinet, and three residents dozing in chairs while a game show muttered on low volume. Yet Emma somehow seemed to occupy more space than any of them. Her dress that day was patterned, purple and cream beneath the coat. One small heeled shoe stuck out from beneath the hem. She looked arranged. Composed. Pleased with herself.

Chelsea felt a prickle run from the back of her neck into her shoulders.

Missus Jenkins noticed her lagging. "What is it, lamb?"

Chelsea nodded toward the corner. "Why's she in there?"

Missus Jenkins followed her look, then gave the mildest shrug. "Well, I suppose because that's where she is."

"Was she there yesterday?"

"If I knew every place Emma had been, I'd likely know where my reading glasses disappear to."

"You have them on your face," Ellen said.

"Exactly my point. Things get about."

That was that.

Grown folks were forever acting like nonsense had manners.

Charlotte's room sat on the east wing, second door from the end, with a little brass sunflower hanging from the knob. Chelsea rushed in before Ellen could tell her not to bolt.

"Nana!"

Charlotte Parker, wrapped in a pale house dress and a cardigan despite the warmth, was seated at the little dinette table with a cup of coffee gone half-cold and a gossip magazine spread open before her. Her silver hair was pinned back in a way that meant she cared at least somewhat how she looked, and her lipstick, never absent, was a shade darker than nature intended.

"There's my baby," she said, opening her arms.

Chelsea ran to her and was gathered in with a smell of powder, coffee, and peppermint.

“You got taller again,” Nana Charlotte said.

“I did not. Mama says I can’t keep growin’ every week.”

“Your mama lacks imagination.”

Ellen set the sack on the counter. “Her mama also brought you butter cookies and those crossword books.”

Nana gasped theatrically. “Well, mercy. I have been remembered in my affliction.”

“You are not afflicted.”

“I live among the elderly.”

“You are the elderly.”

Nana lowered her voice to Chelsea. “See how she attacks me in my own home?”

Chelsea nodded solemnly. “It’s not Christian.”

Ellen pointed a finger at both of them. “I will turn right around and go sit with Missus Jenkins if y’all are gonna gang up.”

Nana grinned. “You won’t do it. Jenkins breath smells like post office glue.”

“Nana.”

“Well, it does.”

The afternoon settled into its usual pleasant rhythm. Ellen stayed a while, drinking coffee and talking about somebody from church whose son had gone to Atlanta and come back with a mustache and opinions. Nana listened, dismissed the son as unreliable, and asked Chelsea about school.

Chelsea explained, at length and with grave seriousness, how one girl in her class, Amber Leigh, had copied her spelling word off the board wrong and turned “because” into “becuz,” which Chelsea regarded as civilization sliding backward.

Nana slapped the table and laughed. “That child wrote a note, not a word.”

“I know.”

“Well, did the teacher flay her?”


“No, Nana.”

“Public schools are in decline.”

They ate half the cookies. Ellen finally said she was going to run into town and fetch sandwiches from the deli counter at Morrison’s, since Nana had been talking all week about pimento cheese and tomatoes.

“I’ll be gone maybe forty minutes,” Ellen said. “Y’all behave.”

“Your confidence in us is offensive,” Nana said.



Chelsea followed her mother to the door. “Can I get a grape Nehi?”

“If they have it.”

“And chips?”

“We have chips at home.”

“But not deli chips.”

“There is no such thing as deli chips.”

Chelsea widened her eyes. “Mama. There surely is.”

Ellen kissed the top of her head. “One small bag. Don’t hustle me.”

After she left, the room seemed to grow softer somehow. Quieter. Afternoon light leaned through the thin curtains. Outside, a mower droned somewhere far off. Nana moved to the couch and patted the cushion beside her.

“Come on over here, sugar. Bring that magazine and let’s see who done what to whom.”

Chelsea climbed up and tucked herself in against her grandmother’s side. Nana turned pages and read bits aloud, editorializing freely.

“This actress here,” Nana said, tapping a picture. “She has made a career out of lookin’ startled in shoulder pads.”

Chelsea laughed because Nana did.

Then Nana began one of her Briar Glen reports. Mr. Bledsoe had worn mismatched shoes to breakfast and insisted he was makin’ a statement. Miss Lurlene had accused the activities director of cheating at bingo through “spiritual manipulation.” A new resident named Mrs. Pickens had brought a parakeet that bit anybody in yellow.

Chelsea loved it all. The room was warm. The couch was soft. Nana’s voice rose and fell in that sweet, half-drowsy music old Southern women had when they talked in comfort.


“Baby,” Nana murmured after a while, “you get sleepy?”

“No.”

“That means yes.”

“I’m just restin’ my eyes.”

“That means you are your mother’s child.”



Chelsea nestled deeper beneath Nana's arm. She could hear the little tick of the wall clock and feel the rise and fall of her grandma's breathing. The magazine slipped in her lap. Spring light glowed pale on the far wall.

At some point Nana stopped talking.

At some point Chelsea stopped meaning to answer.

And then there was sleep.

When Chelsea woke, she did not know at first what had disturbed her.

The room had changed in the way rooms do when a nap lasts longer than intended. The light was thinner, touched with gold now. Shadows lay in different places. The wall clock still ticked, but every tick sounded separate and clear, as if all the other sounds had backed away to make room.

Nana still slept beside her, mouth slightly open, breathing easy.

Chelsea lay very still.

Then she saw her.

Emma sat in the armchair across the room.

Not in the common room.

Not down the hall.

In here.

In Nana's room.

In the floral armchair by the curtained window, where no one had been before they fell asleep.

Chelsea's breath caught high in her throat.

Emma wore the same fixed smile, the same face, but in the altered afternoon light something about her seemed sharper. More deliberate. Her eyes, though plainly not alive, appeared set exactly on Chelsea's face. Her little veiled hat was crooked by a fraction, enough to make her seem less posed and more interrupted. One hand rested palm-up on the arm of the chair.


Chelsea glanced at the door.

Closed.

She looked back at Nana.

Still asleep.

The room was silent enough that Chelsea could hear her own pulse in her ears.



She did not move. Children know there are moments in which movement feels like permission.

A great many thoughts passed through her all at once, none complete. Had Mama come back and left again? Had somebody from the staff entered? Wouldn't they have woken them? Had Emma been there before and Chelsea missed her somehow?

No.

No, she had not.

Emma had not been in that chair.

Chelsea knew that with the deep animal certainty children possess before adults teach it out of them.

She eased one hand under Nana's cardigan sleeve and gripped the soft skin of her forearm.

"Nana," she whispered.

Nana stirred but did not wake.

"Nana."

This time Nana made a little sound and opened one eye. "Mmm?"

Chelsea could not decide whether saying it aloud would make it worse. Her throat felt dry.

Before she could speak, the room door opened and Ellen came in backward, nudging it with her hip, both arms full of paper sacks and wax-wrapped sandwiches.

"Well now, the sleepyheads rise."

Nana straightened groggily. "Lord, I believe I drifted off."

Chelsea pointed before she could stop herself.

Emma sat in the chair, smiling.

Ellen looked over, then frowned mildly. "Well. That's new."

Nana rubbed her face and peered. "Huh."

"Ain't she creepy," Chelsea said, the words out before she could make them smaller.

Ellen set the food on the counter. "She is peculiar, I'll grant you."


"How'd she get in here?" Chelsea asked.

Nana, still thick with sleep, gave the matter barely half a thought. "One of the girls must've brought her in while we was nappin'."

"Why?"

Nana shrugged. "Maybe to amuse you. Maybe she just changed places."

She chuckled at her own joke.



Ellen smiled faintly. “Well, whoever thought it was a fine idea has a strange notion of decor.”

Chelsea kept staring.

Emma’s dress lay in still folds. Her ankles were crossed primly. The smile did not change, but Chelsea had the wild and awful notion that the figure looked pleased to have been noticed.

A tiny breeze from the window curtain lifted the netting on Emma’s hat and let it fall again.

That was all.

Nothing moved.

Nothing happened.

Yet Chelsea could not shake the feeling that something had already happened and she had awakened a minute too late to see it.

Ellen unpacked the sandwiches. Nana asked after the pickle situation. The ordinary afternoon resumed, sturdy as a hymn. Chelsea ate half her sandwich and all of her chips and answered when spoken to, but a small hard knot had formed in her middle and would not dissolve.

She did not mention it again.

Not to Mama, because Mama would give a practical answer and move on.

Not to Nana, because Nana was not afraid, and Chelsea could not bear the possibility of being laughed at, not cruelly, just fondly, the way grown folks laugh when children sense a thing they themselves refuse to see.

When they left that evening, Emma was still sitting in the chair.

Chelsea checked without meaning to. The armchair no longer looked floral and innocent with Emma in it. She sat exactly as before, unblinking and composed, as if she had settled in for the night and meant to keep Nana company after they were gone.

On the ride home she said very little at first. Ellen noticed, because mothers notice silence the way birds notice weather.

“You all right, honey?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re quiet.”

“I’m thinkin’.”

“About what?”

Chelsea watched twilight gather over the fields. “That doll.”

Ellen glanced up in the mirror. “Emma?”

Chelsea nodded.

“You don’t like her, that’s plain enough.”

“She was in Nana’s room.”

“I know.”

“No, Mama. She was in there when we woke up.”

Ellen was quiet a moment. “Somebody likely moved her while you were asleep.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know, baby.”

Chelsea frowned at the window. “She look mean.”

Ellen almost smiled at that, though it did not quite reach her eyes. “Well. She surely ain’t pretty.”

“I think Nana ought not have her in there.”

“She ain’t Nana’s.”

“She act like she is.”

Ellen did not answer at once. She turned the radio lower.


“She’s just a doll,” she said finally.

Chelsea looked down at her hands. The words sat wrong. A doll was something you played with or forgot under a bed. Emma did not feel forgotten.

Sunday passed in church and Monday in school, but Chelsea kept thinking about Emma in the chair.

Not every minute. Children are too alive for that. She recited multiplication tables, traded stickers, watched a bee drown in a puddle at recess, and forgot Emma entirely for stretches at a time. Then some small thing would bring it back. The sight of a dress on a clothesline moving when no one was near it. The empty chair at the dentist’s office. The way her teacher’s puppet in the reading corner stared from a shelf with painted confidence.

By Tuesday afternoon, the unease had settled into something with shape. She was at the kitchen table doing homework when the phone rang.



Ellen answered from the hall, and Chelsea could tell from the first “Yes?” that it was not a social call. There was a certain flatness in her mother’s voice when concern entered it, as though she were smoothing a wrinkle nobody else was allowed to see.

Chelsea kept her pencil poised over arithmetic.

“Yes, Missus Jenkins... Mm-hmm... She did?... Was anybody with her?... No, of course... Is she in pain?... All right... all right.”

Chelsea slid from the chair and stood very still.

Ellen came back into the kitchen with one hand pressed to the corded receiver, then set it down gently after saying goodbye.

“What happened?” Chelsea asked.

Ellen gave her a quick reassuring smile that did not fully take. “Nana took a little tumble in her room.”

Chelsea’s eyes filled at once. “Did she die?”

“Lord, no.” Ellen crossed the room and crouched in front of her. “No, baby. She hurt her back some, and they want to keep her in bed for a week or so, just monitor her. That’s all.”

“In bed?”

“Yes.”

“Can she talk?”

“Of course she can talk.”

“Can she eat?”

“Yes.”

“Can she walk?”

“Not much right now, and they’d rather she didn’t try.”

Chelsea swallowed. The next question felt foolish and enormous at once.

“Was Emma there?”

Ellen blinked. “What?”

“When Nana fell.”

“Honey, I don’t know.”


Chelsea lowered her eyes.

Ellen touched her chin, lifting it. “Listen to me. Your nana’s all right. Shaken up, sore, probably madder than a hornet about bein’ told to stay put, but all right. We’ll go see her Saturday, and we’ll bring her something good.”

“Saturday,” Chelsea repeated.

“Yes.”

The word landed heavy.



Saturday had always meant comfort before. Now it sounded like an appointment with something waiting.

That night Chelsea lay in bed listening to peepers singing beyond the screen window. The spring air carried damp earth and honeysuckle. A train sounded far off. Normally such sounds made the world feel big and safe, every house set in its place, every family tucked where it belonged.

Not tonight.

She kept picturing Nana in her room, trying to stand, then falling. She pictured the little table, the rug, the side chair. She pictured, against her will, Emma already there. Or arriving after. Or watching before.

By Wednesday, Chelsea had begun planning what she would do on Saturday.

She did not know exactly what she meant to do, only that she would not nap. She would not take her eyes off Emma if Emma was anywhere near Nana. She would look in every chair, every corner, every doorway. She would pay attention the way grown folks did not.

Children can be very brave when they think bravery is simply another word for staying awake.


Thursday went by slowly, Friday slower still.

On Saturday morning, Ellen let her wear the yellow sundress with the little white collar because Nana liked that one best. Chelsea packed a paper sack with two oatmeal cookies she had helped bake, a comic book for Nana to make fun of, and a hand-drawn Get Well card with a crooked flower on it.

By the time they were ready to leave, the weather had turned.

Rain poured hard enough to blur the windows, and the sky sat low and gray over everything. The countryside no longer seemed open or kind. Dogwoods flashed pale along the road like scraps of paper caught in the storm. Mud ran red in the ditches. Kudzu clung wet and dark to the trees.

The radio played something cheerful that Chelsea ignored. Every so often, lightning flickered somewhere beyond the pines, and for a heartbeat the whole road showed itself too clearly before falling back into rain.



She sat in the back seat again, staring out.

“Don’t fret so,” Ellen said, catching her eyes in the mirror. “She’ll be mighty happy to see you.”

“I know.”

“You got your card?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And those cookies?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You look like you’re headed to court.”

Chelsea almost smiled. “I’m thinkin’.”

“There she is again. My thoughtful child.”

They turned onto the road for Briar Glen.

The tires slipped a little where the red mud had washed across the gravel, and Ellen slowed. Rain ticked hard against the roof. The trees crowded close on both sides, bending under the weather as if listening.

Then the house came into view between the pines.

A flash of lightning opened the sky just long enough to show the white face of Briar Glen, its dark shutters, its deep porch, and the wet upstairs windows shining like watchful eyes.

And before Ellen had even parked, before the engine had fully died, before either of them opened a door, Chelsea looked up to the second window of Nana Charlotte’s room and saw Emma sitting in the window chair, facing out, waiting for them as if she had known precisely when they would arrive.

Chelsea’s hand closed so hard around the paper sack that the cookies broke inside.

“Mama,” she whispered.

But Ellen was still reaching for her purse and had not yet looked up.



Welcome to Briar Glen.

*The story continues immediately.*

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