



CHAPTER ONE

The second day of summer was a flapjack-and-bacon morning with enough sweet cane syrup to make your teeth ache. A glorious, heavenly day when you got no more homework due for three whole months.

It was also the day I got the strangest phone call of my life. Instead of my best friend, Shelby Jayne, there was an unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line. A girl's voice, breathy and whispery, just like a ghost's might be.

Nope, I didn't see no white figures floating up the staircase to the second floor. No moaning or chains rattling. No pockets of cold air that freeze you to the floor.

Just a voice on the phone. I'd never heard of ghosts waltzing around town making phone calls. Then again, I don't live in a regular house. My parents moved us into the Bayou Bridge Antique Store — a fact I do not brag about. It's embarrassing to admit I share the same space as musty, mothball-smelly furniture, dusty books, and teacups that dead people once drank from.

But Bayou Bridge Antiques boasts a LOT of telephones. An entire *wall* of antique telephones, and Daddy is always buying more at garage sales. He spits some shine on them, rewires the cords, and sells them to collectors, or folks who want to decorate their house in the “old-fashioned” style.

We have what's called “farmhouse” phones, which is a wooden box with a crank that a person had to wind up to make a call. And we have a whole slew of black “candlestick” phones. That's a phone that sits on a table with a fat tab people used to click with their finger to alert the operator.

We also have a couple dozen rotary phones in burnt orange, firehouse red, lipstick pink, and purple vomit. A rotary phone means there aren't any buttons. Folks had to stick their finger into a circular dial and push it around to get each number to dial up and connect.

Then there's also a fancy cluster of pretty Victorian phones, French provincial, Princess phones, and telephones my mamma calls "vintage" sitting on a sideboard with doilies and candlesticks and whatnot.

I never knew there were so many types of telephones floating around the world. You'd think they'd have been buried in a garbage heap long ago. I'd never paid them much attention until I was gulping down the last of my milk and a phone started to ring.

Mamma poked her head into the kitchen and shooed at me. "That isn't the store phone, Larissa. Must be our private line upstairs."

"I haven't finished my breakfast."

"That's because you're dawdling. Now go answer it. Hurry! I'm with a customer."

I figured by the time I ran up two flights of stairs the answering machine would have gotten it, but strangely, the ringing didn't stop. It just kept going, on and on and on. A peculiar ring, like a bell, but when I got to the phone sitting on the nightstand in my parents' room, it was dead silent. I lifted the receiver. Just a regular old dial tone.

But *something* was ringing. Getting fainter, like it was running out of steam.

I gripped the iron staircase railing and listened, knowing it wasn't the store phone or our private line.

The day was still early. Nobody was currently browsing the second floor, although the sound of voices floated up the circular stairwell, Mamma chatting to a customer about a tea set from early-twentieth-century England.

“Probably a country manor house set.” Her voice drifted upward. “Excellent condition, not a single crack. Look at these miniature painted roses. . . .”

I played a game of Hot and Cold, trying to figure out where the ringing was coming from. It got fainter — colder — when I started down to the first floor, but warmer when I ran back up. And loudest — *hotter* — the closer I got to the wall of telephones in the back corner.

A big, square walnut box was clearly ringing as I approached. The two bells clanged furiously together, like the phone had gone crazy.

Only problem was, *not a single one of those phones was hooked up to an outside line!* None of them actually worked. They’re just for show, and most folks buy them strictly for decoration. The metal bells clanged away, and I wondered if my ears were working right.

I didn’t remember Daddy hooking up the phone, but maybe he’d run a line for a picky customer. *Somebody* was calling this old phone!

A shiver whooshed down my neck as I lifted the receiver and stuck it to my ear. The sound of

crackling came through, then silence deader than a graveyard at night.

A prickling rose on my neck. I heard *breathing*, and I was too scared to say a single word. The safest thing was to just hang up, but I couldn't get my arm to lift the heavy black receiver back on its hook.

The next moment a girl's voice softly said, "Hello? Anybody there?"

I was so shocked I dropped the phone. Quickly, I snatched it up again. "Um, hello?"

"Is this working?" the girl said as the murmur of static started up again in the background. "Did I get through?"

"I guess so. I can hear you," I told her.

"Who is this?"

I blinked in surprise. "Who are *you*?" After all, *she* called *me*. And I was pretty sure ghosts didn't actually talk. Or have voices. Or breathe. Maybe she wasn't really a ghost at all. . . .

"Larissa?" the girl asked softly.

I about jumped out of my skin when she said my name. "How do you know who I am?" I glanced behind me, but I was completely alone.

The girl said, "Doesn't matter how I know, but I need your help."

My voice wobbled. "Can't help you if I don't know who you are."

“Actually, Larissa —” She hesitated. “*You* need *my* help.”

Nerves sizzled along my arms. There was something about her voice that was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. “Is this a joke?”

“No!” she said quickly. “Never. This is completely serious. I need you to do something very important. And —” She paused. “It’s a matter of life and death.”

I let out a big breath, finally figuring out who it must be. My archenemy. “Alyson Granger, you are sick. Or stupid. I’m onto you. Don’t know how you pulled this off, but I recognize your voice.”

Touching the scar on my face with my free hand, I was about to hang up for real when the girl pleaded, “Oh, Lordy, girl. I am *not* Alyson Granger, I promise! Larissa, listen to me. You have to listen. Please, I’m begging you.”

Her voice sounded like the big sister I never had. Cajoling, pleading, but stern, too.

I ran a finger along the edge of the white line of the scar I got last year. The year I hated myself. Hated my life. Hated every single kid in this town. “Just leave me alone,” I finally choked out.

“Larissa, please don’t hang up! I can’t tell you who I am, but you’ll probably figure it out eventually.

Right now, I'm afraid that if I told you, I'd lose you forever, and it was the biggest pain to get this phone to work. Because — because I have to be able to call you again.”

She got the phone to work? What does that mean? I couldn't help being awfully curious, so I played along with her, imagining the revenge I'd wreak on Alyson if it was a huge joke she and Tara were playing to mess with my head. “Okay,” I finally said. “I'm listening.”

“I don't have much time, but —” She dropped her voice. “But remember this: *Find the fireflies.*”

“What in the heck are you talking about?” I spat out.

She started talking faster. “Find the fireflies. *Trust the fireflies.* You'll know what I mean when —”

Her voice was suddenly gone. Cut off. Disappeared into nothing.

I clicked the receiver tab over and over, but the phone was deader than a doornail. I willed her to come back, clanging on the bell with my fingernails to get it to ring again, but she was gone.

The second floor of the sprawling store was shadowy. Not many windows up here. The place was packed with stuff. An old blackened iron stove. Suitcases filled with dirt where I was planning on

planting fresh flowers like I did last year. Shelby Jayne loved my daisy-and-petunia-garden suitcases. Only times they sold were to customers from out of state, like California or Vermont.

I didn't usually venture into the dark, creepy corners of the store, but across from the couches and desks, a rectangle of yellow fell through one of the small windows. Jumping around a bookcase, I ran over to gaze down on to the back of the house. Nobody was messing with the phone wires — or running down the dirt road playing a trick on me.

Returning to the wall of phones, I willed the metal bell to ring again. Not a peep. The only fingerprints in the dust were mine.

I lifted the long, frayed cord to the wooden school-house telephone I'd been speaking into not three minutes earlier. It dangled in my hands.

I'd just received a call from a phone that wasn't hooked up — with a cord that went absolutely nowhere.