

CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND
**HOME FOR THE
HOLIDAYS**



CHAPTER 1

BEING STUCK AT HOME FOR THE holidays sucks, especially when home doesn't feel like home anymore.

Ever since my parents announced they were getting divorced and my daddy moved to Atlanta back in June, life has just been...weird.

As much as I normally looked forward to Christmas and the holiday break from school, I knew this year was going to be different. Normally we did a bunch of sappy things like going to look at the lights around Birmingham and making cookies, but Momma was rarely at the house anymore because she was always working. Maybe it was to get her mind off the divorce...

I figured since she wasn't going to be at the apartment we'd moved into over the summer anyway, my brother, Landon, and I might as well spend the holiday with my daddy.

Momma had shut that down real quick, and she still hadn't said why. When I'd asked, just like she had been doing all of my fifteen years, her response was, "Because I said so, Landon."

I thought the real reason we couldn't go was because Momma was jealous of the relationship I had with my daddy, but what parent is going to admit to that? It's no secret that I've always been a daddy's girl, and Momma knew better than anyone how much the divorce had hurt me.

I mean, there were no signs at all—no yelling or screaming or anything my friends said their parents had gone through. Our parents just sat me and Landon down one day and told us it was over, then they gave this old tired speech about always loving us and nothing changing.

I had believed them—until everything started changing. Now, it felt like Daddy had divorced me and Landon when my parents had decided to call it quits.

Daddy being in Atlanta was bad enough, but the fact that I rarely talked to him was even worse. When I'd reach out to him, it would sometimes be hours or even days before I heard back—if I heard back at all. After a while, I stopped even trying. I figured he had my phone number just like I had his, and if he wanted to talk, he knew where to find me.

Deep down I kept hoping he would find me and reach out to me. I really missed my dad-

dy. Even now, thinking about everything that had happened over the last few months made want to cry.

During one of the rare times I talked to Daddy, he had let it slip that he called to talk to us all the time, but Momma wouldn't let him speak to us.

I had gotten upset with Momma once and asked why she was keeping Daddy from me and Landon. It looked like she wanted to say something, but then she changed her mind. My gut told me she had told him to leave me and Landon alone, just like she had told him to leave her alone.

"London," my brother, Landon, said, interrupting my thoughts. By the way he was looking at me from the pullout sofa, which doubled as his bedroom since our apartment only had two bedrooms, it wasn't his first time calling my name.

"What?" I snapped, frowning at him and squinting.

He just stared at me. "What's your deal?"

I glared right back at him.

Landon was sixteen, thirteen months older than me, but we were both in tenth grade since he'd had to repeat kindergarten and his birthday came late. Since he was older, he thought he could intimidate me, but that wasn't happening. Not today or any other day. For the most part we got along, but some days, he got on my last nerve.

Since Daddy had left, it seemed like everybody got on my nerves.

"So you're just gonna sit there and not answer my question?" he asked, his voice sounding all deep, which made me laugh. He had just reached the point where it wasn't cracking with every other word.

I started to say something funky, but really what was the point? It wasn't Landon's fault our family was messed up, and I was sitting in this apartment bored out of my mind instead of the huge home we'd had to leave in Calera, which was right outside of Birmingham.

"What did you say? I didn't hear you," I said.

"I said what's your deal?"

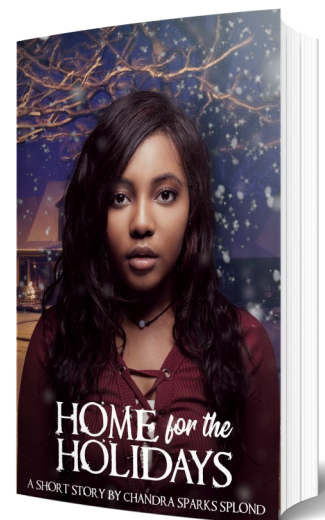
"Oh." That I had heard. "I'm just annoyed," I said, sighing. "Momma messed up our Christmas plans when she wouldn't let us visit Daddy, and we're stuck in this stupid apartment since all she ever does is work. I can't even hang out with Skylar because she's out of town."

"That's messed up," Landon said, focused on his phone.

"What are you doing?" I asked, peeping over his shoulder.

He leaned back and turned his body away so I couldn't see his phone screen.

"Just texting with Zach," he said. He tossed his phone aside and refocused on me.



His words made me sit up straighter and smooth down my shoulder-length hair, like Zachary Kennedy was in the room and could see me. My heart thudded a little harder as I tried to play off how hearing Zach's name made me feel. The last thing I needed was for my brother to find out I had a crush on his best friend.

Landon and I were close, but I didn't think he'd be too happy about that.

He and Zach had been friends for as long as I could remember. For the most part, where you saw one, you saw the other.

At least that's how things used to be—until the last few months. Now I was lucky if I caught a glimpse of Zach in the hallways at school since he rarely came over. I was surprised he and Landon were texting since they didn't hang out that much anymore.

"Is he coming over?" I asked, picking up a book I had tossed on the coffee table and hoping Landon didn't hear the tremor in my voice.

"Nah. He wants to go to the mall." He shrugged like it was no big deal then picked up his phone and started typing again.

"Can I come?" I asked, scooting forward on the sofa.

Landon looked at me and shook his head. "Uh, no."

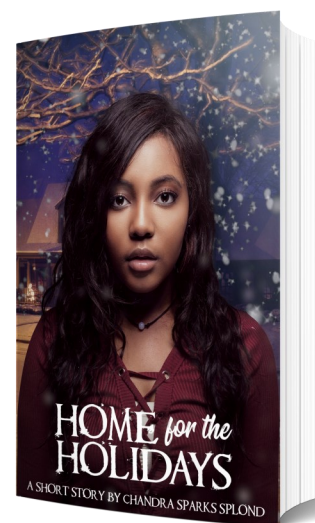
I frowned at him. "Come on, Landon. You know I'm bored. At least at the mall, I'd have something to do for a few hours. Isn't Mason Ridge having that Christmas concert today?"

Every year for Christmas, the Summit mall invited different school bands and choirs from all over the city of Birmingham to serenade shoppers with holiday music. My high school, Mason Ridge, had been participating since I was little, and we always attended. Hearing the choirs was one of those traditions I looked forward to every year with our family, although I really hadn't given it much thought this year.

Landon shrugged. "They're performing at the Summit either today or tomorrow. I can see them play any time though. Besides, we're going to Land Lakes. I was trying to talk Zach into going to the lock-in at church next weekend. You going?"

I didn't even try to hide my eye roll. Like I said, things had gotten weird since Daddy had left. Now, Landon seemed to be going to church pretty much any time the doors were opened, and most of the time, he was trying to drag me with him. It's not like we didn't go to church before Daddy left, but now, Landon insisted we stay there. I didn't see the point. Clearly, God was not thinking about the Bridges family.

Oh, did I forget to mention my name is London Bridges? Yeah, I know there's a song about London Bridge. Trust me, I've heard every joke there is. Obviously, my parents have a sense of humor—or at least they used to. As silly as some folks find my name to be, I think it's pretty cool.



“Well?” Landon said, bringing me out of my thoughts. I racked my brain, trying to remember what we’d been talking about as he glanced at his phone again before flopping back on the sofa and flipping on the television.

We were talking about Zach and possibly him coming to church with us.

“I forgot about the lock-in,” I said. “Is Zach going?”

I had been thinking about not going, but if Zach was going to be there, count me in.

“He said he’ll go if I go to the mall with him.”

I nodded and got up to go to the kitchen. “You want something?” I asked.

Landon hopped up to follow me. “What are you getting?”

I shrugged, peering in the pantry and then the refrigerator. I wasn’t really hungry since we had eaten breakfast a couple of hours ago, but eating gave me something to do to pass the time.

“How about I make some cinnamon rolls?” I said, grabbing the blue tube from the refrigerator door, peeling off the wrapping and whacking it on the counter to pop it open before he could respond.

Landon reached in the cabinet next to the stove and grabbed a cookie sheet then set the oven for 400 degrees while I went to work placing the rolls on the pan.

“Did you see this stuff Momma wants us to do before she gets home?” he asked, nodding at the list on the refrigerator.

I sighed. “Yeah. I saw it. I guess I’ll get started washing the clothes since you won’t let me go to the mall with you.” I threw him a puppy-dog glance, and he rolled his eyes.

“Do you think that’s going to work?” he asked, shaking his head then turning to study the list.

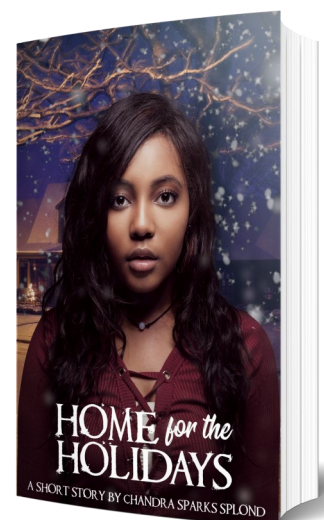
“Maybe,” I said hopefully, then threw him my brightest smile. I had been told it was my best feature. I knew that and the eyes could make Daddy do anything I wanted. Maybe it would work with my brother too—at least this once.

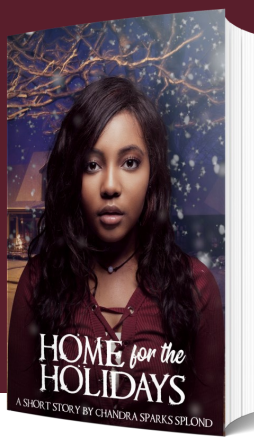
“If you fold the clothes and clean up the bathroom, I might consider letting you go with me,” he said.

“Done,” I said before the sentence was all the way out of his mouth.

Honestly, I was planning on doing both of those things anyway, so it’s not like I was doing extra work. I would have done everything on the list, plus go to church every day for the next month if it meant getting to spend the afternoon with Zach.

Life just couldn’t get any better.





CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

A Short Story



ABOUT THE BOOK

There's no place like home for the holidays—unless you're fifteen-year-old London Bridges who is stuck in her apartment bored out of her mind. When her brother, Landon, decides to go to the mall, London begs to tag along. At least it will get her out of the house, and she'll get to spend time with fine Zachary. Before the day is over, London finds herself valuing those she holds dear and rethinking how she defines home, which just might be the greatest gift of all.

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