Excerpt from *Seasons Change*

The TV was on but turned down so only the echo of *White Christmas* could be heard over our conversation. From the outside looking in it appeared to be an idyllic moment between us. I was bundled up in one of Mark’s old Marine Corps sweatshirts, legs tucked under me on the couch. He was relaxed, one arm draped across the back of the couch while the other absently stroked our dog snoring next to him. He was half dressed for work because he had to head out soon. At the time, he was still working the overnight shift and the only time we had together during the week was the hour and a half between when I returned from teaching and he headed in for the night. We had agreed the day before to sit down with each other during this window of joint time to talk. I remember the muted lighting that I had been complaining about since we bought the house made the living room seem almost romantic. If someone had looked through our windows it would look as though we were just another couple, sitting together to make holiday plans. No one would have guessed what was really going on.

As Mark collected his thoughts, I looked around our house. I’d always been a bit prideful about how our house felt. It wasn’t some stuffy, showroom style home that was going to show up in *Southern Hospitality*, but it was comfortable. It was a home that always had an open door for those that needed it. My inner old Italian nonna would offer to cook for anyone that walked into the house, so it usually smelled like garlic and home cooked meals. Dog beds took up space in every room. Shoes were always by the door, even if they rarely made it to the handmade organizational bench that Mark had built for me. Blankets were draped over the arms of every couch and chair because one of us liked to keep the AC set in a way that penguins would be quite comfortable. After a year and a half in the house it no longer felt like we were just pretending to be adults there; it was finally *our* house.
But that night the house felt sad. It was December and yet we had no decorations out. Our annual personalized ornaments were still packed away in the garage and stockings were missing from the mantel. I knew it made sense not to pull everything out and put up the tree since we wouldn’t even be home for Christmas, but it seemed wrong not to have at least a little holiday décor out. I really should have insisted we decorate. The house should have felt warm, welcoming, inviting for the season. Christmas had always been a big deal to me. I pretty much had tinsel coming out of my ears every holiday season. I loved the magic that seemed to envelope everyone that time of year. It was a big part of why we eloped the day after Christmas 6 years earlier. We got so swept up in the season that it felt right.

But in December of 2018, there was no magic. Our house felt cold instead of festive. Looking back now I can’t help but wonder if the coldness I felt less to do with the weather outside and more to do with the man who was becoming less of my husband and more of a stranger with each passing day. I wish I could remember when everything had changed. Was it when he took on the night shift and we started spending less and less time together? Or maybe it was when his priorities became less about us and more about his virtual gaming world? Could it be that we just were going through the 6-year-itch and we would talk it out and be better on the other side? Or after the tensions of the past few weeks, was my gut right; was Mark about to tell me he no longer wanted to be married?

I swear that night, even the weather was aware something wasn’t right. Overshadowing the holiday music was the sound of rain on the skylight and ominous clouds made the room dark. I debated asking Mark to start up the fireplace in order to warm up the living room just a little, but somehow, deep down, I knew that nothing was going to get rid of the chill I was felt. I wasn’t just cold from the December weather and lack of warm socks. I was cold because for the
first time since we met, I couldn’t find a hint of love on the face of my husband. His normally warm chocolate eyes now looked at me with no spark of desire. I rarely saw the dimples I loved because, if I’m being honest, he rarely smiled anymore. His tightened jawline took on the same appearance that it had when he was in uniform and ready to defend the nation as a Marine. This wasn’t the man who smiled at me while the wind whipped my hair when we stood alone on that Georgia beach when we eloped. This was a whole different person and I no longer had any idea what he was capable of saying or doing.

As the next carol played in the background, Mark looked at me ready to speak. He wasn’t like me. He didn’t spout off based purely on emotions. In fact, there were times I wasn’t sure he even had emotions. His stoic nature was the cause of more than one of our misunderstandings. I don’t say fights because rarely did we actually fight. That’s not true. I would have fought. He refused. He didn’t believe in fighting. He walked away, saying it is what his father taught him to do, and just pretended that whatever I was upset about or whatever he needed to get across to me wasn’t important enough to continue a conversation about. I hated when he would do that. His silence was deafening. It made me feel stupid for having valid concerns about our life together. The day we got the keys to our house was one of those times that stuck with me. While I was excited as could be to get in the house for the first time together, he told me it was more important to get in his workout than come walk through an empty house. There was no room for discussion after that. He made a statement, I had to listen, the end.

The fact that this time he wanted to sit down and have a real conversation about issues should have been a glaringly bright sign to me that things were worse than I could have imagined.
Finally, Mark looked at me. “I don’t think I love you anymore,” he said, “And I don’t think I can find my way back to being in love with you.” His posture was so relaxed he could have been asking me to pick up more almond milk for him at the store the next day; not bringing my world crashing down around me.