The Passages

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While sweeping the entryway, Alex felt herself drifting from this world into another. The faint evening dust sprang from the creaky floorboards and lingered in a cloud around her knees. Clinging to her dress, the soft particles whispered unwelcomed, unwarranted. Brushing her long skirt clean, she paused. A quick glance around confirmed she was alone. Alex dropped the broom and twirled, her skirt blossoming out around her kicking up more dust.

She giggled. Her laugh was warm; she rarely heard it.

Alex had just barely heard the faint knock upon the old oak door. She gasped, and stopped spinning immediately. It would’ve been inappropriate for a woman to answer the door at this hour, but the only other person home was one of her fathers, Morgan, downstairs fixing the erratic furnace. He didn’t appreciate distractions from his work. The rest of the family was out running errands. She checked the clock in the lounge. It would be nearing dusk, and visitors were unusual, but not prohibited at an hour so late. She quickly retrieved the broom from the floor and propped it against the stairway handrail. She crossed to the door, silently cursing her aching feet. She wasn’t yet seventeen, but felt years older from a life of hard work. Everyone was responsible for the upkeep of their home. Even her twelve year old brother, Sydney, pulled his weight.

Alex opened the door to Riley Seay, an older boy from up the lane who caused her nothing but trouble recently. She would have normally slammed the door shut in his face, but there was something different about Riley tonight. He was clutching his reddened cheek, his eyes were wide, and his mouth hung limply. His breath heavy with exhaustion. He gulped in air between words.

“Alex, I’m terribly- sorry.” Riley panted, his sweaty hand gripping the worn, peeling door frame for support. “I had to come here. I don’t got nowhere else that’ll have me. You got to understand.”

“Riley Seay, you get off of my porch and march yourself back up that hill to your house.” Alex sensed the terror in his voice, but she chalked it up to one of his absurd stories. Riley had been coming to Alex’s door for the last few months acting funny hoping to see her. She would’ve gladly accepted his requests, except she knew she couldn’t be seen with a boy because of The Passages. Friendship between boys and girls wasn’t forbidden, but Riley Seay had more than friendship on his mind. “I’ll go crying to your mamas if you don’t leave me alone now.”

“Alex, I just come runnin’ from my mamas’ house,” Riley held strong as
she made to push him out of her doorway. “And they gone and kicked me out. And she stuck me! My mama Kelsey actually struck me. Against the rules and The Passages she laid a hand on another of God’s creatures.”

Riley freed himself of the girl and studied his face in the reflection of the window on the porch. The pain was gone, but the gesture still resonated deep within him. The Passages strictly forbid violence; it would be punishable and judged upon by the heavenly Father. No one accepted violence, not even the wicked ones in town. Bobbi Jewels had once pushed another boy in Sunday sermon, and Pastor Drew had stopped right there and condemned his very soul to the devil. It wasn’t until thirteen long days of public repentance and humiliation he was forgiven.

“And, I don’t blame ‘em,” Alex snapped back, “from what you been thinking about. All those unholy things you’ve been cooking up there in that ungodly head of yours. They’s bound to find out sooner or later.” Riley had suggested the idea to her weeks ago, and Alex was so appalled she took The Passages right there and then and started reading from it. She’d chosen to read the part where God says just how dirty and blasphemous it would be if a man and woman were to lay with one another. Their bodies were made separate from one another and should remain separate.

“I went and told them myself,” Riley cried back at her. “I told my mamas that I didn’t love no man. And that instead, I was in love with the likes of you.”

Alex froze. Had she heard this ungodly creature correctly? He had just renounced his faith right there in front of her. He had just said he was in love with a woman, not another man.

From the ripe young age of three, Alex’s fathers had read from The Passages just as every other parent had done for the last century. They had read to her to show love, to enlighten her in what they expected from her when she’d grown up to become a woman of faith, and like every other parent to bestow fear into the minds of children in order to obey without question. Once, she had been scolded when she had asked that taboo question of child birthing. She had overheard one of Riley’s mamas say she worked in town as a surrogate. Alex became curious as to why some of the women in the county could be with child and some could not. Her daddy Morgan shamed her saying, “Ms. Seay lives a gifted life. Not many are blessed by the Father. Little girl, you respect her and treat her special when you see her.” Alex nodded, wondering if she would be blessed by the Father when it was her time.

The Passages held clear rules as to how followers should lead their lives. Boys would be with boys, and girls would be with girls. It was only logical. The Father had created their bodies so much alike that they had to be meant for one of the same. Alex grew up learning this just as every other child had. The Passages
date back thousands of years before, and for all they knew that was how everyone had always lived.

Despite Alex’s constant resistance to admit her true feelings, Riley had known. He’d known there had been mutual feelings of unspeakable love and even lust ever since she had seen his bare chest (which was also a strict violation of The Passages). This act awakened stirrings that set a string of ill-fated events to occur. Alex had opposed, but Riley insisted. He knew what he felt and knocked on Alex’s fathers’ door asking for her nearly every day since. It had reached a point where Alex could no longer explain to her fathers Riley’s unrelenting call on her. She had begged him to leave her alone, that it was evil and unholy what he suggested. She was a good girl, who listened to Pastor Drew every Sunday at sermon. Why were there devils to tempt her?

Alex had had it. She had to be direct. Beginning with a breathy whisper, she continued, “You are an evil boy committed to damn me to hell along with you.” Her voice rising, “And, I’m gonna go right now and get both your mamas and maybe even Pastor Drew, and you better hope that they’ll all pray for your god damned soul.” She pushed passed the young man and marched down off her porch into the soft spring grass heading for Riley’s mamas’ house. She didn’t really intend to get Pastor Drew involved, and frankly she was scared to. Alex knew for a fact that if Pastor Drew saw what Riley really was he would condemn him to hell and possibly have a public burning or stoning. That was the punishment for all other unholy evil doers.

“You known for a while I must have loved you,” Riley ran to catch up with her, stopping her in her tracks. He smiled painfully under his bruising cheek. “I know you know. And, I also know you feel the same way about me.”

This truly pushed Alex passed her breaking point.

“I do not love you Riley Seay,” she cried. ‘I could never love you. You are a wicked man.” She screamed, her voice hoarse shouting her last word.

Riley stood, dumbstruck by this woman screaming at him on her lawn. It took just one moment for Riley to decide what to do next. He crossed to her, clutched her arms drawing her nearer. Alex pushed him away. She glared back at the boy she had known for years. A boy she now feared would be her downfall. She opened her mouth to speak then closed it. She raised her hand and slapped Riley across the face. It seemed to echo long after she fully realized what she had done. Alex pulled back her hand studying her palm in terror.

“I…” She gasped. Riley’s eyes flicked up over her hand.

“Sir, she didn’t mean nothing by it,” Riley voice cracked with unease. Alex spun around and froze with fear. “I was provoking her.”

Alex and Pastor Drew stared each other down. He had just rounded the corner. He stood at the edge of the lawn, his expression the same as Riley’s had
just been moments previous. Wide eyes, except his lips pursed. He looked furious; his face grew red like it did in on Sundays when he preached a passionate sermon.

“Little girl,” Pastor Drew’s voice was cold. “You get back in that house. You best fetch The Passages, and you better pray that the good Lord is feeling merciful today and overlooks your unholy act of violence.” He did not budge from his post on the lawn. “Now go. You too Brother Seay. Go on home and pray for her soul.”

Riley sank back in defeat. Keeping his eyes on Alex, he passed Pastor Drew toward his mamas’ house. Looking back and forth from the pastor and Alex, he lamented, “Oh, I surely will, sir.”

Alex fumed at Riley’s receding back. She stomped up the steps to her doorway.

Pastor Drew began spouting out verses from The Passages. “The Lord, my ship will carry me to nirvana where earthly afflictions no longer have their hold.” He followed her up her onto her porch, his voice growing louder with each psalm. “He, with fist so strong, but his words so weak will surely be the fault of his own demise.” Alex turned to face the pastor, he stepped forward expecting entry. “Pity those who strike. Love them, though they do not love another.” With this she slammed the door shut upon the preacher man.