

**S.A. COSBY
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MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA PRESENTS

WHEN A STRANGER COMES TO TOWN

**JOE R. LANSDALE
EMILYA NAYMARK
LISA UNGER
BRYON QUERTERMOUS
TILIA KLEBENOV JACOBS
LORI ROY
PAUL A. BARRA
MICHAEL KORYTA
ELAINE TOGNERI
JONATHAN STONE
STEVE HAMILTON
TINA DEBELLEGARDE
JOE HILL**

EDITED BY MICHAEL KORYTA

**A COLLECTION
OF STORIES FROM
CRIME FICTION'S
TOP AUTHORS.**

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HANOVER
SQUARE
PRESS

Michael Koryta is the *New York Times* bestselling author of fourteen novels. His work has been translated into more than twenty languages and has won or been nominated for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, Edgar Award, Shamus Award, Barry Award, Quill Award, International Thriller Writers Award and the Golden Dagger.

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Introduction

When the opportunity to serve as guest editor of the Mystery Writers of America's latest anthology came along, I had one goal for it: give the writers as much room as possible. I wanted to see all of the talent in this genre push in different directions, try some new things, and have some fun.

But what theme would allow for that?

I thought then of a quote that has been misattributed to half the famous writers in history, most frequently to Leo Tolstoy. I'm still not sure who first said it, frankly, and that seems positively ideal for a mystery collection! The quote is: "All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town."

A stranger comes to town. I liked that. I liked how broad it was. The stranger could be the hero or the villain. The town could be welcoming or hostile. It certainly allowed the writers plenty of room to have fun, and maybe stretch in some new directions.

I'm not sure how much fun they had writing the gems that you're about to discover—based on the kvetching I heard about deadlines, which remarkably always seem to be a new discovery to writers—but *I* certainly had an enormous amount of fun reading them.

We range from the wickedest of visits-gone-bad (I'm thinking of Joe Lansdale's dark tale here) to the beautiful and emotional (looking at you, Lisa Unger!) and the spooky and surreal (thanks, Joe Hill!). I could go on about everyone's contribution—S.A. Cosby delivered a particularly delightful read, and, bless him, did it *ahead of deadline!*—but when you're talking about short stories, spoilers are all too easy to offer, and I refuse to rob the reader of the experience.

I'd be remiss, however, not to point out the breadth and depth of the genre's talent at this moment. When the judging committee forwarded to me their selections as winners for this collection, I was awestruck by the quality and excited by how many of these writers were new to me. One of the goals of MWA has always been to nurture and support new voices, and we have some terrific ones here. Of course, you're going to enjoy the likes of Michael Connelly and Alafair Burke and Lori Roy and Steve Hamilton showing off their pro chops and reminding you why they've amassed so

many Edgar Award nominations, but please, please don't skim in search of the names you know; look for the names you might *not* know. I'm certain that from the minute the GPS instructs our protagonist to "exit now" in Emilyya Naymark's lovely chiller, you'll be willing to take the ride with her. Emilyya was a new name to me. Think I'm going to be looking for her work in the future? Absolutely.

The same goes for Smita Harish Jain, who takes us on a journey of morality—and morality policing—in Mumbai. And you probably have heard of Bryon Quertermous by now, but if you're new to his work, you'll understand why I'm a fan after you read this opening:

Howard told me three things before he died:

1. His last name was also Howard
2. The love of his life was a Ukrainian chat girl named Elsa
3. He was psychic

There are nineteen dark treats ahead for you, and my job is to shut up and get out of your way so you can get on to the main event. I know you'll enjoy the show. It was a privilege to be involved with this project, an appreciated chance to see new and different work from some of my longtime favorites, and a chance to be introduced to some I know I'll be reading for years to come.

Onward, then. Somewhere in these pages, an inebriated woman in need is about to slide into a most unusual cab in the desert, a man is saving his 2C boarding pass in the spirit of true love, and a boat called the *Double Tap* is running at 20 knots toward a place called Sheepshead Bay. I think they're all headed for trouble, personally. Turn the page and tell me if I'm wrong.

Michael Koryta

Solomon Wept

by S.A. Cosby

Parrish parked the car in the far corner of the gravel parking lot and killed the engine but it didn't die. It sputtered and coughed for a full minute before it went silent. She pulled down the visor and checked her makeup in the

mirror. The wig was one hundred percent human hair that spilled down her back to the crack of her ass. The heavy rouge and dark lipstick gave her a mysterious look. She'd applied too much foundation on purpose. Her natural amber complexion was now close to olive. She got out of the car into the sultry night air. Beads of sweat appeared as if by magic at the base of her neck and on her chest. Her low-cut skintight red shirt offered scant relief. She grabbed her purse and hurried toward the bar. Her high heels crunching the gravel with every step. Just before she went inside she checked her purse. She knew the gun was in there but she wanted to see it again with her own eyes.

Calling the place a "bar" was a bit of a misnomer. It was more like a juke joint with bar-like aspirations. A bluesy tune was playing on a crackling sound system. She didn't see a jukebox so it must have been the bartender's choice. She went to a booth in the back just past an ancient pool table with netted pockets. A sign above the bar informed patrons that it was a dollar a game and they kept the balls behind the bar. The few patrons in attendance didn't seem to have an interest in billiards. Parrish slipped into the booth and pulled out her phone. It was a burner with just enough minutes to last her through the weekend. Just enough minutes so she could text Jim and Tammy and tell them she had made it into town and was waiting for them at Deacon's out on Route 630. She'd gotten their real names from Curtis a week ago. She'd been out a year and it had taken her almost that long to find him. He'd left the pimp game and was cutting hair in a little nowhere town called Mathews County and dealing on the side. He'd had to switch careers rather abruptly. That's what happened when you were a pimp and one of your girls stabbed a date who was the son of a Richmond city councilman. They'd given Parrish a five-year sentence for stabbing the white boy. She'd tried to tell her public defender the boy had tried to choke the shit out of her and stick a flashlight up her ass but he didn't want to hear it. Neither had the judge.

Good behavior and overcrowding had gotten her out after eighteen months.

Her cell phone vibrated.

We are on our way, the text message said. Parrish sent back a text that indicated she couldn't wait to meet them. Pressing Send made her skin crawl. She got up and went to the bar.

“Hey, darling. What can I get you?” the bartender asked. He didn’t try to pretend he wasn’t giving her the once-over.

“Jameson on the rocks,” Parrish said.

“You want to start a tab?”

“No,” she said and pulled a five out of her purse. The bartender poured her drink and slid the glass over to her. She downed it and went back to the booth.

At first Curtis had pretended he didn’t know who he’d sold her baby to or where they had gone. He’d belittled her. He’d insulted her. He’d laughed at her. He’d tried all the old tricks that had worked when he had been Silky C and she had been on his first string. None of that had bothered her. He didn’t know it but the dynamic between them had changed irrevocably. She wasn’t afraid of him anymore. He was just an old wannabe player standing in the middle of a small kitchenette in a raggedy trailer, heating up some grease to fry some fish, trying to make her feel bad about shit he’d made her do.

“I just want my baby, Curtis.”

“I told you I don’t remember nothing about them motherfuckers. You need to get on back down the road, trick,” he’d said. Parrish had felt the dam inside her break.

“You sold my fucking baby! You ain’t had no right to do that shit!” she’d yelled.

“Bitch, I did that boy a favor. He better off with them white people than with your junkie whore ass,” Curtis had said. She’d gotten in his face then and that was when he had slapped her. A sharp backhand shot that snapped her head back and made her stumble. Back in the day she would have gone and hid for an hour. She would have spent that time trying to come up with a way to get back in his good graces.

That was then. This was now.

He’d had the audacity to turn his back on her. Like he was still the man. What a joke. He’d never been the man and she wasn’t the scared little girl that he’d pimped out of a motel room on Chamberlin Avenue. She’d snatched the pan of grease from the stove.

“You still hit like a bitch,” she’d said. When he turned she had tossed the bubbling oil in his incredulous face with a forehand shot that would have made Serena Williams proud. Once he’d gone down, she’d cracked him on the head with the frying pan. He’d sprawled across the cheap linoleum,

whimpering like a newborn calf. Parrish had found some duct tape and tied his skinny frame to one of the mismatched chairs in his kitchen. At first he'd held on to the lie about who had bought her son. Then she'd gotten the paring knife and a bottle of rubbing alcohol from the bathroom. They had greatly improved his recall. White couple who said their names were Jim and Tammy. They lived in Blue Line County, North Carolina. They were rich and kinky and they didn't mind buying a mixed-race baby who would probably be able to pass for white out the back of a strip club.

Parrish motioned at the bartender. He brought her another Jameson and she handed him another five. She downed this one as quickly as the first.

After Curtis had told her everything, he'd begged her not to kill him. Right up until the moment she'd dropped the knife on the floor she thought she would. She'd held the knife to his throat as he blubbered and apologized before cursing and screaming at her. Telling her she wasn't shit. That she'd always be a "hoe." That was when she realized she didn't have to kill him. He was in the boonies barely eking out a living hustling rednecks for Oxys and Percs. For Silky C this was a living death. She'd ransacked the metal rectangle he called a home. She'd found the gun, \$1500 in cash, a few dozen pills and the keys to the multicolored Oldsmobile Delta 88 he drove. She'd left him there among his tears and regrets.

Parrish's phone vibrated again.

Here. What are you? the text said. Parrish stared at the screen. Another text came through.

Sorry where are you.

She sent one back saying she was in the booth in the back.

It had only taken her a week to find their ad on Craigslist. All she had to do was narrow the search field down to Charlotte and surrounding areas. Curtis had told her what they liked the most. MW4W. AA. A man and a woman seeking a Black girl for adult fun. They even had their pictures in their ad. A thick-neck blond guy and a tight-faced brunette with more plastic than a Barbie doll. She'd searched ads with the keywords *Jim and Tammy*. They had been the second ad on the Blue Line subpage. They traded pics for a week. Finally, they had made a date. She'd talked to them on the phone. They'd been open and excited. They'd told her about themselves. How they

were down for some fun. How they were church leaders. The “Jim and Tammy” thing was an in-joke.

They talked about their kids. The older ones who were grown and off spreading the gospel or their legs in the big bad world. And the little one. Their baby boy.

Their baby.

Parrish saw the front door open. A shaft of light from the pole lamp in the parking lot sliced through the cigarette smoke in the bar. A couple came through the doorway. A short, thick-necked man and tall, tight-faced brunette. Parrish bit down on the inside of her cheek and made herself smile. She waved them over. They both lit up like a Christmas tree when they saw her.

“Well, hello,” Jim said. Parrish got up and hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. Tammy came around and gave her an awkward half hug and kissed her on the cheek. They slipped into the booth, Jim on one side, and Tammy and Parrish on the other.

“It’s so nice to finally meet in person?” Tammy said. She ended the sentence with an interrogative inflection that set Parrish’s teeth on edge. Jim was staring at her like a starving man staring at a slow-moving rabbit.

Just get to the house. Just get to the house. Just get to the house, Parrish thought. Her plan, if she could even call it that, was to get to the house, find her son, flash the gun and leave. That was it. She didn’t have a backup plan and she hadn’t thought about what would happen after she got her boy back. None of that really mattered. She just wanted to hold her son. He was six months old when she went inside. A beautiful ball of laughter and squeals that filled her with joy every time she looked at him. When Curtis had found out she was pregnant he’d told her to get rid of it but she kept putting it off until it was too late. He didn’t care if he was the father or not but a pregnant hooker was a niche market. Curtis wasn’t Dominic’s father. Contrary to popular belief, sex workers were not mindless bags of meat without emotions who didn’t try and take precautions. Dominic’s father was not a date or a client or a john. He had started out as a friend and had evolved into a lover. She’d kept him a secret from Curtis. Not because Curtis would have hurt him but because he would have killed Curtis. Tony worked for Shade Sinclair, kingpin of the Carolinas. Dominic’s father was a mountain of a man who never raised his hand to her. When she had gotten a letter from

her girl Hope telling her Tony had been killed in a drug deal gone bad, she thought that was the worst pain she could ever feel. Until she'd gotten the letter from Curtis telling her he'd sold her son.

"What ya drinking?" Jim asked. He grinned so wide she could swear he had sixty-four teeth. Parrish smiled back.

"Jameson on the rocks," she said. She felt a hand on her thigh. She turned her head and Tammy was smiling too. The skin around her eyes was as tight as a rich man's pockets. Parrish thought Tammy needed to cut back on the Botox.

"Barkeep, three Jameson on the rocks!" Jim yelled. Parrish thought Jim looked just the kind of guy that would call a bartender "barkeep." She didn't hate these people. They might have bought a baby illegally but they didn't know they had stolen her son. She didn't really like them though. Their phoniness was like the rot from roadkill that's been roasting in the sun for a few days. She could almost taste it. She was just a kink for them. An "exotic" Nubian princess they could share.

Well, you do plan on pulling a gun on them, so maybe don't judge them too harshly, a voice in her head intoned.

The bartender brought over a round of drinks. Then another. And another. By the time they had settled up, Jim was red-faced and drooling just a bit. He tossed Tammy the keys and leaned against the passenger side of their Lexus.

"Why don't you girls give each other a kiss," he slurred. Tammy turned to Parrish and moved a lock of hair out of her face. Parrish closed her eyes as Tammy's tongue pushed into her mouth.

"Yeah. That's nice. I like that," Jim said. His breath was coming in ragged staccato bursts.

Just get to the house, Parrish thought.

* * *

The house was a mansion. A tan brick and roughhewn stone monstrosity that could hold every house Parrish had ever lived in stacked on top of each other with room to spare. Jim and Tammy's house sat at the end of a nearly mile-long driveway covered with white peastones and lined with Leyland cypresses. She'd insisted on driving the car she'd stolen from Curtis. She parked it behind the Lexus. She checked her purse again and then got out.

The couple wrapped their arms around her as they all climbed the stone steps to the front door.

The foyer of Jim and Tammy's house was a cavernous expanse with gray marble flooring. Jim playfully squeezed Tammy's and Parrish's backsides.

"Let's get some more drinks," he said. He went to a tall armoire in the corner of the living room. He took out a heavy glass decanter and three whiskey glasses. Tammy kicked off her heels and came up behind Parrish.

"I'm gonna suck your clit like it's a pacifier," she whispered in her ear. Parrish moaned just enough to make Tammy chuckle. She took in the rest of the house; an ornate spiral staircase was to her left. Straight ahead was a hallway that led to the rest of the darkened house. Jim walked toward her on spaghetti legs.

If I was gonna fuck him he probably couldn't get it up, Parrish thought. As if he'd telepathically received her bon mot, Jim tripped, stumbled and dropped the tray of glasses and liquor. The crash was thunderous. The excellent acoustics in the house turned the echoes into a symphony.

"Goddammit!" Jim yelled.

"Jim, the baby," Tammy said. A brittleness to her tone told Parrish this wasn't an unusual occurrence with good old Jim.

Then she heard it. As sharp and as clear as Gabriel's horn.

A child's cry. A child crying, awakened from his sleep and afraid. Her baby boy. Her Dominic.

"You fucking woke him up again," Tammy said.

"Well, go put him back to sleep. I'll... I'll clean this up," Jim said. He shambled off into the darkness. Tammy smoothed back her hair and smiled at Parrish. It was like she was putting on a mask.

"Excuse me for a minute. I'll be right back," she said. Parrish watched her stomp up the stairs. She heard Jim crashing around in the back of the house and before she knew it, her feet were moving and she was climbing the stairs. When she reached the landing, she heard Tammy's voice coming from the last room on the left.

"You better stop that fucking crying. You better lay your ass down. I'm not playing with you, ya little crack baby," Tammy said. A pain grabbed Parrish's guts and squeezed them in an iron grip. Saliva filled her mouth as she walked closer and closer to the open door. She heard a sound like the clap of bare

hands and the cries of the baby, her Dominic, stopped with a frightening suddenness.

Tammy was standing above his bed with her hand raised. The room was a baby boy's fantasy. It was filled with so many toys Parrish could barely see the floor. All manner of cartoon characters populated the walls in framed posters. Tammy was standing at an angle that afforded Parrish a view of the toddler's tiny face. She locked eyes with him and she knew that this was not a rare occurrence either. Tammy noticed her and turned to face her.

"Kids. They need discipline," Tammy said.

"Yeah," Parrish said.

She reached inside her purse and pulled out the gun. A six-shot revolver. A .32 or maybe a .38. She wasn't sure. She aimed it at Tammy.

"What are you—" Tammy started to say but Parrish shot her in the throat. Her last words with that interrogative intonation reverberated in Parrish's head. Dominic started crying again as Tammy crumpled to the floor. Hard footsteps pounded up the stairs. Parrish stepped out of the room just as Jim hit the landing.

"What the fuck was that?" Jim asked.

"This," Parrish said. She shot him in the stomach. He stumbled backward but caught himself and started to advance on her. She shot him again and this time he dropped like a wet sheet falling off a clothesline. Parrish went back into the room and stepped over Tammy.

"Hey. Hey shhh it's okay. I gotcha now. Mama got you," she cooed at the boy. He was having none of it. He screamed and screamed even as she hugged him to her chest. Tammy's last words floated up from the lake of her memories. She could see her eyes stretched as wide as the Botox would allow.

What are you.

* * *

Parrish had to drive around Blue Line County for thirty minutes before she found the sheriff's office. All the driving had put Dominic to sleep. He was curled up in his blanket in the passenger's seat with his plump thumb in his mouth. An unruly mop of blackish-brown curls on top of his head. A gift from his daddy.

Parrish parked the car in the parking spot farthest from the door of the sheriff's office. The area around the sheriff's office was the only place she'd seen in the whole county with sidewalks and streetlamps. To the west was the town grocery store and pharmacy. To the east was the courthouse and what she assumed was the fire station. Parrish leaned over the center console and kissed Dominic on the forehead.

She got out the car and left the keys in the ignition. She started walking east. She had traded her heels for a pair of Tammy's workout athletic shoes. They were snug but they were better than heels. She walked until she passed the grocery store and the sidewalk ran out. She saw a sign up ahead that said the interstate was five miles if she turned right on Route 609. She pulled out her burner. She dialed 911.

"Blue Line Sheriff's Office," the female voice said.

"There's a little boy asleep in a car in your parking lot. He needs a good home. He needs a good mama," she said. Before the dispatcher could ask any questions, she ended the call and dropped the phone. Parrish stomped on it and started walking again. She thought she might start to cry but all her tears seemed to have gotten lost on the way to her eyes.

* * * * *

Relative Stranger

by Amanda Witt

When the doorbell rang, Glory Crockett was up to her elbows in flour and Crisco. She took five seconds to finish crimping the edges of the last piecrust, shot a glance at the oven timer—one minute and thirty-eight seconds, and the pies wouldn't quite be done even then—and headed for the front door, snatching up a dish towel to wipe her hands as she went.

The floor gave off a hollow echo underfoot; the house was old, a shinglesided farmhouse plunked down alone in a quarter section of wheat and cotton fields. Owen's grandparents had modernized periodically, but time had a way of passing. The kitchen boasted white-painted aluminum cabinets, and the dishwasher was a portable that had to be pulled in from the mudroom and hooked with a hose to the kitchen faucet. The bedrooms were small, the walls thin, and skunks kept wriggling into the crawl space and setting up housekeeping there.

But Glory loved the place; she loved everything about it. For one, it held generations of Crockett family history. For another, it was bought and paid for. She and Owen were one hundred percent debt-free.

They'd made some upgrades—brought the electrical and plumbing up to code, installed ceiling fans. Glory tipped up her face as she passed beneath one, its breeze fluttering her dark hair and, more to the point, drying the sweat on her brow.

This was the thing that stunned their town friends, even more than did their lack of internet or cell phone coverage: the Crocketts didn't have central air. And it did get hot in North Texas; there was a reason the Wichita Falls bicycle race was called the *Hotter'N Hell Hundred*.

But the Crocketts had more means of relief than any other generation who'd lived on their farm. They had the ceiling fans, and plug-in box fans and a couple of loud rattly window units if they got really desperate. And they had screen doors to catch the breeze, and strategically planted trees, and old-fashioned window shades pulled down tight on whichever side of the house currently faced the Texas sun.

At the moment the sun was in the west, so the living room was dark save for watery blue light filtering in through three narrow vertical windows in the front door.

Through those windows Glory could see a man standing on her front step. He was looking back toward the gravel road, his face in profile, and for a split second Glory thought it was her husband.

One of the boys must have locked the storm door—they did that sometimes, locking each other out, grinning through various windows before slipping out the mudroom door to round the house and pounce. As for why Owen would be home this time of day, well, there could be any number of reasons—tractor trouble, fences down, what have you. And Owen never grabbed what he needed from the barn or tractor shed without swinging by the house to say hey. He and Glory might be cresting their thirties and raising four kids, but they still had a spark.

Glory pushed her hair out of her face and smiled, was still smiling as she reached for the doorknob.

The man on the step turned and looked straight at her. Glory's heart gave a startled thud; her cheeks flushed hot.

She and Owen had been married fourteen years. She knew every angle of his face, every scar on his body, every expression, gesture, posture, mood. How could she possibly have confused him, even for a heartbeat, with a stranger?

For this was a stranger, a man she'd never seen before in her life. Glory was sure of that, just as she was sure he wasn't actually looking at her—the reflective window film worked like a one-way mirror.

But he certainly appeared to be looking at her, and he certainly bore a resemblance to Owen, though not as strong as that first glance had suggested. They both had deep-set blue eyes and thick dark blond hair, and their general build was the same, but this stranger was older, or at least had lived a harder life. He might once have been better looking than Owen; he had that air of conscious charm that formerly handsome men so often wore. Formerly handsome men, and grifters. Used-car salesmen and the like.

The stranger raised one hand to his forehead, shielding his eyes as if that might help him see through the window and into the house. "Glory?" he said.

He knew her name.

Maybe that should have been reassuring, but Glory's mouth went dry. She wanted to turn the dead bolt, then run back through the house to slam and lock the other outside door, too. But that was silly—this man clearly wasn't some random stranger, but an unmet relative of Owen's, and anyway, the kids were outside somewhere, and Glory wasn't about to lock herself in and her boys out, not ever, but especially not with a stranger on the front stoop.

In the kitchen, the oven timer began to beep. She pulled open the solid door.

"There you are," the man said easily, smiling at her through the screen of the storm door. "Owen told me to come on inside." He was wearing jeans, boots and a lightweight chambray button-down over a T-shirt—the clothes of a workingman, although now, without the distorting blue tint of the windows, Glory saw that his flesh was pale.

The stranger glanced off to his left, toward the barn. "Owen said he'd be right on in. Said you'd give us some ice tea before we head back out."

Glory leaned way over, near the screen, giving herself a line of sight. She still couldn't see the outbuildings, but sure enough, Owen's battered pickup sat on the sandy pull-around, half-hidden by the silvery propane tank and

the giant lantana bush, where he always parked when he needed something from the barn.

The sight sent relief tingling through her veins, followed by annoyed embarrassment. Glory was a perfectly capable woman, and not the nervous sort. It was that brief moment of misidentification that had unnerved her, she thought, that visceral sense of solid ground turning to quicksand beneath her feet. She still hadn't quite regained her footing.

And so she hesitated one moment more. "What's Owen doing?" she said.

"Looking for something to jury-rig the tractor." The man grinned. "Actually, to jury-rig the hell-forsaken motherless son of a waffle iron, if you want to know the truth."

Glory smiled. "Owen's a master of creative cussing," she said, slinging the dish towel over her shoulder to free both hands, and the man stepped back as she unlatched the storm door and pushed it open.

"And he always was good with a wrench," the stranger said, moving past Glory into the house, so close she could feel the heat of his body intensified by the heat he'd absorbed while standing on her concrete stoop in the sun. He felt hot and he smelled hot, but he also gave off a faint smell of something else, something unpleasant—not sweat, dirt and machine oil, a combination with which Glory was intimately familiar, but something sharper and uglier.

"Owen can fix anything," she agreed absently—trying to identify that odor: sharp, foully organic, like he somehow was sweating ammonia—and in fact, Owen could. Like many small farmers, he scorned modern equipment in favor of old machines that could be fixed with baling wire and a can-do attitude. New machines, with their proprietary this and that, their computerized motherboards, their high-tech electronics, required a phone call to the dealer, diagnostic software, specially ordered parts, an appointment with a certified repair tech. And in the meantime, fields sat fallow or crops rotted unharvested.

In the kitchen, the oven timer continued its relentless beeping.

"Sounds like you're busy," the stranger said, glancing around the dimly lit room as he moved toward the kitchen. "Don't let me keep you."

"It's the pies," Glory said, and because she was hoping Owen would hurry on to the house, because she didn't want to sit through a glass of tea and piece of pie alone with this too-charming stranger who smelled of—