



The  
**Farang**  
Affair

By J.F. Gump

# THE FARANG AFFAIR

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## CHAPTER I

### *Phitsanulok, Thailand*

Somjit Chutima glanced at her watch; it was almost eight o'clock. Daylight had faded and the geckos, frogs, and other night creatures were warming up for another evening of chirping, croaking, and mating.

Somjit stirred at the overcooked food she had been nursing on the hotplate since seven. She knew she should throw it away but she was afraid to do that. Her husband would be hungry when he got home; he would be angry if his supper wasn't waiting.

She grabbed a piece of the overcooked pork with her chopsticks, brought it to her nose and sniffed. It wasn't anything her husband would eat, she was sure of that. She put the bite in her mouth, chewed once, and then spit it back into the pan. Definitely nothing she wanted to eat either.

She glanced at her watch again. If Nong came home soon, there would still be time to buy food from a street vendor. It wouldn't cost much and it would be a lot better than what was on the hotplate. She reached into the front pocket of her slacks. She knew from the shape and size of the coin that it was a ten baht piece, about 25 U.S. cents. Not enough even for the cheapest of meals.

She considered her options. If she threw the food away and Nong didn't have thirty or forty baht in his pocket, there would be no dinner and he would be angry. On the other hand, he would be just as angry if she kept the food and he couldn't eat it. If he was angry enough, he might even make her eat it.

The thought of having to eat the entire pan of the over-

cooked pork made up her mind. She switched off the hotplate, picked up the pan, and walked to the door. The baby kicked hard as she stepped outside. With a kick like that, she knew it would be a boy.

She looked down the street. In the dim glow of the street-light she saw the neighbor's dogs lying at the edge of the dusty lane. She walked to them and dumped the still-steaming food on the ground. The dogs sniffed cautiously and then proceeded to eat. The way they curled their lips away from the heat made them look like they were grinning.

Somjit smiled and turned back toward her house. At least the rats wouldn't get it, she thought.

The rats—Somjit hated the rats. Rats had killed her parents. Not directly, but they had killed them just the same.

Six years earlier, when Somjit was just fifteen, her mother and father had become infected by leptospirosis, a disease known to Thai farmers as rat fever. The fever is caused by a dangerous combination of open wounds and rat urine in the rice paddies. It infects a surprising number of rice field workers each year. Most recover, some don't. Her parents didn't. Their deaths had changed her life completely.

From the day Somjit was born until the year she turned twelve, she had lived in more places than she could remember. Her mother and father had been laborers for one of the largest construction companies in Thailand. Working for a large company didn't mean they were better paid, only that they had jobs as long as they were able to work. Her family had migrated from construction site to construction site living in temporary camps built by the company for its workers.

The labor camps were nothing fancy, long narrow buildings erected from bamboo, scrap lumber, and corrugated sheets of steel. Paper-thin walls divided the shacks into small, one-room cubicles. Furniture was sparse to none. Cooking was done on hotplates or charcoal grills. Privacy between

neighbors was minimal while privacy amongst family members was nonexistent. But it was the only life Somjit knew and she was happy.

Then, three months before her thirteenth birthday, her father broke his leg and was confined to bed. Her mother continued to work while Somjit stayed home and tended her father.

A few weeks later the construction project was finished and the company moved on. Somjit and her family stayed behind. They would catch up later, after her father's bones had mended and he was out of his cast. They knew it could be a long time.

Somjit and her mother took jobs in the rice fields. It was hot, backbreaking drudgery but it earned them a living. When her father's cast finally came off, he, too, joined them in the paddies. His leg muscles had withered from months of disuse and he walked with a noticeable limp. It seemed like forever before his strength returned to normal.

The right time to chase the construction company eluded them and the weeks turned into months. Their farmhand wages were small, but with three incomes they lived. In time, their old life in the labor camps became faded memories.

A sharp knock at the door jerked Somjit from her reverie. She turned to look.

"Hello, it's only me." Nok, a young woman from down the street, stepped inside.

"You scared me!" Somjit's heart pounded. "I thought you were my husband."

"Actually, I came to see if my own husband was here," the girl said. "I think they are out together. I hope Prem is not with another woman. He has done that before and I hate him for it."

Somjit was worried, too, but not about another woman. She was worried about her own husband's attraction to

drugs.

"I'm sure they stopped to have a beer after work. They will be home soon." Her words came out more confident than she felt.

"I hope so. If he is with some whore, I'll kill him. I worry about the diseases he might bring home."

Somjit didn't know what to say, so she said nothing.

After an uncomfortable silence, the girl finished her thought. "First, I will cut off his penis."

Somjit smiled. "That's like cutting off your nose to spite your face. Don't you think?" She had heard that saying somewhere and now seemed an appropriate time to use it.

The girl squirmed. "Well, maybe I wouldn't do that. But if he brings some disease home, I will kill him."

Somjit nodded her understanding. "Me too."

Her friend left without further comment.

Once the girl was gone, Somjit's thoughts returned to her past. By the time she turned sixteen, she had lived on the rice farm for two years. It was the longest time she had ever lived in one place. She had made new friends and had an acceptable, although limited social life. It was a time of her life she would never forget.

The farm owner had a daughter who was less than a year older than Somjit. In time they had become friends and the girl shared what she was learning in school. Before long, Somjit learned to read and write and do basic math. It was the only real education she ever had.

Then, in the last half of her fifteenth year, Somjit's world was turned upside down. First the farmer's daughter was sent away to a private school in Bangkok for advanced education and Somjit's own schooling came to an end. Not much later Somjit's parents and a few other field workers became sick with the rat fever. Three of them died, two were her parents. Within three days their bodies were cremated and smoke and

ashes and memories were all that remained.

Somjit couldn't survive on her own so she left the farm. She spent the next two years wandering from place to place, living with any relative or family friend who would allow her to stay. She had enough relatives, but they were strangers to her. When she was younger, she had met a few of her aunts, uncles, and cousins at weddings, funerals, and infrequent visits to their hometown; but she had only met them and didn't really know them. Still, they were family and they were all she had. They gave her a place to sleep as long as she worked. Most of her pay was exchanged for their hospitality.

As time passed, Somjit had matured into a very attractive young woman. Tall and slender, yet bulging in all the right places. The men noticed—and she noticed that they noticed—but she never gave them a second thought. They only wanted sex and Somjit knew the trouble that could bring.

By the time Somjit turned eighteen, she was living with her great aunt, her grandmother's sister. Her great aunt was old and she was odd. Some relatives made jokes about her aunt and called her crazy, but Somjit didn't find her any crazier than most people she knew. In fact, she liked her great aunt very much. Over the years the old woman had saved enough money to live modestly.

Like the rest of her relatives, her aunt insisted that Somjit work. Unlike the others, she also insisted that Somjit read and study. Living with her great aunt provided a much needed sense of stability.

Six months after moving in, her aunt fell and broke her hip. After that, everything changed. The old woman shifted her focus from education to matchmaking. One young man of whom she was especially fond was the choice she made for Somjit. He was thin, muscular, and handsome. His name was Nong.

After a few days of feigned shyness, she agreed to the marriage and she and Nong became husband and wife. Two

months after the marriage, the old woman died, leaving Somjit and Nong to make their way in the world.

Somjit inherited most of her great aunt's money but it was a trifling sum. She and Nong spent it quickly, as young people are apt to do. When the money was gone, they both went to work for her father's old construction company.

During the last year and a half, they had worked at three different construction sites before landing in Phitsanulok. Seven months ago, Somjit had learned she was pregnant. Two months ago, when she was no longer able to do her job, she had quit working. With their income cut in half, the few extras to which they had become accustomed came to an end.

Lately Nong had seemed embarrassed, even disgusted, by the sight of her pregnancy and refused to be seen with her in public. During the last few months he had changed from an oversexed husband who couldn't go more than two days without making love, to a man who wouldn't give her a second glance.

Somjit often wondered if he had a girlfriend on the side. She had hinted at that once and was rewarded with a beating that had left nasty bruises on her face, arms, and back. She had never mentioned a *mia noy*, a minor wife, again. She prayed Nong would treat her nicer after their baby was born.

Nong would be home soon. The thought pulled her from her mental meandering. She stepped through the doorway into their labor camp room to wait.

Thirty minutes later Nong arrived. His eyes were blood-shot and his pupils dilated. She smelled neither whiskey nor beer on his breath. She hoped he hadn't been using drugs again.

Both of them had experimented with drugs when they were first married. They had stopped after Nong had beat a man nearly to death over an incident so trivial that neither