

THE LOW SEASON

By

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Black clouds had been building above the island all afternoon, and when the sky finally broke just after sunset the torrent was deafening. The rain thudded into the ground, churning the parched dirt into thick mud, sizzling on the gas torches that lit the hotel's patio. Two Thai girls in close-fitting flowered dresses hurried to move the few guests' dinners to the shelter of the inner patio's roof. Behind them, Panraphi the hostess followed. "Phitsamai and Abhasra will reset your places," she told the guests as the waitresses smiled and bobbed their heads apologetically. Beyond the patio, the sea hurled great fists against the dark shore.

In the kitchen, Udom smoked, craning his head back to let the vapors drift lazily from his mouth. On most nights, he dropped the kitchen waste for the dogs, but it was the low season, so they went hungry. Their wet noses twitched expectantly in the doorway until a vicious thunderclap sent them yelping into the darkness. He spat after them, frowning. *We are all dogs*, he thought, turning back to wipe the counter again, *dogs of the farang, to scramble after their crumbs*.

"Udom. Udom!"

"What?" he called to Abhasra angrily, setting his cigarette carefully on the counter. He did not have money for many more.

"The French want more ice cream. Strawberry this time."

"I will bring it."

Opening up the failing cooler at the rear of the kitchen, he carved out two scoops and set a third for himself on the counter before leaving to prostrate himself before the *farang*. He crossed the patio quickly, the bowls cold pits in his palms. The guests, a Scandinavian couple and two retired French

sisters, had been the bungalow's only residents for the past week. They spoke to each other in their common tongue of hesitant English as he approached.

"Did you hear about the killing?" the sister with dark hair asked, clutching her napkin as they shook off the rain and took their new seats. Jewelry clattered heavily on the tabletop.

"Beaten with bare hands!" the Scandinavian's wife replied.

Her husband grimaced. "The Thais say it is unlucky, the reason the rains come so far out of season."

Udom placed each bowl carefully in front of its owner, sliding a small silver spoon into the rich cream, stepping back, and bowing. The French laughed. "Oh, thank you, you didn't have to do all that," one said before turning back to her companions. "I've heard that the island's mountain is sacred?"

"You are welcome," Udom said to them in Thai, and stole a glance at Panraphi as he turned to go. The waitresses chattered at the edge of the patio, Phitsamai covering her mouth and clutching Abhasra's arm tightly, squinting her eyes to avoid laughing until Udom withdrew.

He stalked into the kitchen and tore off his apron. Laugh at him. At him! When they ran around like tramps, all of them. What could they do, carry drinks? Ride the backs of swaying motorcycles with their arms around the thick middles of drunken *farang* to the bungalows down the road? He paced back and forth, remembering his cigarette and throwing it into the night when he found it burnt down, followed by the melting ice cream. One dog, its coat glistening in the rain, returned to nose the oozing pustule hesitantly, then looked up at him.

"Get away..." Udom began loudly, then softened. The low season was hard enough for men. "I have nothing to give you this night. Tomorrow things may be better." There would be flooding tomorrow—ground parched from weeks of drought could not absorb the torrent outside—and the dogs would find plenty to eat in the morning.

Phitsamai entered the kitchen. "That's all they talk about, the killing. Don't they have murders in other countries?"

"This one happened in paradise," he growled. "But they will forget in a few days when they move to their next resort."

"Do you think it was a *farang*?" she asked.