

*Jakarta, Indonesia, 1968. Amid seduction, KGB plotting, and life in the lush gardens of Java and Bali, a Russian ballerina fights for her freedom. To help, her American friend Ruth must contend with the misogyny of the U.S. foreign service.*

## **A Tangle of Vines**

By Patricia Bragdon

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# A TANGLE *of* VINES

PATRICIA BRAGDON

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## **Chapter One**

### **Jakarta, Indonesia, 1968**

After ten thousand miles and three weeks of sea and air travel on the way from Washington to Jakarta, the Fairchilds were tired. “Almost there, Ruth! The end is in sight -- well, the end of the beginning anyway.” Mark Fairchild spoke quietly to his wife Ruth, as the plane came to a stop and the crew began to open the doors. Heat rushed in, full of humidity and the scents of an old tropical city — dust, fetid canal water, sewage, vegetation, sweat- - in an overwhelming miasma.

There were only a few passengers on the plane, and the Fairchilds gathered their belongings slowly and descended the roll-up stairs to the tarmac, Zoe their cat quiet in her carrier. Immigration and Customs went fast, with no complications — bless those diplomatic passports, thought Ruth gratefully—and they were quickly out in a hot shabby waiting area, noisy and crowded.

“Hey, Fairchilds! Over here!” someone yelled over the din and they were engulfed in a little group of greeters — “Give me your baggage claim tickets” from a burly man, red-faced, balding, and sweating copiously in the suffocating building “I’m Joe Forrest. Welcome to Jakarta, this is Bunahwan, our driver, let’s get outta here. Car’s outside, you must be tired, let’s get you home.”

The black van was generously air-conditioned; Zoe’s box went in first, and she settled down to sleep. The luggage was loaded — just a couple of large suitcases, most of

their belongings would come later by sea—and the van pulled out into the chaos of daily life in Jakarta in 1968. Heavy traffic of cars, trucks and bicycle rickshaws, rough pavement, incessant honking, and crowds of people pushing into the road delayed their passage — reminders that the island of Java was one of the poorest and most heavily populated places in the world.

Mark and Ruth were quiet on the ride to their new quarters. Joe, still mopping his bald head, kept up a steady monologue, pointing out interesting sights “Over there, see the chairs under the flamboyant trees? Those belong to the outdoor barbers. They usually work in the early morning when it’s cool — shave, haircut, and gossip. Barbers all the same everywhere, I guess.” Old barber chairs set in casual rows, mirrors nailed to tree trunks, people sitting in the shade with kids buzzing around them, all made for a picturesque spot.

At last, the van pulled into the driveway of a house where a group of servants stood at the door smiling and waving. Weary, Ruth thought of films with the loyal servants waiting outside the castle door for the arrival of the master and his family, although this was an Asian version and the servants were strangers, still to be met and evaluated. How do I do this? I have never had a servant other than a weekly cleaner, never lived a life where others performed services for me and depended on me for their livelihood. I wish Leonie were here. My big sister--why did she have to go? She always knew what to do. If it weren't for Mark's yen to see the world, we'd still be in Oak Park and my sister might still be alive.

Although this was the Fairchild's third post, Ruth still wasn't sure about the gypsy caravan aspect of life in the foreign service. From the outside, it had seemed exciting and invigorating, new places, new people, new challenges. Hard to be bored and intolerant living this way, she had thought, but she had begun to see a different and less agreeable side lately. The structured social hierarchy of embassy life troubled her now, with a person's rank determining so many things—the size of the family's quarters, the people with whom you could socialize, the events to which you would be invited, and the unspoken but clear message that you and your family must obey your superior officer and even his wife. The competition and the gossip of such a small inbred community could be vicious and inescapable.

Feminist voices were beginning to be heard frequently though still faintly in foreign service posts around the globe, where younger wives were beginning to chafe at the restrictions placed on them. "Two for the price of one", the State Department's policy of requiring unpaid labor from wives, was being called into question often now, and the section on an officer's performance appraisal grading his wife was widely mocked and ridiculed, as was the "marriage rule" preventing a married woman from becoming a foreign service officer. You know, Leonie would have fought that rule, Ruth thought. She would have done everything she could to bring it down, to help women to achieve parity, and discomfort the fossils in State. I wish she were with me now. But, thanks to that bully of a director, she had been on the road in a snowstorm, on the way to a ballet performance. Yes, she had loved dance. Yes, she had loved being part of the company. But no-one



should have had the power to force that group out into terrible weather just because they needed the ticket money. And she died there in the cold and darkness.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Ruth suddenly realized that Joe, still chatty, was opening the car door now, fussing around like an over-solicitous real estate agent, and pointing out features of the house: "It's new! It's nicer than the older houses here. You've got two bedrooms, a living room and a dining porch, plus a screened porch. Come in, come in, let me show you around!"

Her first impression was of enervating heat in the house. Wobbly fans hung from high ceilings, wide-open windows with bars — ornamental ones, but bars nonetheless. Walking to the window, Ruth could see a mango tree outside, with nothing else in the garden but grass surrounded by a white stucco fence, barred also. The civil disturbances were two years past; surely things were settled now, she hoped, and there was less need for bars. Inside were pale cream terrazzo floors, white plaster walls, and heavy dark wood doors with solid locks to close at night.

The two fans spun shakily on long stalks from the faraway ceiling, a large potted palm stood in a corner with a note attached — "Welcome from the Admin Office!", standard government-issue Danish modern furniture, we had that sideboard at our last post, she thought ..., two enormous bedrooms, air-conditioned to Arctic chill, two generic bathrooms, everything pleasant and anonymous, seeming to wait for Mark and her to bring it into focus with their personalities.

Joe, still overly-friendly, nattered on without pause for breath or thought, and she heard Mark's voice interrupting him "Are these all the keys? I count three outside doors--shouldn't there be another key?"

"Yeah" replied Joe "seems to be one missing--should be three, only two here... not sure which door...I'll check on that later... Car will pick you up tomorrow morning, Mark ... Ruth, my wife will come by ... there's stuff in the refrigerator ... "People swirled around them and, at last, she sat down and said "Please — I don't feel well. I think it's the heat." and the crowd melted, leaving her, Mark, and the caged cat alone in the living room.

They sat quietly for a while, trying to feel the ambiance of the house; there was subdued chatter from the kitchen and a rear courtyard where the servants were now congregated, and the cat suddenly yowled; she needed to get OUT of the box. Mark got up and let her out into the living room from her traveling cage, then returned to the sofa next to Ruth. He took her hand and said "So? Here at last. Thoughts?"

"Oh, relieved to be here. Wondering how we'll fit in, what it'll be like."

Mark sighed, and responded "Yeah, I know. A bit strange, walking into someone else's job this way, especially after that interview at the Department when they told me why we were pulled out of Paris so suddenly, and the hints of funny business going on here." Ruth thought -- well, at least it got us away from the "funny business" going on

with you and chère Marie Ange in Paris! Innocent, I'm sure, but given a bit more time ...

Mark, a US foreign service officer, had been assigned to Jakarta to replace the former economic counselor who had disappeared in a swimming accident some months earlier. A group of friends — mostly staff members from the US embassy and the UN mission in Jakarta—had been spending a weekend at a beach resort on the Indian Ocean. After a boozy, convivial dinner, some members of the group decided to go for a swim in the ocean despite the dangerous reputation of the beach. It was a moonlit night, and the breaking waves were full of luminescence, every splash producing magical sparkles. The group swam for a while enjoying the magic, but soon realized that the tide was rising and the pull of the current was dangerously strong. When the group re-assembled on the beach, one of their number was missing — Paul Faber, the embassy economic counselor. No-one could remember seeing him after they entered the water. Accounts were confused, some people had had too much to drink, and it wasn't clear how many people had actually been in the water. Investigations were inconclusive, and Paul's body had never been found. Inevitably there was gossip.

They sat quietly for a while, then "Joe seems alright," Mark said reflectively, "but I don't know--what was all that business with the key? Could be something not so pleasant under all that hail-fellow hotshot realtor stuff. Well, let's see what the welcome committee put in the refrigerator, and if there's a drink. At least it won't be airline food!"

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"Was Joe one of the swimming party that night?" Ruth asked.

"I don't know", Mark replied as he headed for the kitchen. "Seems to be a whole lot of confusion about that. Hey, there's beer in here! Want one?"

## Chapter Two

### Visitors

The working day begins early in the tropics. The embassy van gathered Mark into its load of bureaucrats at 6.30 the next morning, while the cook waited at the kitchen door for orders from Ruth — what does the family want to eat for the day? And for Zoe the cat? Suleiman, the cook, was stropping a large knife on a leather strap as he waited for a list. Ruth hastily checked the refrigerator for any supplies already put in by the welcome committee and wrote a list for Suleiman, who took it and disappeared hurriedly out the door. He left his knife on the counter; Ruth, noticing it, wondered why he felt he needed to be sharpening it so theatrically, and why he hadn't taken it with him. Zoe, stretching and chirping, strolled into the kitchen; she had passed the night in the air-conditioned bedroom with Ruth and Mark, and was ready to get acquainted with her new post.

The morning went fast for Ruth, learning the names of the soft-voiced servants who would work for them, and exploring the house. In addition to “their” rooms, there was a large rear courtyard with several small servants’ rooms and an Indonesian bathroom along the rear wall, and a tall damp-stained concrete wall at the side. The house was roofed in red tiles, curved to fit over one another and, as Ruth would discover, fragile and prone to breaking.

Five servants had been employed for them by the embassy’s administrative office in advance of their arrival — two men and three women. The men servants wore

simple white cotton trousers and shirts, while the women wore the graceful female Indonesian garb of *kain* —long batik-printed sarong-like skirts, with cotton or lace blouses called *kebaya*.

Ruth heard a car in the driveway, and a servant ran to open the door for a guest. In swept a tall blonde carrying an extravagant bunch of orchids which she thrust at Ruth, saying "Welcome to the armpit of Asia! I'm Gwendolyn Edwards but everyone calls me Gwen, my husband is a political officer at the embassy, and we live just down the street. Don't be too impressed by the orchids — they are common as marigolds here! May I have a glass of water, please? And then, I will answer all your questions and probably some you haven't thought of yet."

Ruth, a bit overwhelmed by the visitor's personality and appearance — cat's-eye glasses, backcombed dyed blonde hair, clanking gold bangles, and a vividly patterned mini dress — started for the kitchen to fetch the water but Siti, the youngest of the servants, was there with it and another servant had taken the orchids, so she and Gwen settled themselves on nearby chairs and Gwen rattled on with the usual making-acquaintance questions:

"Where are you coming from?" She got right down to business.

"Mark was posted to Paris, to the OECD. He's an economist, so it was a great place for him. I loved it, who wouldn't?"

"Did you mind leaving? I mean — Paris!"

"Yes and no. Paris is awfully expensive, and the job was very competitive. We hardly saw one another for three years. So much for the romance of Parisian life!" Ruth didn't mention the developing problem of Marie Ange, the pretty secretary. "But Jakarta is a promotion for him and a good chance to work in a developing country. I don't know what I think yet— I've never been in Asia before!"

"Any plans to get involved in charity work or fundraising for pet projects here? The leper colony gets you lots of points with the powers-that-be!" Ruth had been through this in other posts; it was the standard new colleague quiz.

"Leper colony? Not sure I would be up for that ...anything else I could do? I would like to get involved in something helpful, but I need to find my feet first. My sister was killed last winter, and I am still finding my way without her."

"Oh, I'm so sorry about your sister! What a terrible loss!"

"Thank you. We were close -- she was my "big sister", my leader in everything. She was a dancer, and I hope to learn something of the dance culture in Indonesia -- it would be a way to stay close to her now. Perhaps there would be some way into that world and something I could do to be helpful -- fundraising, maybe?"

"I think there are a couple of wives who are involved with the Javanese dance group here -- Helke Ramsey for example. She might be helpful. And there's always tennis and bridge, and gossip of course. Lots of that around this year! Hmm — let's see — did I mention the feral cat rescue?" But then Gwen, leaning forward and lowering her

voice confidentially, said something surprising — “I am going to be indiscreet and warn you right now to be careful. This place is a nest of vipers! The current ambassador has pretty much left, only shows up occasionally, and Congress doesn't approve of any of the names submitted to them and won't confirm anyone -- so competing factions here have a free hand to run the place, and the gossip is vicious. Don't trust anyone! “

Ruth was surprised -- such candor wasn't normal in her experience of foreign service posts--and didn't reply immediately and Gwen went on "also, there's quite a lot of discontent being stirred up by reports of demonstrations against the Vietnam war back home, and some wives are becoming quite outspoken about the lack of opportunities for women in the foreign service. And the department won't allow married women to serve as FSOs!"

"Oh, yes, a woman officer in Paris got married and had to resign!" Ruth said. "The "marriage rule"! Doesn't seem as though it will ever change."

Gwen tilted her head to the side and sighed gently, saying "I've never thought about these things before, and I honestly don't really know what to think. My husband thinks we shouldn't rock the boat though." As she finished, Ruth thought -- why, she looks like a blue jay, head cocked, bright eyes contemplating something new in the feeder, full of mischief and trouble.

Just then, a second car entered the driveway and another woman appeared at the door, this one with short gray hair, no make-up, wearing sensible shoes and carrying a bunch



of daisies. If Gwen's a blue jay, this one's a sparrow, thought Ruth. Again, a servant whisked the flowers away as the newcomer introduced herself. "Hi, there! I'm Belinda Forrest. You met my husband Joe yesterday, and I wanted to drop by to say hello and see if you need anything. Our husbands are going to be departmental colleagues." Noticing Gwen, she hesitated for a moment and continued "Oh, Gwen! How nice of you to come by so quickly! I'd forgotten you live close." The slight coolness in the greeting and the hesitation beforehand piqued Ruth's interest. Maybe this sparrow's not so timid, tread carefully, she thought, remembering Gwen's so-recent warning.

Siti, a young woman with a sweet smile and a graceful manner, brought a tray of coffee and the conversation became general, with advice on household management, food shopping, local customs, all the everyday trivia needed in a new posting. Zoe wandered through to greet the guests, fixing her smoky blue eyes on each in turn, patting their knees with gentle paws, charming them. Ruth laughed — "She's being Madame Ambassador and trying to talk you into giving her some treats, don't fall for it."

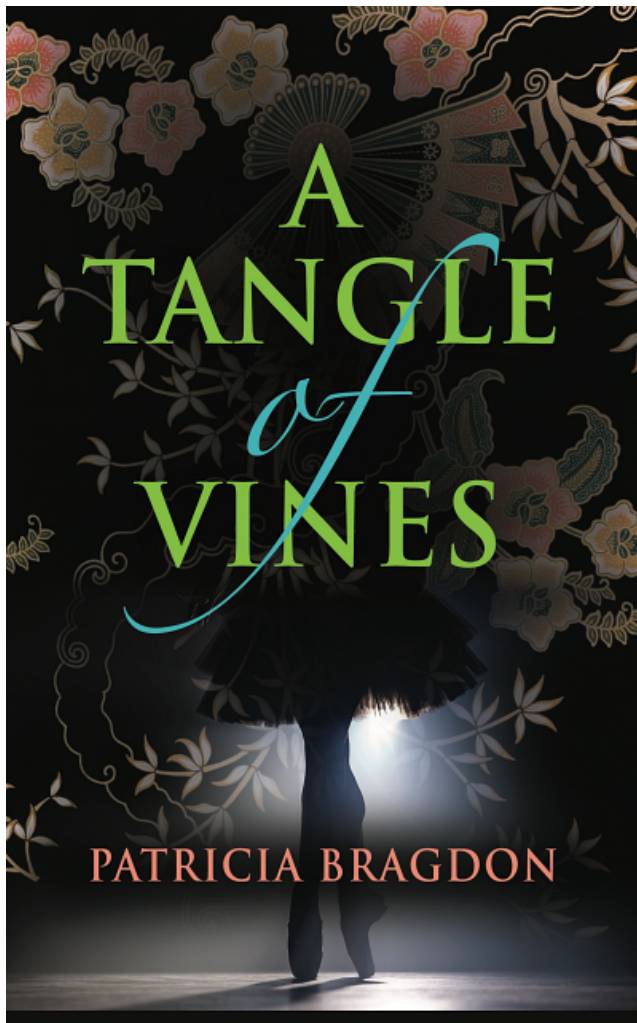
"I'm going shopping later this week at Toko Sunlight, Ruth, if you would like to join me. I'll let you know what day", Belinda offered and Gwen followed with an invitation to spend the afternoon at the swimming pool with her:

"It will give you a chance to relax, and to meet some of the local inhabitants," she said "and see how we "trailing spouses" entertain ourselves when we are off-duty and not being good little representatives of the United States of

America.” Belinda looked uncomfortable at this faintly-critical remark, but said nothing.

As the guests stood to leave, Ruth accepted Gwen’s invitation, saying “I would love to join you at the pool, Gwen”, intending to use the chance to find out more about her feminist opinions and try to see whether or not she wanted to be a friend or was simply a troublemaker and gossip. Belinda extended a dinner invitation to Ruth and Mark for the following evening, pointedly excluding Gwen.

After they left, she decided to rest and started for the bedroom but before she could get there, there was a hullabaloo from the kitchen and rear courtyard, and Zoe streaked through the room with her fur and tail bushed out, disappearing under the nearest sofa. Ruth ran to the kitchen and was met by the women servants talking excitedly and gesturing toward the courtyard where she could see Suleiman glaring angrily around at the crowd and shouting something in Indonesian. Point down in the grass a few feet away from him was his knife, still quivering from the force with which it had struck the ground,



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