



*After a life spent wandering the world, Denise Laing has settled in the tourist resort of Senggigi and seems to have found a fragile inner peace. But the outbreak of riots, and the arrival of her estranged daughter, set off a personal crisis that shakes this peace to its roots.*

## **Lombok Flames**

by Alan Brayne

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# Lombok Flames



ALAN DRAYNE

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ISBN: 978-1-63263-693-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2018

First Edition

## One:

I barely gave them a thought: the plumes of smoke. I sat on the wall near Roberto's restaurant, stretched my arms out, and sighed. Ocean and sunshine, food for the soul.

I was heading into Senggigi from my home in Green Valley complex. The morning was fresh and sunny, like every morning in Lombok, before the cloying humidity that kicked in around noon. This was my daily routine which I'd repeated countless times. A brief stop at the internet café to check my emails; then a stroll to the *Pasar Seni* to take brunch at one of the restaurants.

The smoke in the distance looked sinuous and languid. Nothing of importance, perhaps farmers clearing the land. How civilised my life had become. And, when I look back, how complacent. Twelve months in Lombok had rubbed off a few jagged edges. I told myself I'd moved there to devote more time to painting. But a year had passed and I'd hardly lifted a brush. I guess deep down I'd always known it was a lie and I'd moved into Green Valley in an attempt to rescue my marriage.

But my marriage would never be rescued, and that mattered less with each passing day. My local Sasak husband had gone back to his village in the east. He'd turn up on occasions, when he'd run out of money, with stories of sick relatives back home. I pretended I believed him; it made things simpler. I was glad to give him some cash and watch him leave, because as long as he was around my life felt fraught.

But little by little, without any effort on my part, Senggigi had calmed me down. I couldn't claim I'd found tranquillity of soul, or whatever I'd been seeking for most of my life, but at least I'd forged a routine, built a comfort zone around me. Each morning I'd amble down the hill to the centre of town, chatting on the way with the folk who ran the stalls. It felt like a kind of duty to stop and make

conversation. A few of the men had been wary at first because they knew I was married to a Sasak and local husbands were jealous. But they must have looked at this woman in her fifties, with her wrinkles and flyaway grey hair, and decided it was safe.

And I have to say I loved it. I loved feeling part of the kind of village life which no longer existed in England. Although it seemed ironic that I'd needed to go to the other side of the world in order to find it.

But that morning there wasn't a soul in sight. Even the old man on the corner just past the Aqua club, that half-mad, withered old man who seemed to spend his life on that spot, scratching the earth with his stick, was nowhere to be seen. But I barely gave it any thought – there were plenty of reasons to explain it. We'd just had Christmas and the Millennium, and then there'd been *Lebaran*, the break at the end of Ramadhan when all the Sasaks left Senggigi to go back to their villages. Things were bound to be quiet, I'd said to myself. They'd be back to normal in a week or two.

Then I spotted the grille on the door of the Chinese supermarket. That should have made me stop and think, since that store was open for business come what may. But my mind was focused elsewhere: the email from Laura I was hoping to find once I got to the internet café. She and Nick had headed off to Kuta in the south three days ago, and I'd heard nothing from them since. This was no reason to worry: things were pretty basic in Lombok, especially outside the tourist hub of Senggigi. And I felt sure that Laura's silence was deliberate. Ever since she'd arrived, she'd seemed keen to let me know that she could survive very well without her mother. But I really hoped to hear some news that morning, just to put my mind at ease.

When I got to Starzone internet, it was empty except for Heru. He looked at me and I looked back, and I thought for a moment that I spotted something anxious in his glance. But in an instant, it was hidden. Heru came from Java, and he had the knack of the Javanese for concealing his inner feelings. He was tall by local standards, five

foot ten or eleven, with caramel skin and improbably dark brown eyes. He was wearing a navy-blue polo shirt with a button open at the neck and a pair of loose black trousers. As always, he was looking the picture of elegance.

But that morning there was something a little too eager about his smile. I could sense he was feeling anxious.

“What are you doing here, Mrs Laing?” I’d asked him countless times to call me Denise, but he always stuck to Mrs Laing. “Haven’t you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“About the riots.”

“Riots?”

“All over Lombok. Gangs of people are burning down the churches.”

I thought back to the plumes of smoke, the things I’d noticed but ignored. The empty stalls as I made my way down the hill. The grille on the Chinese store. I stared at him and I think I shook my head. “Burning the churches?”

“In Mataram and Ampenan. They’re setting fire to churches. Attacking Chinese homes.”

“What?”

“All over the island, I think. I’ve heard there’s trouble in the east. And also down in Kuta. They’re attacking the Chinese.”

The Sasaks called them *orang Cina*, but most of them were local, born and bred in Indonesia, like their parents before them. Sasaks also called them *sombong*, which means snobbish. I don’t know if

this was true or merely envy, since the Chinese were generally wealthier; the only ones I'd met were the family who ran the store and they were polite enough, if somewhat distant. The Chinese kept to themselves and there was very little contact between them and the local Sasaks.

The Chinese were also Christian as a rule, and Indonesia had been a tinderbox for the last six months. A civil war was raging in Maluku, virtually unreported in the west, as Muslims and Christians slaughtered each other in their thousands. The roots to this conflict were more varied and more complex than simply different faiths, but the Indonesian press was reporting the clashes in terms of religion, and Islamist groups from Java had made their way to Maluku to protect their fellow Muslims. Or, according to the Christians, to indulge in religious cleansing. Each day, it seemed, brought another headline of a massacre.

"I've heard rumours they're heading for Senggigi," Heru said.

I let out an involuntary laugh. The idea seemed vaguely ludicrous.

"Of course it might not be true," he went on. "But you really shouldn't stay here, Mrs Laing. You need to go somewhere safe."

But I still didn't take in what he was saying. Surely not Senggigi, I was thinking to myself: not this tourist oasis, a miniature version of Bali, where all manner of cultures and religions happily mixed. The local Sasaks were Muslim, but there were just as many Christians, plus the Hindu-Balinese who had lived there for generations. Then, as tourism bloomed, they'd been joined by flotsam and jetsam from every corner of Indonesia, lured by the scent of a job. In Senggigi they serviced the tourists: as bar boys, porters, waiters, room maids, whores.

Westerners like me were the final ingredient in this ethnic soup. Indonesians called us *bule*, which meant white. And many *bules* had

put down roots, often because, like me, they'd married a local. So Senggigi seemed a carefree multi-cultural mix, and it was hard to believe that any serious conflict could flare up there.

"This place will be fine," I said. "Everyone's so relaxed here."

Heru stared at me and shook his head. The look in his eyes was gallant, in the way that western men no longer feel able to be gallant in case women like me accuse them of being sexist.

"The Holiday Inn is arranging flights to Bali," he said. "They've hired a helicopter."

"Oh, you know what tourists are like. The first sniff of danger and they panic."

"But perhaps you should join them, Mrs Laing. To make sure you're safe."

And then it suddenly hit me. "Oh my God! Laura!"

Heru walked over to the Aqua machine and poured me some water.

"My daughter," I went on. "You met her a couple of times."

"Yes, I remember."

"Did you say there were riots in Kuta?"

"It's only a rumour, Mrs Laing."

"But that's where she's gone. And it isn't like Senggigi down there. It's not so westernised."

"I'm sure it isn't true. There are so many rumours flying around."



I sat down at one of the computers. “Can you log me on? Maybe she’s sent me an email.”

I watched his fingers float across the keyboard. He had delicate, slender hands. The hands of a musician. A pianist, perhaps. I sometimes wished I’d chosen a man like Heru instead of my Sasak husband: someone with his serenity and air of distinction. Clearly, he was well-off by local standards. He was my neighbour in Green Valley for a start, and that was well beyond the reach of most locals. But this sense of class went deeper than mere money. Heru was a natural aristocrat.

The daylight danced on the silver ring on his finger. Yes, my life would have been very different if I’d chosen someone like him instead of my Sasak husband. But that would have been the sensible thing to do, and I’d spent the whole of my life not doing the sensible thing.

I drummed my fingers on the table as I waited for the webpage to open. I was worried that any moment there’d be one of Senggigi’s power failures and I’d be cut off from the world.

“I’m sure she’s safe in Kuta,” Heru said, with a smile that was designed to reassure. “The police will protect the Novotel. A lot of very important people have invested in that place.”

“But Laura won’t stay at the Novotel. She’ll find the cheapest place in town and bunk up there.”

The connection was unbearably slow. It eventually timed out and I had to start all over again. I thought once more of the power cuts that happened almost daily in Senggigi. Often around that time, as the day grew increasingly humid and the ACs were switched on, so the grid was unable to cope.

“I was just the same at her age,” I went on, as I clicked again on the link. “Always searching for something more real. Something authentic.”

I took out my mobile and tried Laura’s number. Unobtainable. It had been unobtainable ever since she’d left. Again this was no cause for alarm, since cell phones were new to Lombok and most places had no signal. Plus I suspected that Laura had switched off her phone so that I couldn’t reach her.

Heru watched me with concern as I nervously fingered the keys and tried the number again. “Perhaps I can drive you to the Holiday Inn,” he suggested. “And get you on the helicopter to Bali.”

“And leave my daughter here?”

He gently shook his head; of course I couldn’t leave my daughter. Heru was still single – unusual in an Indonesian man in his early thirties, and I’m sure the cause of some serious teasing and pressure – but, like every Indonesian I knew, he believed in the sanctity of the family. The family always came first.

At last I got through to my inbox. There were no new messages waiting.

“I have to get back to Green Valley,” I said.

Heru went to protest.

“Maybe Laura is there,” I added, before he had time to speak.

“But she won’t be, Mrs Laing.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“She won’t be able to get through. The road from Ampenan is blocked.”

“All the same, I’m going.”

He picked up his keys. “Then I’ll close the café and come with you.”

“Please, there’s really no need.”

“It’s my home, too. Green Valley. I have to protect my property.”

We walked along the dusty strip where I walked almost every day. I was acutely aware of the emptiness, like someone breathing on the back of my neck.

We passed Senggigi Square: a twee development of apartments for the affluent in mock-western style. Opposite lay the dusty path to the headland and the beach. Just before noon, it was usually packed with tourists, but that day it was deserted. The Chinese store was still closed. We hurried past the night club, Jungle, opposite a creaky old family restaurant on land that must have been worth a fortune since it looked out over the beach.

Then, a little further, the sleazy end of town. Or as sleazy as Senggigi got. The Aqua Club, open late into the night, towered proudly back from the road in its carapace of thatch and bamboo. “Where east meets west,” a notice outside proclaimed in large letters, and everyone knew what that meant. Where *bules* could get drunk and pay for a local girl.

But that smoky late-night buzz was hard to imagine right then. Senggigi was a ghost town.

When we reached Green Valley, some men at the entrance to the complex were building a makeshift barricade out of lumps of stone. One of them spoke to Heru in a whisper.

“There’s a rumour they’re on their way,” Heru explained.

“They?”

“Some men from the local villages.”

“But why should they target Green Valley?”

“A lot of the houses are owned by Chinese. And also,” – he struggled to find the right words – “there are the other people who live here.”

I knew very well what Heru was trying to hint at in his faltering manner. Although these things were done with great discretion, many of the young women and men who worked the Aqua Club at night had their base on Green Valley. And even those who didn’t sell their bodies were often lovers of westerners who’d rented a house there for when they dropped into town.

“Yes,” I said, quietly. “Not everyone approves of Green Valley.”

Heru gave a smile of relief. We’d understood each other without any need to be direct.

The men spoke to him again. They used Indonesian rather than Sasak, but too quickly for me to follow. I suspected this was deliberate.

“These men will wait here,” Heru explained. “And try to persuade the gang to leave the complex unharmed.” He turned those deep brown eyes in my direction. “But you really mustn’t stay here, Mrs Laing.”

“There’s no way I’m abandoning Laura. This is where she was staying. This is where she’ll come to try and find me.”

“But she won’t be able to get through. The crowd have blocked the road.”

I think I let out a gasp. At last I felt a sense of danger. I was starting to grasp that Senggigi might no longer be the place I knew and loved.

Oh, I'd always been aware that the idyllic holiday facade was partly fake, a fantasy for tourists, and that a very different Senggigi lay just beneath the surface. Yes, the waiters and hoteliers were ready to turn a blind eye to what happened at the Aqua Club because it put rice on their plates. But this strip of land by the beach was a world of its own, and in the villages beyond it lay a dirt-poor, traditional Lombok where Islam and local custom set the rules. To the people who struggled to survive in this grinding poverty, Senggigi's bubble of westernised life meant drugs and sex and godlessness, and many of them resented this desecration of their homeland.

I wasn't really worried for myself, though: it was Laura that I feared for. She didn't know the place like I did. She didn't speak the language or know the rules. The unspoken rules. If there was any trouble, I was scared Nick would shoot off his mouth and make everything worse. He was a nice boy – I'd taken quite a liking to him in the short time that I'd known him – but he had a lot of growing up to do.

At last the men on the barricade let us through. The complex was deathly quiet. But it was always deathly quiet, I told myself. Few people seemed to live there, and certainly not families or anyone who might make a noise. No father revving his car each morning, no rowdy schoolkids joshing and teasing each other on their way home. For most of the time Green Valley was as sterile as a patch of dry grass.

We hurried to my house on the corner of Jalan Alamanda. My next door neighbour came out as soon as she saw me. Her round, brown face was uncharacteristically tense.

“Have you heard?”

I nodded.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

She and her husband were the only people I knew in my street; it wasn’t the kind of place where you made small talk with the neighbours. In any case, the neighbours weren’t around for most of the time. In my little street, for example, all but three of the houses appeared permanently empty: holiday homes of ex-pats or rich Indonesians. But this youngish couple next door seemed to have taken quite a shine to me. There was a certain cachet to having a *bule* as a friend.

“You can’t stay in your house,” she warned. “You must go away.”

“No, I can’t stay in my house,” I echoed, without thinking.

“We tried to book a flight to Jakarta, but even my husband couldn’t get one.”

Her husband was some kind of bigwig in the local government and they were proud to label themselves Jakartan rather than Sasak. Yet, despite this tinge of snobbery, I rather liked them. He was big and tubby, like an oversized teddy bear, while she didn’t drip jewels and hauteur like so many well-to-do Indonesian wives.

“So we’ll have to stay,” she went on. “But we don’t need to worry because we’re Muslim.”

Heru flashed me another of his smiles of reassurance. “But *you’re* not Muslim, Mrs Laing,” he said, gravely. I could see the concern in his eyes. I’d always suspected he might be rather fond of me, but I was suddenly realising how much. “You’d be safer in Bali.”

“But I can’t just leave. What if Laura comes back?”

“If she tries to get back here, it will have to be from the north, past Bangsal. But I’m sure that’s blocked off as well. Please try not to worry. The Novotel will get the tourists out of Kuta and off the island.”

“You can always stay with us,” the neighbour offered. “We could hide you in the back room.” Her eyes began to glisten as she warmed to the idea. “If anyone comes, we’ll say you’ve gone to Bali.”

“Oh no, please. I don’t want to cause you any trouble.”

“It wouldn’t be any trouble.”

“No, really. I couldn’t possibly place you in danger.” I did my best to hide my true feeling, which was something close to panic at the thought of being hidden away in their house like some latter-day Anne Frank.

I think Heru picked this up; he was good at these things. “One of my friends works at the Bella Vista,” he said. “Do you know it?”

“You mean that old hotel on top of the hill past the Sheraton?”

He nodded. “I’ll ask my friend to keep an eye on you. Because it’s so close to the Sheraton, it’s sure to be safe.”

This sounded much better than cowering in some half-lit back room, forced to take part in polite conversation. “All right,” I said, quickly. “I’ll go to the Bella Vista.”

Heru smiled with relief. My neighbour nodded her head with a tinge of disappointment.

I said goodbye to her and went into my house. The silence overwhelmed me. Monumental, like a cathedral. Or a cemetery. I told myself I mustn't let it perturb me; it was always silent in Green Valley. But there was something very different about this silence. It felt like the silence of the jungle before some animal lets out a shriek.

I got a suitcase and threw in some clothes; I didn't really care what I wore. I kept thinking of Laura and Nick. They were only passing through on their way to Australia, part of their gap year around the world, and neither of them spoke more than a handful of words in Indonesian. They were young and inexperienced, and wouldn't know when it was wiser to simply say nothing.

I reached the door and suddenly stopped. My photos, I had to take my photos. A big tin box with a dent in the top. Inside hundreds of photographs. I had to take it with me, just in case they burned down the house. Inside that battered old box lay the story of my life.

I opened the drawer to the desk and there it was. I knew I didn't dare open it, because then I might see Laura and perhaps I'd break down and cry in front of Heru. It lay next to my childhood copy of *Alice in Wonderland*: the two things I'd kept beside me in all of my travels. Those, and the wooden Buddha that I'd bought in Goa, and which sat on top of the desk.

I picked up *Alice*. I'd read this book so often as a child that a lot of the pages were loose and a few of them tumbled to the floor. I gathered them up and glanced at the illustrations. It felt like meeting old friends.

I debated whether to take the book, along with the wooden Buddha. But I'd always told myself I shouldn't cling to things, that possessions weigh down the soul. Maybe I should just leave everything, even the photos. Ah, but these pictures were different, I said to myself, as I clung to the box. These pictures weren't inanimate



objects. These pictures were like people. I put *Alice* back in the drawer but held on tight to the dented tin box.

When we came out of my house, the neighbour was waiting in her front yard.

“These are for you,” she said, and she handed me a tin of biscuits with a Union Jack on the lid and pictures of London.

I stifled a laugh and squeezed out a smile. It seemed such an unlikely gift. I wondered where she’d got it; I assumed some airport lounge. But it was a genuine act of kindness, and I felt touched.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered, laying her hand over mine. “We’ll take good care of your house. We’ll make sure that they know the owner’s not Chinese.”

I bit my bottom lip. Despite what Heru had said, I still felt there was a chance that Laura might make her way back to Green Valley.

“Do you mind if I leave you a key?” I asked my neighbour.

“Of course not.”

I went back inside and got my spare key, the one Laura and Nick had been using.

“Just in case my daughter comes back.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, as she squeezed my hand tight. “*Hati hati*. Take care.”

I followed Heru back towards the entrance to the complex. His step had grown much faster.

“Don’t you need to go to *your* house?” I asked him.

“It’s safe enough. I’m Muslim.”

I looked at him and smiled. All that stuff about taking care of his property had been an excuse; he had come along to make sure I was safe. I leaned towards him slightly and let my shoulder brush against his. The touch was very brief, but it felt comforting.

When we reached the main strip of Senggigi, it had become an alien place. Not even one of the many stray dogs was roaming the stretch of tarmac. The sky was clouding over. Soon there would doubtless be the usual midday downpour. We passed the *Pasar Seni*, and followed the bends in the road that traced the contours of the coast, past the Sheraton. The Bella Vista lay just beyond, at the top of a short, steep hill. We hurried up the driveway to the foyer.

Heru held open the door. Some people who were huddled inside glanced up and watched us enter. My nostrils twitched. I swear I could smell the fear.



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