

VIROBACTER

Also by TC Reis

The Secret Cove
The Unwelcome Visitors

VIROBACTER

by TC Reis



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1

The night was a vivid picture of pristine peacefulness. A full moon bathed the two story Spanish colonial concrete and stone villa in a surreal silken blanket of silvery light, making it stand out against the black silhouette of a dense grove of mahogany trees.

The upper floor windows were wide open, letting the soothing tropical night breeze into the children's bedroom where 5-year-old Amber and her sister Jayde lay sound asleep.

Suddenly, the cackling of agitated birds shot across the night, shattering the silence. The noisy chirping and frantic flapping of wings woke little Jayde. Lids heavy, she opened her eyes briefly then closed them again, drifting back into deep sleep.

Within moments, a loud deafening sound coming from the window jolted Amber from sleep. She sat up in the next bed confused. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she turned her head and saw something hovering outside the window. Frightened, she began to cry.

The awful pounding grew louder and louder, scaring her even more, making her cover her ears with both hands. She closed her eyes tightly, wishing the frightening noise would go away. She jumped off the bed and ran to the door crying, "Papa! Papa!"

Awake in the bedroom across the hall, Michael heard Amber's distressed voice calling out to him. He rushed to the children's room and opened the door. Amber was upset and crying.

"It's all right, angel," he said, calmly lifting the trembling Amber in his arms. "Papa's here."

"I'm scared," she sobbed, clinging to him tightly.

"It's just a bad dream, honey." He reassured her, kissing her forehead gently. "See?"

Still sobbing, Amber hesitated before slowly looking around the room. Sensing everything was still and quiet again, she slowly stopped crying. Finally feeling safe in her father's arms, she braved a glance at the window and saw nothing. Convinced that with Papa close by nothing could ever harm her, her little voice pleaded, "Don't go. Will you stay, Papa?"

"Don't worry, I won't leave, pumpkin," he answered, tucking her back in bed. "I promise I'll stay."

Hearing the commotion, Jayde woke up and began to cry, too.

"Mama!" she called out, sobbing.

It crushed him to see how much his young children longed for the comfort of their mother's embrace at that moment, knowing she could never be by their side when they needed her most.

He went to Jayde and sat by the edge of the bed, wiping her tears away. "It's all right; everything's fine," he whispered softly. "Close your eyes and go back to sleep, sweetheart. Mama will be back in the morning."

After a while, the room returned to peaceful darkness. Michael heard the light creaking of Amber stirring in bed and the faint sound of Jayde's even breathing as she was lost to the world, asleep in the next bed.

He walked to the window and looked out. He stared at the darkness, thinking about his children and their future, wondering where their mother could be.

2

Downstairs the grandfather clock chimed midnight. The living room was buried in complete darkness except for a faint light coming from the small lamp on the writing desk, and the bright silvery beam from the full moon coming in through the open window.

There were Christmas wishes to be sent, and as she had done every year without fail since her husband, U.S. Air Force Commissioner Arthur Beale was stationed in Bulan, a small village in the region of Panoy located in the northernmost tip of Borneo, Lydia had written everyone home, sending them her best.

Feeling tired and sleepy, but glad to have completed the task in time, she put the pen down and sealed the last envelope to be mailed by their driver, Hanselmo, early in the morning.

It was a tedious 70-kilometer drive through rainforest and over dirt roads to get to the modest wood and cinder block mailing center in town. She wanted to make sure she didn't miss sending anyone a greeting card, after all, Christmas was Christmas even in the remote village of Bulan, which was halfway around the globe, far from friends and family in Colorado.

The silence was broken by the sound of heavy footsteps across the hallway.

"Ma'am Lydia, Ma'am Lydia," the maid came charging into the living room in a panic.

"What is it, Ursula? What's the matter?"

“Hanselmo just came back from the village. He has very bad news,” she labored to catch her breath.

“What bad news?”

“Hanselmo says the village men are on the way here and they’re very angry,” her eyes turned into dark pools of fear. “They’re carrying long knives and bamboo stakes. He warned me there’s going to be big trouble!”

“Trouble?” Lydia was stunned. “But why?”

“He heard them talking about another villager who was found dead by the river. They believe that the mangal has struck again. They must have found out about ...” Ursula hesitated. “About ...” She couldn’t bring herself to say.

“It’s all right.” Lydia knew it was bound to happen—the dreaded moment had come.

“What are we going to do, Ma’am Lydia?” Ursula said wringing her hands, beads of sweat running down her face.

“Calm down.” Lydia walked toward the window and looked out. There was nothing there but the full moon and the darkness. “Are you sure?” she asked calmly.

“Yes, Ma’am, I know I heard right. Hanselmo swears the men will not stop until they ... kill Ma’am Criselda and they want to kill the children too!”

“Amber and Jayde?” Lydia was shocked. “Over my dead body they will! Tell Budi and Bima to shut the gates and tell Hanselmo to get the truck ready. We’re taking the back route out of the villa immediately. We must get to the plane right away.”

“The back route?” Ursula’s eyes grew big. “Through the rice fields? But Ma’am, it has been raining for days and the rice paddies are muddy and slippery.”

“I know that but it’s the quickest way to get to the plane, so hurry and do as I say.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Ursula turned toward the door.

“And Ursula ... thank you,” she said to the maid. “Now go quickly and get Amber and Jayde ready while I tell my husband and my son what is going on.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Ursula sprinted out the door.

After breaking the terrible news to her husband, Arthur, Lydia hurried upstairs and knocked on Michael's door. "Son, are you awake?"

There was no answer.

"Michael, wake up." She knocked again.

"What is it, Mother?" Michael emerged from the children's room.

"It's Criselda. The villagers have found out..."

"I've known all along this was bound to happen," Michael said before Lydia could say more.

"I, I'm sorry son."

Teeth clenched and fists curled up in a ball, Michael turned the other way to hide the pain.

"I need to be alone."

Lydia remained silent.

"I understand how terrible this must make you feel, son, and I wish it didn't have to be this way but ..." She hesitated. "Michael, we must go."

"I'm not running away!" he snapped. "This is not going to stop no matter where we go." He said bitterly.

"There is no other way." Lydia pleaded. "The villagers are coming. They're after Criselda and ... the children."

"The fools!" Michael was enraged. "Amber and Jayde are innocent!"

"The children's lives mean nothing to them." She said. "They're blinded by anger and won't stop until Criselda's bloodline is ended. It's too late. We've done what we could to help Criselda and there's nothing more we can do. We have to take the children away from here."

"I'm not going to let anyone drive us away like a pack of wild animals. This is our home! Amber and Jayde have nothing to do with this. And if those savages come anywhere near my children, I'll tear them apart with my bare fists if I have to," his face turned red and his eyes blazed in anger.

"But it doesn't have to come to that, Michael," Lydia said. "We can make it out of here safely if we leave now."

Michael didn't answer.

Seeing there was not much time left, Lydia broke the silence.

“Ursula is getting the children dressed and your father is downstairs waiting in the truck. We must get to the plane quickly.”

“The plane?” Michael repeated.

“We’re flying to Sarawak.” Lydia said. “That is the only way we can take Amber and Jayde away from here. There is very little time Michael, please.”

Everything was happening too fast; his mind was in a jumble. He paced back and forth.

“I have no choice,” he finally said. “I can’t leave Criselda behind.”

“But Michael,” Lydia protested.

“I’ve got to stay. Don’t you see? I can’t leave her like this. The mother of my children needs me.”

“Please son, your children need you, too. Come with us while there is time.” Lydia was in tears, pleading. “These are dangerous, vengeful men. There’s no telling what they are capable of doing. I am worried for your safety.”

“No, Mother, my mind’s made up. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. Now please, go and take Amber and Jayde away from here.”

“Everybody in the truck! We must leave now!” Arthur Beale’s voice echoed from downstairs.

“Father’s right. You must get out of here immediately. Tell Amber and Jayde their mother and I love them very much and give them a big hug for us. Tell Dad, I said good-bye.”

“I will,” she said in resignation. Seeing it was useless to dissuade him from staying behind, Lydia turned to leave.

Michael hugged her and said, “I love you, Mother, now go! I’ll be up in the balcony keeping an eye on the gates and watching out for the men until you get out of here.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful.” Lydia begged. “Promise me, Michael.”

“I promise.” He said.

Lydia hesitated before walking down the stairs. She looked back, hoping Michael would change his mind, but he was no longer there.

He had gone out to the balcony to stand guard and watch for any signs of the approaching mob.

From where he was standing on the balcony of his bedroom,

moonlight shone down brightly, allowing Michael to see everything on the driveway below. He looked around and saw nothing but shadows of trees past the gates of the villa. He didn't let the calm fool him. He knew it wouldn't take long for angry villagers to show up at the gates crying for blood—his wife's and his children and he was never going to let that happen.

He went back inside to get the rifle and a box of shells from the bedroom. He began loading the winchester with bullets before returning to his post out in the balcony.

Downstairs, the servants Budi, Bima and Hanselmo worked at frantic speed to get the escape underway. Hanselmo had filled the truck's tank with gas, while Budi and Bima labored to bar the gates with heavy tables and anything they could get their hands on that could prevent the angry villagers from getting inside.

Ursula was back upstairs in the children's room, getting them dressed. It was going to be a long trip and the night was cold, so she bundled them in sweaters and quickly threw flannel blankets, along with some clothes, into a light brown tapestry bag.

"I'm sleepy," Amber yawned, rubbing her eyes. "Where are we going?" her squeaky 5-year-old voice asked.

"You're going to Sarawak with your Grandmother Lydia and Grandfather Beale." Ursula answered nervously, her hands shaking while tying Amber's shoelaces.

"Nana and Grandfather?" Amber repeated.

Ursula nodded.

"Why?" Amber asked.

"I'll tell you later," Ursula said, worried for their safety; thoughts of impending danger going through her mind.

When they were covered in warm clothes, Ursula threw a dark green scarf over Amber's head and tied it in a knot under her chin to cover her light blond hair.

"There, now we're almost ready to go," she said, turning to Jayde.

"No! I don't want to go." Jayde stomped her feet. "I want my Mama!" Ursula didn't know what to say.

Jayde looked at her and began to cry. "Where's my Mama?"

Ursula's heart melted, "Oh, please don't cry, Jayde. We'll look for

Mama,” she looked at the five year old’s sad face. “But first we have to hurry.”

She tried to put a scarf over Jayde’s dark curly locks, but the child would have nothing of it and pulled it away. Seeing there was no way to convince her to keep it on, Ursula gave up.

“All right, let’s go,” she said, taking them both by the hand and leading them downstairs to the living room.

Outside the villa, Arthur Beale was inside the truck waiting. The motor was running and ready to go, while Hanselmo swiftly loaded a few hastily packed bags in the back of the truck. Ursula helped Amber and Jayde into the front seat next to their grandfather. Lydia sat on the opposite side, keeping the children between them.

“Let’s go! Where’s Michael?” Arthur asked impatiently.

“He’s not coming.” Lydia answered.

“What?” He roared. “Let me go talk to him,” he opened the door.

“No, Arthur.” Lydia stopped him. “Listen to me. It’s no use. I’ve tried talking him into coming with us, but your son’s mind is made up. He wants to stay behind and be with Criselda. Now, we must go.”

Hearing her mother’s name made Jayde begin to cry.

“It’s all right darling, don’t cry,” Lydia wiped away Jayde’s tears with the small, white handkerchief in her hand.

“Nana, will Papa be all right?” Amber asked, sensing something was wrong.

“Of course, pumpkin. Papa will be fine,” Lydia answered, fighting back the tears.

Up on the balcony, armed with the loaded rifle, Michael kept a careful watch for the villagers. He saw Hanselmo hurry down the steps, past the stone columns flanking the front entrance to the villa. He was carrying an armful of luggage, which he swiftly loaded in the back of the truck as Ursula helped Amber and Jayde inside. He saw his mother look up. He waved at her. She waved back before getting inside the truck.

He was relieved to see the truck pull away and drive down the cobbled driveway, headed toward the back gates of the villa and the expanse of wilderness leading to the banana plantation, where the plane was waiting to transport them to safety.

In the dim brightness of the truck's headlights, Lydia saw Ursula, Hanselmo, Budi and Bima silently waving good-bye as the truck rolled down the driveway out the gates. The villa had become home. It made her sad to think they would never be able to come back. She knew Amber and Jayde would miss their nanny Ursula the most. She glanced back at the villa. The sight of Michael's silhouette on the balcony was tearing her apart. He looked so alone, it made her want to get down the truck and rush to his side. Why wouldn't he listen?

They hadn't gone far when suddenly, a heavy beating sound began to fill the air. Something was hovering above the truck, making an awful sound that grew louder and louder. Amber covered her ears and closed her eyes.

Arthur stopped the truck.

"Nana, I'm frightened." Amber was shaking.

"Me, too," Jayde tugged at the sleeves of her coat.

"Don't be," Lydia answered. "Nana and Grandpa are right here," she drew them close to her, putting her arms around them protectively.

Arthur remained calm and unfazed, listening and waiting.

"Nothing to be afraid of," he laughed in an effort to put the children at ease. It's just a big bird that's trying to find its way home."

Arthur and Lydia looked at each other helplessly. They knew what was out there wasn't a big bird lost in the night. It was something more ominous and deadly.

They waited for the horrible sound to stop. After it did, Arthur said to Amber and Jayde, "See? It's gone."

The two giggled.

He turned the key and started the truck, but before he could put it in gear, the distant sound of muffled voices hit the air.

"They're here!" Lydia whispered, eyes wide with fear."

Arthur quickly turned the headlights off.

"Let's get out of here." He began to drive.

They hadn't gotten very far when they heard a loud, shrill cry rise above the men's voices, piercing the night, echoing eerily across the darkness.

"No, Arthur. Stop the truck, please." Lydia said; eyes glued to the balcony where Michael was standing.

Michael heard the shriek, too, as he stood outside on the balcony. She had returned!

He looked up and listened, but there was nothing there. He ran back inside the bedroom and quickly switched the lights off, before rushing out to the balcony again.

“Where are you? Come to me now,” he shouted. “Come down and seek shelter while there is still time.”

Somewhere out in the darkness, the creature must have heard him calling, because suddenly, out of nowhere, the heavy beating of wings began.

He looked up and saw it circling above, trying to come closer.

“Criselda!” he called out. “Come inside, where you’ll be safe!”

As the form began its descent, the sound of voices cut through the air, startling the winged creature, sending it darting upward.

Michael turned and saw a trail of blazing light snaking across the darkness, heading toward the villa.

“No! Don’t be frightened,” he shouted at the creature. “Come down now, where you’ll be safe! I promise I won’t let them hurt you.”

He looked below and saw Bima and Budi run inside the house.

The sound of heavy banging was followed by the deafening noise of the front gates crashing down, sending a group of men armed with bamboo spears and long knives charging onto the villa’s grounds.

Michael fired shots in the air and then another on the ground, a few feet away from the men.

“Stop! Don’t move! I’ll shoot anyone who comes closer!” he shouted. The men stopped.

“I want all of you to get out of here,” Michael ordered.

“We will not leave until we get what we have come for!” one of them said. “We are here because we want the killings to stop! We want the mangal! We know you are harboring the creature. We want you to give it up!”

A loud buzzing followed as the villagers spoke excitedly among themselves.

“You are trespassing on my property,” Michael shouted. “I want all of you out of here, now!”

“We will not leave without the mangal,” the man said stub-

bornly. “There will be no peace in Bulan while the evil creature is alive. The mangal has to die.”

“I am warning you. Leave now or I will shoot!” Michael cocked the rifle and aimed.

“Look! Over there!” one of the men shouted, pointing above. The rest looked up to see the sinister form of the winged half body fluttering above the balcony.

Michael saw the hatred in the men’s eyes as the blazing flames of their torches reached out from the darkness exposing the mangal.

“Go away! Get out of here now!” Michael shouted to the creature.

“Kill the mangal! Destroy the evil creature now, before it gets away!” someone from the crowd screamed.

Taking their cue, the men began to throw their bamboo spears at the creature, sending a volley of sharp projectiles racing in its direction.

Michael saw a spear hit the creature, sending it confused and shrieking, headed for the safety of the only sanctuary it knew—the balcony.

He fired more shots in the air to stop the men from inflicting more harm to the mangal. The men were determined. They sent more spears flying. The creature was strong. Although it was wounded, it managed to dodge the sharp and deadly bamboo stakes that the men continued to aim and throw at it. The injured creature struggled to find its way through the lethal maze of pointed spearheads coming at it from all directions, but it was no use. Another one found its mark, impaling the creature in the chest and wounding it mortally. The creature’s lifeless form plummeted to the ground

“No! Criselda!” Michael shouted.

In shock he didn’t see the stray spear hurtling toward him.

Having put an end to the creature that had long terrorized the village and killed its people, the pacified villagers left as quickly as they had come.

Fearful of the unruly crowd outside, Ursula remained crouching behind the living room sofa, hiding while praying for the men to leave. After what seemed like a very long time, she heard the angry voices gradually fade away and give way to silence. She craned her neck and listened closely, trying to make sure that they were really

gone. She got up and walked to the window to make sure. There was no one there. Worried for her master's safety, she ran upstairs to check on him.

"Sir Michael!" She called out.

There was no answer.

She knew something was wrong. She called out one more time before turning the doorknob and opening the master's door.

"Sir Michael, they are gone! The villagers have gone away!" she entered the bedroom. The room was empty. The balcony door stood open. She hesitated then walked toward it slowly, afraid of what she might find.

"No!" She stepped back in horror. Michael was sprawled on the balcony floor, bleeding, a bamboo spear stuck in his chest.

"Hanselmo! Budi! Bima! Come quickly!" she screamed. "Sir Michael is wounded! We must take him to the doctor at once. Hurry!"

Hanselmo came rushing in. He dropped to the floor next to Michael's body. He put his head down close to Michael's face, waiting for him to breathe, watching his chest and waiting for it to rise, but it didn't. He lay very still.

Ursula, Budi and Bima looked on helplessly as Hanselmo's hands traveled over Michael's neck and arms, trying to feel for a pulse. Hanselmo felt Michael's tepid skin and knew instinctively, that the life had just drained away from his body. He shook his head slowly and looked up, "It's too late. Sir Michael is dead."

3

The moon glowed brightly, helping them see a little better through the night. They waited inside the truck where they could see the villa through gaps between a dense cluster of banana trees that shielded them.

No one made a sound. Sensing that something was wrong, Amber and Jayde kept still in their seats. Lydia saw a restless crowd of torch-bearing men appear out of nowhere.

“Huh. They’ve broken down the gates!” She gasped. “They’re inside the villa,” she fought to hold her voice down.

The group swiftly gathered below the balcony where Michael was.

Far enough not to be noticed but near enough to be able to hear the sounds coming from the villa, Lydia couldn’t tell what the men were saying. She heard the low buzzing of their voices grow louder until they were shouting. Her heart was pounding while she watched the irate villagers move about restlessly, driven by frenzy as they shouted furiously, egging each other on, intensifying the volatile situation. Then she saw something swoop down and fly toward the balcony.

“No! No! Stay away!” She heard Michael thunder over the steady buzzing sound of the crowd. And then she heard shots.

“Arthur,” Lydia turned to him in a panic. “That was Michael! What are we going to do?”

“We have no choice. We must get Amber and Jayde away from here.” He said.

“But, Arthur ...”

“Trust me, Lydia, the men have no reason to hurt Michael. It’s the mangal they’re after.”

Amber and Jayde looked at one another, unable to understand what was going on.

They heard more terrifying wailing. Pulse racing; Lydia turned her eyes back to the balcony just in time to see one of the men throw the spear he was holding at the creature. He missed, prompting the others to do the same, sending a volley of long pointed objects in the direction of the dark creature that hovered in the air. Horrified, she saw one of the men’s projectiles find its mark, hitting the creature, sending it plummeting to the ground.

Without turning the truck’s headlights on, Arthur started the truck and they were moving again. They continued to drive on. After he was sure that they had gone far enough, leaving the villa and the irate villagers far behind, he switched the headlights back on.

“It’s dead,” he said to Lydia, thinking little Amber and Jayde were asleep.

“I don’t know how to tell the children about their mother,” Lydia said sadly.

“I’m sure we’ll come up with something. Don’t worry,” Arthur answered, keeping his eyes ahead.

Amber was silent and still, but not sleeping as they had thought.

She had seen everything. She had heard grandfather and Nana talking, but couldn’t understand what they were talking about. She wanted her Mama. Where was Mama?

The unpaved road was narrow and treacherous, especially in the dark. Arthur proceeded to drive cautiously, careful not to veer too close to the edge. Even with the headlights guiding the way, it was impossible to tell where the precipitous road ended. Everything around blended too well with the darkness that surrounded them. He knew that with barely enough clearance between the tires of the truck and the edge of the wet muddy road, the slightest miscalculation could cause the truck to slide over the steep, slippery incline and plunge down to the swampy rice paddies many feet below.

As if to test their perseverance, rain began to fall, slowly at first and then in torrents, sending heavy raindrops pounding incessantly on the truck's windshield. He turned the windshield wipers all the way up, but it was no match for the heavy downpour.

"Oh, no," Lydia muttered.

The tension became unbearable as the truck made its way through the watery haze that showed no sign of clearing up.

"We'll be all right," Arthur, said calmly, his eyes focused sharply on the marred image of the road ahead, hands firmly guiding the steering wheel.

"Don't you think we better stop and wait until the rain stops?"

"I don't think that'll do us any good," he answered. "We're better off moving on."

He did not want to alarm her, by letting her know that the heavy downpour was so intense, a mudslide could follow at any moment and drag them down the embankment, burying them in mud. He knew their only chance of getting out was to keep moving toward the safety of higher ground.

"Don't worry, Lydia, this is nothing more than a monsoon rain. It'll let up before you know it."

Just as the rain had started suddenly, it abruptly stopped. Lydia breathed a sigh of relief.

They kept moving on until the truck came to a clearing, which led to a strip of land that had been cleared to serve as an improvised runway.

"Wake up pumpkins. We're here," she said, gently rousing the girls from sleep.

"Are we in Sarawak, Nana?" Amber asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"No, not yet, but we will be soon." Lydia took Amber's little hand.

Arthur drove the truck farther across the clearing, past a grove of banana trees until the twin-engine Beech plane came into view. He circled around it and stopped the truck on one side, quickly turning off the headlights.

"It's too difficult to see Arthur," Lydia complained. "How are we going to find our way in this darkness?"

“There are huts not far from here. The lights will surely draw attention. It might let the others know we’re here,” he said, taking her hand and helping her step down from the truck.

Lydia stopped.

“Listen.” Her eyes grew wide with apprehension. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” he stopped and listened.

“There it is!” She turned her head in the direction of the noise.

“Don’t you hear it?”

“I hear it now,” Arthur said, opening the door of the plane.

“Oh no!” She saw a sprinkling of tiny flickering lights cutting through the darkness and heading in their direction. The voices became more distinct as the tiny lights began to flicker into a flame that began to grow bigger. The smell of kerosene became stronger. She couldn’t be wrong. Men carrying torches were headed in their way.

“They’re here!” Lydia gasped.

“Everybody inside the plane. Now!” Arthur ordered.

Lydia was first inside. Arthur picked Jayde and Amber at once and lifted them into the Beech twin-engine plane. After making sure Lydia and the girls were secure in their seats, he jumped inside and locked all the doors. He flipped a switch and the plane’s engines came alive. The propellers began to spin. He put the aircraft in gear and began to turn it around, facing south. The Beech was slowly gaining speed, preparing to take off, when they saw shadows moving briskly toward the plane.

“Hurry, Arthur! They’re coming closer!”

“Hang on,” he said, pushing the lever forward.

Bam. Bam. Bam. They heard loud banging on the side of the plane. Lydia looked out the window. A man was running alongside the plane, trying to keep up. Like a madman, he used the blunt end of the bamboo spear in his hand, to pound heavily on the plane, to damage it and make them stop.

The fluttering blaze of torches lit up the place, making it bright all around. The angry villagers were closing in. Lydia was drawn back by the anger mirrored in the man’s eyes as he refused to let go of the