

J. R. Childress

The Amazon is burning. Desperate times call for...

**DESPERATE
MEASURES**



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Author's Disclaimer

This is purely a work of fiction. While it takes place mostly in the country of Bolivia, all events are based in the future and all characters are fictional. References to past actual events and people are used to help support the fictional story. Any resemblance of these fictional characters to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

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*“There is just one hope of repulsing
the tyrannical ambition of civilization
to conquer every niche on the whole earth.
That hope is the organization of spirited people
who will fight for the freedom of the wilderness.”*

*~ Bob Marshall,
Co-founder of The Wilderness Society*



DEDICATION

While this is a work of fiction, the destruction of the Amazon described in this novel is real and growing. This book is dedicated to the Indigenous peoples of Bolivia and the entire Amazon region as they tirelessly work to protect the rich biodiversity and their own way of life from marauding illegal logging, mining, and cattle farming operations, supported by corrupt governments intent on harvesting the resources of the Amazon, no matter what the cost to the planet.

Several people inspired me to tackle this important topic. My fly fishing trip to the Tsimané Sécure Lodge in the Isiboro-Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory brought me into contact with Marcelo Perez, CEO and Co-Founder of Untamed Angling, an adventure angling company focusing on supporting and improving the well being of Indigenous Amazon communities. Through evening talks with Marcelo, I learned the behind the scenes situation facing the

Amazon rainforest and its people. I hope this novel gives him a glimmer of hope that people do care about the Amazon.

I would also like to thank my editor, Josephine Lane, for her very professional work. A good friend, Pamela Norman, took my unedited manuscript and through the eyes of an English Literature scholar, provided many good suggestions and improvements. Jancarla Ribera, a dedicated professional in the Bolivian tourist and forest education sector working with the NGO, El Llamado del Bosque in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, helped me understand the history and culture of Bolivia and its people. Eric Bettelheim, a distinguished and knowledgeable environmentalist, helped me understand the political and global economic issues surrounding the recurring failures to halt deforestation in the Amazon.

This novel would never have been started nor finished without the support of my wife, Christiane Wuillamie, OBE who kept the home fires burning while I was in the Amazon and then beavering away in my writing shed in the garden.

To all those who care about the fate of humanity, the Amazon, and the natural world, all I have to say is: desperate times call for desperate measures.

J. R. Childress



PROLOGUE

DESPERATE TIMES

In 2021, scientists found that for the first time the Amazon emits more carbon dioxide than it absorbs.

Hippocrates, the ancient Greek physician, and father of medicine was not only a healer and a philosopher but also a realist. When he coined the phrase, “*For extreme diseases, extreme methods of cure are most suitable,*” he knew it contradicted the healer’s oath of “*Do no harm.*”

Yet desperate times call for desperate measures, and today, we find ourselves in just such a time. This is a story of activism, of protecting the ones we love, indigenous tribes, the Amazon rainforest, and the planet we call home. It is also a story about what needs to be done when traditional approaches fail. At its center lies the truth of the Amazon rainforest’s decimation

and its impact on global warming, changing weather patterns, biodiversity loss, and global economic chaos. What happens to the Amazon will dictate the fate of nations and mankind.

Deforestation of the Amazon is not just an environmental issue but an economic and social one as well. The damage wrought by greenhouse gases accumulating in the atmosphere from rampant deforestation is a significant contributing factor to the climate crisis we are facing today. The vast rainforests of South America and Africa are instrumental in controlling weather patterns that affect the entire world. The destruction of these forests contributes significantly to global warming, reduced rainfall, extended droughts, food scarcity, and population migrations that cause political and humanitarian crises. Many call the Amazon the “lungs of the earth,” and yet it continues to be systematically destroyed by illegal logging, mining, oil drilling, and farming at an unprecedented rate and scale.

At the same time, this novel is intended to provide hope and support to those currently fighting against illegal and excessive deforestation of the Amazon. The characters in this story are entirely fictional, but the threat is real and the events entirely plausible. We cannot afford to ignore the reality of the destruction of the Amazon.

* * *

BBC Television Network
Special Report on the Bolivian Amazon

The verdant canopy of a dense rainforest gradually comes into focus, as though teasing the viewer with a glimpse of an ethereal paradise beyond. The calm, steady, and reassuring tones of the familiar, silver haired BBC presenter soon follow, like a sage voice of wisdom in a confused world. He sits in the co-pilot's seat of a helicopter, soaring high above the awe-inspiring expanse of the Bolivian Amazon rainforest, his silvery mane of hair tousled by the wind. As if sensing the gaze of millions of viewers' eyes upon him, he pivots his head towards the camera, the expression on his face intense and concerned.

“The Amazon is the largest rainforest on earth, covering 1.4 billion acres across nine South American countries. In 1970, 26-year-old UK biologist, explorer, journalist, and early documentary filmmaker Ralph Hewitt-Jones used a hand-held Canon Super 8 Movie Camera to record his journey in an aging DC-3, flying above the Bolivian Amazon rainforest. Departing from the high-altitude city of La Paz, the gleaming silver airplane descended towards the lowland rainforest. Making a clockwise journey, flying north, east, and finally south, the young explorer landed several hours later in Santa Cruz de la Sierra in southwest Bolivia. Hewitt-Jones filmed his entire journey and over the next several years recorded the wonders of the rainforest and its people in his field journal and subsequent popular books.

“Shooting out of the small circular window of the plane at the vast landscape below, he recorded in grainy black and white an endless sea of pristine rainforest, sometimes covered in mist and clouds from transpiration, the process by which rainforests move water up into the atmosphere. A process that helps create the basic weather patterns that help keep our earth cool and bring life-giving rain to all parts of the globe.

“Barely did the camera come across a town or a cleared patch of farmland. Instead, gin-clear creeks and rivers meandered and snaked through the endless jungle. Hundreds of twisted tributaries added their sweet water to the larger Guapore, Blanco, and Beni rivers, which all flow into the Madeira, the largest and longest river in Bolivia, measuring nearly 1,000 miles. The Madeira eventually merges with several other large rivers to help spawn the mighty Amazon River.

“In his best-selling book, **Rivers of Life, Forests of Plenty**, Hewitt-Jones gave the world one of the first birds-eye views of the gigantic western regions of the Amazon basin. Because he was trained as a scientist, he described in meticulous detail his first impressions from the air and his travels on foot through this magnificent and unexplored primal rainforest. To him, it was the incarnation of the Garden of Eden. He documented a cornucopia of fruits, seeds, berries, nuts, flowers, trees, and animals of all shapes, sizes and descriptions. His adventures were harrowing and fascinated readers in the UK and America.

“Meeting several tribes of Indigenous natives never before contacted by the outside world, he marveled

at their ability to live and thrive in partnership with a forest that outsiders found so daunting and deadly. Yet, he was also awed and humbled by their genuine happiness and peaceful nature. After his 9-month trip, Ralph Hewitt-Jones dedicated the rest of his life to helping the Indigenous tribes in Bolivia gain legal rights to their native lands, trying to protect their culture and way of life from outside encroachment.

“He was not successful.” The helicopter banked and descended lower, recording the landscape below.

Speaking again to a global audience, his voice took on a touch of sadness. “Today, we are taking that same trip from La Paz and circumnavigating the Bolivian Amazon rainforest. Yet you will see an entirely different picture. A picture of the callous and careless destruction of this once pristine rainforest in the name of progress and economic prosperity. Progress that has delivered massive wealth for Bolivian politicians and business owners. Yet almost none of the economic value extracted from the Bolivian rainforest has reached the Indigenous populations or local towns and villages. Instead, most farmers and residents of the many small towns and villages live in abject poverty. Some do slave-like labor for the cocaine cartels. Others, especially poor women and girls, are trafficked to other countries to work menial jobs or sold into brothels and the sex trade. It’s modern-day slavery at its worst.

“For the past two months the BBC film crew, several esteemed rainforest scientists, and I have followed the same route as Hewitt-Jones’ 1970 air and land excursions. Filming in the same areas, this time

in High-Definition color using multiple Canon EOS C300 Mark III cameras. However, our expedition was not a wonderful experience. Before the trip, we watched Hewitt-Jones' original footage multiple times. We poured over his books of extraordinary and life-altering adventures. Yet on this trip, our experience was disheartening and depressing."

A vast swath of clearcut rainforest and burning piles of underbrush filled the screen. In a sober voice, the aging narrator stammered as he continued. "Bolivia is the smallest country containing the Amazon rainforest, yet it is the third most deforested country in the world, behind Brazil and the Congo. Last year alone, Bolivia lost over 1,560 square miles of rainforest to logging, some government-sanctioned, most illegal. That equates to an area nearly as large as the US state of Delaware. Today, less than 60% of Bolivia's original forests remains intact."

With a touch of sadness and despair in his voice, he continued to describe the negative impact on the rainforest and the Indigenous tribes in Bolivia's relentless pursuit to exploit the riches of the Amazon for economic gain. The screen regularly switched between Hewitt-Jones' original footage and the new, HD color views of the same areas.

"During our time in Bolivia, the television team visited one of the remote tribes struggling against illegal logging and mining on their tribal lands for the past two decades." The image of a malnourished mother and child in a remote tribal village faded into view. As the camera panned around the small central square,

dozens of malnourished children clung to their mothers, looking like death warmed over. At the edge of the village, earth mounds signaled the location of a recent mass burial.

Wiping away a tear, he looked straight into the camera. "Similar to the Yanomami tribe in the Brazilian rainforest, this Bolivian tribe has been decimated by the encroachment of illegal mining and logging companies. Toxic chemical waste from gold mining flows into the rivers, poisoning fish, the main food source of the village. Illegal logging has destroyed their small subsistence farm plots, making the natives increasingly dependent upon hunting forest animals, driven further and further away by the noise and fires from the land clearing operations. Diseases like smallpox and flu brought by outsiders killed many of the elderly and children over the past two decades. As you can see, the Amazon is not just facing a deforestation crisis but also a humanitarian crisis."

At the end of the 90-minute BBC television special, the chiseled and weathered face of Ralph Hewitt-Jones, now in his late 80's, came into view. Long, curly grey hair graced his square shoulders. Looking directly at the camera with piercing blue eyes, he stared straight into the living rooms of millions of viewers around the world. A small tear fell onto his leathery hands.

"Bolivia is an overlooked country in South America. While the global media focuses mostly on the rainforest destruction in Brazil, the Bolivian rainforest is rapidly disappearing. Desperate times call for desperate measures. But it may be too late!"



CHAPTER 1

OUR MOTHER IS DYING

*In humanity's relentless drive for economic gain,
the most significant casualties are nature and the future.*

*Isiboro-Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory
The Bolivian Amazon
Present Day*

The inky blackness and heavy silence of the Amazon jungle at night was shattered by an otherworldly, reddish-orange glow growling and hissing as if hell itself had somehow broken through. The sultry, thick humid air intensified the deafening cacophony of dozens of man-made fires, tearing through the ancient forest floor. Just behind the raging fires, a macabre symphony of gas-powered STIHL chain saws and the savage roar of monstrous Caterpillar bulldozers, wheel

loaders, and diesel logging trucks contributed to the ghoulisn scene. Another illegal logging operation was underway, snatching up precious Mahogany and other hardwood trees, destined for expensive furniture and flooring in the United States. The less valuable trees heading to Chinese plywood mills. Whatever couldn't be sold was piled and burned.

After the prized trees were felled, exhausted and sweating workers wielding massive chainsaws swiftly sliced them into enormous 40-foot sections. Mammoth log loaders hoisted the rich reddish Mahogany logs onto waiting trucks, ready for transport to newly erected lumber mills situated a few miles outside the perimeter of the National Park. At the mills, the logs would be cut into lumber sections and exported to China and the United States. A handful of carefully chosen construction companies and furniture manufacturers waited anxiously for the high-grade timber.

After the bonfires consumed the piled underbrush, earthmoving bulldozers spread the ash and flattened the land to create small areas of farmland. In a few weeks, poor farmers would be forced by cruel, heavily armed men, recruited from one of the cocaine syndicates, to plant and tend coca bushes, the first step in the ruthless and extremely lucrative cocaine trade from Bolivia into the United States and Europe.

Tonight, eight heavily armed and well trained professional soldiers from Bolivia's largest cocaine syndicate spaced themselves strategically around the perimeter of the illegal logging operation. The foreman could not afford any disruptions to his tight schedule. Most of the

guards were former poachers who knew too well the perils of the savage Indigenous warriors intent on protecting their rainforest and driving out the illegal loggers. The risk of dying a barbaric death, via a poisoned arrow or machete, was too real. Their instructions were simple; hide and shoot to kill.

The endless noise and roaring fires drove the larger and more agile forest animals further into the jungle. But not every animal could escape. The burnt carcasses of several slow-moving tree sloths smoldered on the forest floor, along with a large female, White-lipped peccary and her six piglets, crushed by falling trees in their frantic and confused rush to escape the fires and destruction.

Amid the clamor and fiery chaos, twenty warriors from the Indigenous Moxeño tribe, their faces and bodies tattooed with symbols of manhood and bravery, crept silently toward the clearing. Their ancestral homeland, their spiritual mother, was being raped and ripped apart by the invaders with their bright orange mechanical monsters. Each warrior faithfully embraced the sacred duty to protect their ancestral land, the Amazon rainforest. Earlier that evening, the warriors painted the sharp, needle-like tips of their arrows with deadly curare poison from a toxic vine harvested from high in the forest canopy.

Two sweating loggers, 100 yards ahead of the clearing and the cluster of rapacious machines, struggled getting their heavy chainsaws into position to fell a massive, South American Broad-leaf Mahogany nearly 150 feet high and 8 feet in diameter. As their

screaming chainsaws bit into the red flesh of the forest giant, neither heard the soft twang of hemp bowstrings or the silent flight of two 6-foot-long native arrows. Both men screamed simultaneously, writhing in agony as they fell to the ground. Their motorized death blades stood silent, imbedded firmly in the trunk of the monster tree. One brightly decorated arrow shaft protruded out the front of each man's bloody chest. The constant roar of the fires and equipment drowned out their feeble agonizing pleas for help. In less than a minute, their corpses were locked in a grotesque, contorted posture, as if a mannequin had been torn apart and glued together by a sadist.

Blending in with the forest and the shadows, the Indians crept towards the remaining loggers and equipment operators. As they set their arrows and drew back their stiff long bows, a deafening barrage of automatic gun fire erupted from the surrounding underbrush. The slaughter was over in less than 20 seconds.

"Stupid savages," snarled one of the soldiers emerging from the underbrush. "They aren't smart enough to realize an expensive logging operation would be heavily guarded. It's a wonder these simpletons have survived so long. Just another bunch of dead savages standing in the way of progress."

The guards piled up the Indian bodies. They were about to douse them with gasoline when the foreman shouted, stopping them in their tracks. "Don't burn those bodies! We can use them to our advantage." He called over the leader of the guards and whispered. "Kill a couple more loggers. But use the Indian arrows."

We need this to look like self-defense. One of my men will take pictures of the dead workers. And make certain there are several arrows in each body.” He smiled and turned on his satellite phone.

A Chinese Huawei smartphone silently vibrated inside a Gucci black and tan leather handbag. Madam Zhao excused herself from the long, ornately decorated dining table in the residence of the Bolivian Minister of the Environment. The door to the anteroom closed with a solid thud. “Is it done?”

“The Indians attacked, just like you predicted. They are all dead, twenty stinking savages, plus eight of our crew: easily replaceable local workers. I will send photos. Brightly decorated arrows are visible in the dead workers’ bodies.”

“Excellent! Now, get your men back to work. We need that shipment ready as soon as possible.” She ended the conversation with a lopsided smile. “I love it when a plan comes together.”

* * *

Two days later
CNN Headline News

“This is Carla Ribera reporting from Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. I am standing in the middle of 24 de Septiembre Square, in front of the majestic, red

brick 16th Century Cathedral Basilica of St. Lawrence. Thousands of protesters have been pouring into the square for several hours now and the noisy crowd is overflowing into the side streets.

“The protestors, primarily members of the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia, including brightly dressed men, women and children from the many lowland Indigenous tribes, are gathered to protest the continuous destruction of their native lands.” A cutaway showed the swelling crowd with brightly colored banners and signs. Many Indigenous natives wore colorful Macaw feather headdresses and carried traditional bows, long hunting arrows, heavy hunting spears, and razor-sharp machetes.

The camera returned to Ribera. “As you may recall, a highway from north to south directly through the center of the Bolivian Amazon rainforest, proposed by the Bolivian Government back in 2011, was abandoned when nearly a thousand civilians marched from the lowland city of Trinidad to La Paz to protest. It was an arduous journey of over 370 miles. Since then, all official government road building through the Amazon has stopped. Yet the destruction of the Amazon rainforest continues at a frantic pace.

“While forest rangers, local police, and the Bolivian army turn a blind eye, dozens of illegal logging and mining groups continue to destroy thousands of acres of prime Bolivian rainforest. And after the logging of prime Mahogany and hardwood, the rest of the vegetation is piled and burned. Then poor local farmers are forced into cultivating coca for the manufacture of cocaine.

“This current protest, by no means the first in the past three months, was triggered by the recent killing of twenty Indigenous natives from the Moxeño tribe in the Isiboro-Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory. Several days ago they were gunned down attempting to drive illegal loggers from their land, supposedly a protected National Park. In the past decade, over 2,000 climate activists and Indigenous Amazon natives throughout South America have died defending their lands from illegal deforestation.” Putting one hand over her ear, the diminutive reporter spoke louder as the noise from the chanting crowd escalated.

“Earlier this year, the murders of a British journalist and a local indigenous chief and climate activist in Brazil brought global attention to the lawless conditions prevailing in the Amazon. It’s easy to understand why this crowd is angry and shouting for justice. As I scan the faces of those whose way of life and homelands have disappeared, I see a fierce determination to demand justice from a corrupt government in partnership with the cocaine syndicates.” The growing sound of singing and chanting rose from the passionate crowd.

“The loud chanting you hear in the background is from the protesters as they call on Eduardo Mendoza, the 70-year-old Minister of the Environment and first cousin to the new President, to come out onto the balcony of the white, colonnaded building just behind me. So far, he has not appeared, and the crowd is definitely growing more and more restless. Many of the protesters carry huge signs saying, ‘Don’t kill our mother,’ ‘No more loggers, miners or Narcos,’ and

‘The forest is ours, not yours.’” The reporter looked to her left and right, as the camera scanned across the surging crowd. In the background, a large number of police and army helmets with thick visors were evident.

“This is highly unusual,” said Ribera, her voice filled with concern. “In a very public show of force, police officers and Bolivian soldiers are stationed in front of the Ministry of the Environment. So far, they have not actively engaged with the protesters. As our camera pans across the front of the building, you can see they are in full riot gear and are heavily armed. My sources tell me that multiple van loads of Bolivian soldiers are parked along all the surrounding side streets.”

As the chanting grew louder, Carla Ribera put down her microphone and signaled the camera team to follow her to the front of the Ministry of the Environment building. She wanted to get clear footage if the Minister appeared on the balcony.

Eduardo Mendoza, Minister for the Environment, gazed at the crowded square through the bulletproof, reflective windows of his second story office. His opulent office, adorned with highly polished, reddish Bolivian mahogany, provided an impermeable shield against the raging sea of humanity outside. The bulletproof glass kept the chaos and chanting at bay.

Amidst the calm of the ministerial chamber, Madam Zhao, Chairwoman and sole owner of Diamond Wing, the Shanghai-based purveyor of exotic timber and fine furniture, sat stiffly on a maroon leather couch. The pungent odor of her French Gauloises cigarettes filled the

room. She callously flicked the ash onto the exquisite 18th Century Kerman Rafsanjan rug from Iran at her feet.

Madam Zhao made a languid gesture with her ivory cigarette holder towards the frenzied mob outside, her tone crisp and commanding. “Minister, you must take swift action to quell the restlessness of your native population. If they continue these senseless protests, the consequences for my Bolivian logging operations could be catastrophic, and your personal bank accounts will suffer as well. You must act expeditiously, before these agitators draw the attention of the obstructionist Amazon deforestation charities, the trigger-happy DEA of the United States, and the fat bureaucrats of the UN Commission for Climate Change. Rest assured, we can bribe those lethargic bureaucrats, but the others present a greater challenge.”

Mendoza spun away from the window, his eyes locking on the growing pile of ash staining his precious carpet. The urge to summon his bodyguards to rid his office of this disrespectful crone gnawed at him. He resisted, masking his contempt behind a veneer of ministerial decorum.

“What options do we have?” he asked, the words tumbling out of his mouth with a hint of desperation. “The fallout from the 2011 protests in La Paz over new roads in the Amazon was disastrous. Our security forces acted with a far too heavy hand. Several protesters died and many were injured. The international community denounced us. The President stopped all new road projects through the lowland forests. We cannot afford another debacle like that.”

Madam Zhao leaned forward, flicking more ash onto the carpet. Her voice, harsh and shrill as fingernails scraped across a blackboard, cut through the tense silence of the room. "Minister, I have a solution, but it will come at a cost. I have spoken to the leader of the most powerful cocaine syndicate, and we reached an understanding. With his support, we can ensure that these Indian protests and disruptive raids become a thing of the past." She stood slowly, her cane and legs shaking. "However, in return, I fully expect the Bolivian government to show its gratitude by granting us lucrative logging permits."

A diabolical smile crept across her heavily made-up face, revealing a set of gleaming white teeth framed by dark red lipstick. The spackle-like makeup she wore to conceal the ravages of age began to crack around her rose-tinted cheeks, giving her the appearance of an elderly circus mime. Mendoza felt a shiver run down his spine as he realized the true nature of the deal being offered to him. He knew the stakes were high, and any misstep could result in catastrophic consequences for the new Bolivian President and the country's economy.

"We cannot involve the government or the military," he protested. "Not with the upcoming elections and the importance of industries like logging, mining, and cattle farming to our economy. Not to mention the revenue from the highly lucrative cocaine business."

As if on cue, the scene outside the window erupted into wild cheers. Two long Indian hunting arrows, tipped with bright red paint, whizzed through the air,

burying themselves deep into the wood frame surrounding the Minister's balcony doors.

Madam Zhao's carved cane pointed directly at Mendoza, her eyes burning with a fierce intensity. "Stop worrying, Minister. Your government will be hailed as heroes for putting an end to this unrest. Your re-election is assured. As for the Indians, leave them to me. You just need to go out onto that balcony and show some sympathy for their cause. Promise to take it up with the President tomorrow. In the meantime, I have already set our plans in motion."

Mendoza recoiled, a bead of sweat trickling down his forehead. "Our plans?" he replied, his voice barely above a whisper.



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