

**AN EXCERPT FROM**

## **ATACAMA**

**A NOVEL IN PROGRESS**

© Carmen Rodríguez, 2018

### **MANUEL – LA CORUÑA, 1925**

The evening I listened to my father advocate for a general strike, I felt a surge of pride fill my chest and understood in my gut that what my papa was saying was simply put, true and just.

“When we all join the strike, when we bring the Atacama region to its knees, they’ll have to listen to us, comrades! Without us, they’re nothing. Nothing! We make their profits, we pay for their luxuries, and we are the wheels that make their capitalist world turn.

“They exploit us, they abuse us, and they kill us. They treat us and our families like beasts. But we’re not beasts, comrades. We are human beings. We are workers. We are smart workers. We know better. We are the proletariat. We have learned from our teachers and our leaders that it doesn’t have to be like this.

“Today, we’re asking for better working and living conditions, and for the Chilean state to nationalize the mines. But that’s only the beginning because, once we fulfill these demands, our struggle will continue; we will not rest; we cannot rest; we will join forces with workers from the north, from the centre, from the south, and will keep on struggling until we realize our most cherished dream: to crush capitalism and establish a workers’ socialist state. The future belongs to the working class, comrades!!”

Our demands were simple and clear: no more wages paid in tokens; improved working and living conditions; adequate health care; respect for workers’ organizations and publications; and last, but not least, the nationalization of the saltpetre mines owned by British companies. By June, everybody was in agreement and the whole region went

on strike. Miners, railroad workers, cart operators, and even the longshoremen in the port of Iquique joined in. Everything came to a halt.

The Governor was prompt to follow the Minister of Defense's directives and ordered the deployment of troops in strategic points across the region. Then the minister sent five warships to Iquique, each one filled with reinforcements. He also declared a state of siege. There was no question about what would happen now: the government would send in the troops.

We worked that whole night, and all of the next day and night. By the early morning of June 5, everything that could be done, had been done: we had occupied the mine and the town; we had taken over the company store and dispensed provisions to every household; we had set up explosives in key spots, distributed borers, picks, shovels and pitchforks, and the hand bombs we had been assembling for weeks. Everything was in place and everybody knew what to do.

That's how, in the early afternoon of June 5, 1925, I found myself perched on the highest branch of a *tamarugo* tree, scanning the horizon for anything unusual: a desert skunk rushing up the *pampa*, hares hopping out of their burrows, iguanas and lizards abandoning their sunny posts and scrambling under a rock, birds becoming restless. Those were the signs that would point to the approach of the troops.

I was getting antsy, when I saw a yellow lizard dash off a rock and disappear. Then, a family of finches began to trill and flew out of another *tamarugo* tree. I sharpened my senses. In the distance, to the west, a barely discernible cloud of dust traversed the *pampa*. I didn't hesitate. I climbed down the tree in a wink and ran.

When I got to the union office I was so out of breath that I could hardly speak. But I didn't have to say a word because everybody understood that the troops were coming and hurried to their posts.

My papa asked me to take my cap off. At first I didn't understand what he meant, why he'd want me to take my cap off, but he just repeated, "Come on, take your cap off." So I did. Then he grabbed a few hand bombs out of a bag and put them in my cap. I couldn't believe my eyes. But my papa gave me a quick clap on the back and sent me

off to the soccer field to join my mama, the rest of the ladies and the kids. “If they start shooting, you throw these right at them,” was the last thing he said.

The soccer field was crammed. Some ladies were sitting on the dirt; others, standing in small groups; and the brats were running around, laughing and screeching as if this had been just another normal day. It took me a while to find my mama, but as soon as she saw me cut through the crowd, she grabbed her horn, stood on a wooden box and began to shout:

“Women, women! Women and children! The troops are on their way. The troops are on their way! We have to get ready. And remember: they have the weapons, but we have the truth! We all know that we cannot keep on living like this. Our men cannot keep on working like this. Our demands are just. So, be ready to face the soldiers with dignity. We will stand together. We will hold hands. We will hoist our banners and flags up high. We will chant our slogans loudly and with conviction. When the troops see and hear us, they’ll understand that what we’re asking for is nothing more than a decent life for our families. The same kind of life they want for *their* families. When they realize that we are as human as they are, they will not shoot! But if they do, you know what to do: those of us who chose to use hand bombs will hurl them at the troops and the rest will retreat up the *pampa* and into the dunes. Are we ready??!!”

A resounding “Yes!!” erupted from the soccer field. I stuck my hand bombs into my pockets, put my cap back on and joined the waiting game.

Shortly after, we heard the first claps of the horses’ hooves on the saltpetre fields. The banners and the flags went up and we all reached for our neighbours’ hands. Then, my mama began to chant:

“We want justice, we want justice.”

It didn’t take long for everybody to join in.

“No more tokens,” “Long live the working class,” “We deserve decent housing,” “Workers to power,” “We hold up half the sky,” “No more oppression,” “Saltpetre is Chilean.”

The tapping of the horses became louder and louder and now we could also hear the wheels of the military carts crunching the *caliche* as they got closer to the mine and the town.

We kept on chanting, and as we could hear the troops getting even closer, we began to shout:

“We are your mothers,” “We are your children,” “You are workers, we are workers,” “We are your brothers, we are your sisters.”

Then we saw them: hundreds of them coming towards us, on horse and on foot.

We kept on chanting.

I hardly had any voice left when the explosions began at the mine site, to our right, one after the other, one after the other. And then, the soldiers started shooting.

“Don’t shoot, we’re your mothers, we’re your sisters, we’re your children,” I heard my mama and other ladies shout. But by then, I had already reached into my pockets and begun to hurl the hand bombs until there weren’t any more left.

They kept shooting.

Bodies were falling all around me. I was petrified. What brought me back to the soccer field was the bullet that killed my sister Eva. After I finished hurling my bombs, I reached out for her hand, but she wasn’t there. And then I saw her on the ground, flat on her back, her eyes wide open and blood spouting out of a hole in her chest. I covered the hole with my hands, sat on it, got up, tore off a piece of my shirt, pressed the cloth against the wound. But the blood kept spouting out.

Then I heard my mama shout:

“Manuel, Eva! Moncho! Run! Let’s run!”

“Eva,” I muttered, pointing at my sister on the ground.

My mom stopped in her tracks and fell on her knees. She looked at Eva, looked at me and then began to scream and to shake Eva with both her hands.

“Mama, she’s dead! Let’s run!!” I shouted.

She picked Eva up, I grabbed Moncho’s hand and we ran. Ran like crazy, urging the other ladies and kids to run too, while the bullets kept whistling past our ears.