

CHAPTER 5: HAPPY HOLIDAYS

The Athens apartment of Mika Ioannou is already suffused with the rich smell of *arnaki souvlas*, roasted lamb on a spit. Twenty-four years old, and a recent university graduate, Mika, a black-haired, green-eyed beauty, straddles the traditional world of her Greek forebears and the modern world of near continual political crisis as Greece struggles to find its post-Civil War identity. The surprising strength of the radical left in mainstream Greek politics after the collapse of the political center in 1952 has created an atmosphere of uncertainty for many, excitement for some, and danger for a few. Mika's own vision of Greece's future is simple and relatively apolitical: a modern, western state that values its glorious and distant past while building a future on the contributions of all of its citizens. For her, the future is about practicality: monarchies are pointless, the oppression of women is a waste, and wrangling over the fine points of different branches of Marxism is just plain silly. She stands ready to roll up her sleeves and put her degree in public health to work for the good of all of the people of Greece. But not today.

Today, Easter Sunday, 1954, she prepares dinner for herself and her on-again, off-again companion, Niko Lendaris, a hot-headed Leninist whose screeds she tolerates given his striking resemblance, from head to foot, to Michelangelo's David. An open bottle of Ouzo and two shot glasses on the kitchen table should get the afternoon off to a fine start.

Niko bursts into the apartment in a dark mood. His mercurial nature appears deeply rooted in Peloponnesian politics. In fact, he's a fraud who has discovered that a turbulent persona dressed in the trappings of exotic political dogma holds a strange attraction for young university co-eds willing to cozy up to a statuesque radical. But Mika is no average co-ed, and Niko is finding the results of his efforts less than satisfactory.

"You're late," Mika observes as she begins to carve the lamb on the spit. Her rich voice is full-throated; her tone is direct but not scolding.

Niko ignores her. He pours himself a shot of Ouzo, throws it back, and sits at the small linoleum table a few feet from where Mika works.

"First one today?"

"Out of this bottle," he replies as he pours another shot. Before Mika can respond, he drains the glass again.

"Slow down. We can drink and make love after dinner, unless that's too much bourgeois decadent happiness for you all in one day."

Niko explodes.

“Can we drop the fucking politics for just one day? I’m sick of hearing about the decadent this, the oppressed that, the goddamn chained fucking masses. It’s all bullshit! Bullshit!”

Niko springs from his chair, knocking it over in the process, and storms straight for the apartment door he’d entered moments earlier.

Mika is unperturbed by this latest petulant outburst. She looks for a way to make it clear he is never to return. Her eyes settle on the sizable lamb still on the spit.

“Niko, darling. Don’t forget your dinner.”

Mika picks up the lamb, and hurls what was supposed to be the prelude to an afternoon in the sack, in a graceful arc towards the infuriated pseudo-Marxist Niko. As the lamb catapults towards him, something catches his ear and he turns to face her just in time to see the descending spit of lamb, sharpened-point first like an Olympic javelin, head straight for his heart. The spit impales him and would have gone far deeper but for the succulent lamb still skewered in place. It went deep enough. Niko stares for a moment in disbelief before falling backwards, dead before he hits the ground, the victim of an Easter dinner gone badly awry.

Mika’s first thought is to salvage the lamb from the spit. Instead, after satisfying herself that her dinner companion is quite dead, she sits down to a meal of tzatziki, stuffed grape leaves, pita, and Ouzo as she contemplates when she should call the Athenian police, and what she should tell them when they finally arrive.