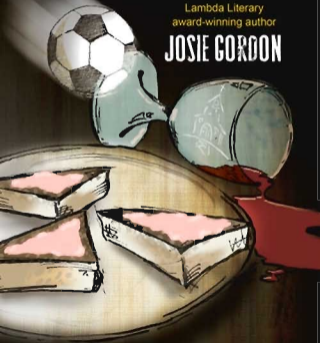


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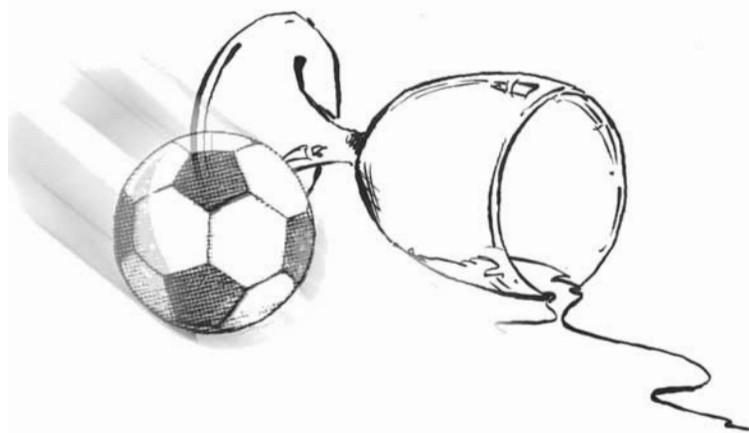
Lambda Literary
award-winning author

JOSIE GORDON





TOASTED



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Bella
BOOKS

2009

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P.O. Box 10543
Tallahassee, FL 32302

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

First Edition

Editor: Katherine V. Forrest
Cover designer: Kiaro Creative Ltd.

ISBN-10: 1-59493-157-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-59493-157-4

For my friends

Acknowledgments

While it's true that Michigan's Great Lakes coastlines are dotted with quirky little towns with unique histories and vivacious lives, the dramas of Middelburg and its inhabitants are entirely made up by me. I just borrowed the geography—and even that I tweaked, adding a county and town where there is none. Don't go looking for it on a map. It doesn't exist and never did. There is no resemblance to the living or dead. Same goes for the Episcopal church. Well, it exists, of course, but Lonnie's diocese, bishop, colleagues and parish live only in my head. And yours, friend readers—and yours.

My thanks to my tribe: Rhoda, Trisha, Cindy, Lori, Carla, Devon, Pat, Craig, Jesse, everyone in my family, Casper and Desmond who snore while I type and then demand to play ball, Hattie who naps on my desk, and Tim who makes sure I get my exercise picking up paperclips, and most of all, Jen. I couldn't do it without them. Any errors in this text are mine, not theirs.

Special thanks to all of Lonnie's fans. I've got to tell you, I had the most fun making up the stuff in this book that I've ever had in my writing life. I hope you have as much fun reading it! At www.josiegordon.com I blog when I can and post updates on my writing. Hope to see you there!

Watch for the third Lonnie Squires mystery coming soon!

About the Author

Josie Gordon's first mystery novel *Whacked* (December 2008) won the Lambda Literary Award for the Best Lesbian Mystery of 2008.

This was a happy ending to a rather scary episode: once upon a time, Josie actually found a dead body in the woods. And though every amateur sleuth she has ever encountered in books or on TV would have seized the chance to march right up and investigate, Josie ran like the dickens in the other direction! Later, while waiting for the police, she resolved to write a book in which the sleuth would be as freaked out by finding a dead guy as she was.

Josie loves to sing in choirs, play the Irish whistle, drum, make a mess with paints on canvas (she can't call it "art"), and volunteer with her German shepherds in local hospitals and care centers. She lives with her partner in the woods and loves to spend time where there are more trees than people.

Toasted is the second Lonnie Squires mystery.

You can learn more at www.josiegordon.com.

Chapter One

I pride myself on two things in life. First, serious soccer skills. Olympic caliber. If a torn knee hadn't ended it all, I could've played with Mia Hamm.

Second, genuine compassion for others. Not worth a lot on the soccer field but it comes in handy for my day job. My vocation. You see, I'm an Episcopal priest.

You know how it is when you have two things you pride yourself on—if one goes, you're having a bad day. When both go, well, everyone had just better look out, because you can't be held responsible.

That's how it was that sweltering August Friday as I stood packed into the sticky five-by-five entry of Woman at the Well Episcopal Church with my Committee on Liturgy, all of us held captive by the committee's chair, a supremely irate Bova Poster. Round and sweaty, Bova gripped her bulbous hips. "You're the

priest!” The embroidered chickadees on her powder blue tee stretched as she heaved her bosom. “Make! Them! Act! Like! Christians!”

The thing about soccer and compassion, at least for me, is that they go hand in hand and make me a good priest. When I play soccer, I’m patient and wise. When I do well at the job I love, I’m a focused powerhouse on the field.

But I hadn’t played soccer in almost four months, since I’d moved here from Chicago’s south side, the longest I’d ever gone without a team. Even when I’d torn up my knee in college, I’d had the team. And I needed that camaraderie, the physical outlet of my body cleansed by sweat and effort and stretching beyond my limits. It restoreth my soul.

Without it—well, let’s just say when folks like Bova got trying, instead of offering compassion, I just wanted to kick her and the other five members of the committee in the shins—studs up.

This proved how badly I needed to get those last three names for the roster of Middelburg’s new women’s soccer team. There hadn’t been a women’s team in town since my old church group, The Well’s Belles, had fallen away ten years ago. Except for an occasional reunion game, nothing. If I didn’t get a team together and start playing soon—

Bova slapped her hand onto a green sheet tacked in the center of the parish bulletin board. I swear I saw the thin clapboard of the hundred-plus-year-old walls shake. “I! Did Not! Approve! This! Posting!”

I peeled my black clergy shirt away from my breastbone. The church had loads of charm, but no air-conditioning. I wished for another four inches on top of my six-foot height so I could escape the press and feel a cool breeze.

Everyone stared at me. My struggle not to lash out had rendered me silent for several long seconds. *Help, help, help*, I prayed silently as I looked down at the members of my flock and tried for a slightly confused expression. “Can we back up? I’m still unclear about the emergency.”

Bova had called me at home, on my day off, screaming

about *An Emergency! The Zaloumi brothers! At church! Need a priest. Now! Life and Death!* I told her to call nine-one-one, dived into my clergy clothes, ran wet fingers through my short black and chestnut hair and nearly broke the land speed record driving to town. I barreled through the church door, my stole in one hand and the bottle of emergency holy oil from my glove compartment gripped in the other—and I’d run smack into the whole committee held captive by Bova.

Bova slapped the offending green sheet again. Hair clung to her damp forehead. “Someone hung an announcement! Without my permission! Make them obey the rules! Like Christians! Not! Like! Wild! Animals!” She whacked the board again for emphasis.

“Hand her a top hat and a whip,” muttered the Zaloumi Twin wearing an Old Guys Rule ball cap. I shot him a look and both of their reedy ninety-four year-old bodies bent in unison.

Bova stabbed a finger at them. “They did it! Undermining my authority! Again! Make them stop!”

Frustration coiled in my legs. I really didn’t want to be a bitch to these folks, members of my flock. I didn’t want to have to bite my tongue either. I wanted to take these quirks of small-town life less seriously. Help them be good to each other.

Kitty Gellar, Senior Warden of the church, cleared her throat and everyone turned. Her bird-thin body looked unflappably cool inside her standard polyester black suit and high-collared blouse. She had lived eighty-some years as an Episcopalian in Middelburg, Michigan, so when she *abem*-ed other Episcopalians listened. “Father,” she said to me, though I hated it when she called me that, “perhaps we could move this discussion to the parish house?”

Next door. Air-conditioning.

“Yes,” said mousey commission member Isabella Koontz.

The parish’s extravagantly beautiful temporary secretary Ashleigh Moore pushed open the door and the Zaloumis turned to follow.

“No!” Bova punched her hips again and the chickadees nearly

took flight. “I want this solved! At the scene! Of the crime!”

As I watched Bova’s chickadees expand and contract, I heard the theme from *Mission Impossible* playing in my head—the old soundtrack I’d heard as a kid watching reruns on lazy weekends with my dad in the basement den. You know the one with the fuse burning fast and short?

Just three more for the team roster, I thought, trying to compose my face so I looked like I was considering the situation at hand. *Three more women in the next ten days and you’ll have the Well’s Belles resurrected.*

I tried not to sigh out loud and looked again at the flyer, alone in the middle of the empty bulletin board. “This says that starting Sunday we’ll offer both bread and wafers for communion and that people can have their choice.”

“Exactly!” Bova nodded triumphantly, as if all were now made clear.

I was still lost. “It’s Committee on Liturgy business.”

“No! It isn’t! It’s the Zaloumis! Meddling again!”

Eddie and Leon Zaloumi stared back at me with four identical brown eyes. The brothers were meddlers who acted half of my age—which is thirty-four—most of the time. In the three months I’d been at this parish they’d put peeper frogs in the ladies’ room and brought me snakes just for fun. Doing something just to get a rise out of Bova—who was easily riseable—would be their MO.

“Did you gentlemen put this here?” I asked.

“Yes, Reverend,” the Twins said together.

“Are you still part of the Committee on Liturgy?”

Identical nods.

“But I didn’t approve it!” Bova said. “Any of it.”

“You know,” Ashleigh interjected from her spot nearest the door, “the committee did approve both bread and wafers starting, like, this Sunday.”

“No!” Bova’s chickadeed bosom bounced. “Bread only! Traditional communion! The way Jesus himself did it!”

Oh for God’s sake. My right foot jiggled.

The Zaloumis shook their heads and Isabella winced.

“Want me to print the minutes?” Ashleigh offered, trying again to escape back to the cool offices next door.

“Not necessary,” Kitty pronounced. “Father, what was decided at the meeting?”

I shrank about six inches. Kitty was the only person, other than my ex, Jamie, who could make me feel so small so fast.

“I wasn’t there.” The one meeting I’d missed in the last three months. I’d been trying to recruit a few soccer players after the big women’s coffee hour at the Christian middle school.

“There will be no changes!” Sweat popped out across Bova’s forehead. “That’s the announcement that should be here! I made a flyer!” She bit her lip.

Leon poked Eddie—or maybe the other way around—looking satisfied.

Energy buzzed across my skin and suddenly I got it. The committee *had* decided to offer both, but Bova didn’t like the decision. So she’d decided to announce that there’d be no change. She knew Isabella would never speak up against her publicly, and Kitty and I hadn’t been to the meeting and if the Zaloumis protested, no one would believe them. So the Twins had pre-empted her with their own flyer. Just like a give-and-go on the eighteen yard line. The defender had no idea what had just happened. So Bova, instead of just ripping down their flyer and going on her merry way, had decided to start a war.

Well, Lonnie, they hired you to reconcile folks of the congregation. How about some reconciling? Thus sayeth the voice in my head.

Or some old fashioned head-knocking. “The thing is,” I said out loud, “I’m the one with authority over the worship service.” *Supposedly.* “And none of this got run by me.”

Eddie and Leon shrugged their bony shoulders inside their matching plaid cotton shirts.

“Um, like, I hear the phone ringing?” Ashleigh waved her squared black fingernails toward the doorway. “And I don’t even, you know, get the wafer thing? We don’t do that at the CLOSER churches.”

Christ the Lord’s Own Sainted Elect Reformed churches

comprised seventeen of the twenty churches in Middelburg and almost ninety-eight percent of its inhabitants.

“Go.” I turned to the board and tapped the silver thumbtack. “If this is what the committee decided, then it stays.”

The Zaloumi without the hat pumped a fist.

“No!” Bova gripped the green sheet.

I placed a hand against her arm. “Don’t touch it.”

“I’m chair. I post notices! They broke the rules!”

“Actually,” said Kitty, “you’re threatening to break another rule right now.”

“Wh-what?” Bova blinked. Like I said, no one messed with Kitty.

“The flyer was posted by members of the appropriate committee. That’s allowed.” Kitty’s voice reminded me of a brick wall. Rough, but no cracks. “So you’d need their permission to remove it.”

“But I *am* the committee!” Bova crossed her arms in front of her stomach, squinching the embroidered chickadees into a long kiss.

I looked at the others, hoping someone might cut this poor woman some kindness. Not that she deserved it, but if we all only got what we deserved, where would we be?

The Old Guys Rule Zaloumi scratched his whiskered neck. “Tell you what. I’ll flip you for it.”

I remembered this was Leon, because of the scar that cut his left eyebrow in two. Left, L, Leon.

He pulled out a quarter and tossed it. “Call it.”

“I will not!” said Bova.

“Tails, it stays,” said Eddie.

Leon snatched the coin out of the air and smacked it onto his forearm, then glanced at it. “Tails it is.” He scooped it back into his pocket. “Fraid the flyer stays.”

No one else noticed that Leon hadn’t shown his coin. It could have been heads for all we knew.

Bova looked at me. “This is the problem in this congregation. Lack of reverence. Lack of respect.” She pulled her spine straight.

“It’s no wonder the whole town—”

“No wonder the whole town what?” My blood pressure boiled at the jab.

“Talks.” Bova looked at her feet, half smiling, voice low. “About you being—you know.”

My heart leapt into a sprint. Jamie had been in town last spring when I’d almost died in my own front yard. She’d ditched me and returned to Hyde Park the next day, but enough people had seen her and I together. Had someone figured out I’m gay?

“Reverend?” Isabella asked.

I raised an eyebrow trying to look cool. “About my being a woman, you mean?”

Bova shook her head. “Much worse.”

I wondered if the others could hear my heart thrashing against my chest in the tiny, hot room.

“For one thing, most days, you don’t even wear the right clothes,” she continued.

I wore clergy clothes, especially the hot plastic collar, only on Sundays or special occasions. The official outfit did not help people relax.

“And you poked your nose in when Vance got murdered last spring,” Bova said. “As if you liked it. And then you took the dead guy’s dog home! It’s strange!”

“Saving the innocent always is,” said Eddie, straight-faced.

“Specially ’round here,” Leon added.

Bova ignored them.

“She caught the murderer!” Isabella said.

“Some say she *brought* the murderer,” Bova said.

“Some shouldn’t be speaking at all.” Kitty crinkled her lips.

Red flooded across Bova’s neck. “Well, all I’m saying is that people are saying she moved to town and next thing, Middelburg has its first murder in decades.”

Kitty inclined her head. “Anything else?”

I wished she hadn’t asked as Bova nodded with importance.

“She lives out of town. In the woods. Alone.” Bova scanned the room, drinking in her audience’s attention. “And everyone

knows about the gay thing.”

I felt my knees buckle. *Breathe.*

“What kind of person can do that?” Bova asked.

The room swam.

“To a God-fearing religion professor?” Bova finished.

I blinked. “What?” She’d lost me. “Do what? Are you talking about Guy Rittenga?” He was the only religion professor I knew. “He’s married.” What did that have to do with me being gay?

“You talked him into giving that speech about gays up at the college’s graduation and got him fired!” Bova jammed her hands on her hips again.

So “the gay thing” wasn’t about my sexuality! But what was it about? “But Guy retired.” I looked around for support but everyone avoided my eyes.

Bova humphed at my naïveté. “That’s what he says, probably to save face. But everyone knows they really fired him. Poor Maris.” She shifted her weight to one hip. “Why do you think you can’t get people to sign up for a new soccer team?”

“Because they are afraid of the Episcopal church,” I said. “Don’t want to do anything that isn’t associated with a CLOSER church. That’s why this team will help our congregation’s relationship with the town.”

“No. Because people don’t want to be part of anything you’re running,” Bova said. “They think you’re—” She stopped, looking satisfied.

My heart jumped again. Maybe I hadn’t escaped so easily. “They think I’m what?”

“In league with the antichrist,” Bova said, enunciating each word with a politician’s flair.

Is that all? Laughter bubbled out of my chest. “Are you kidding me?”

“*That* explains it,” said Leon Zaloumi. “She lives in the woods. Alone.” He tossed his hands above his head. “She keeps a black animal.”

Eddie nodded. “She didn’t run or scream when we brought those milk snakes in. Snakes bein’ allied with the devil ’n’ all—

this explains it.”

“Explains what?” Isabella asked. She was too innocent to know better.

“She’s a witch,” said Leon. Eddie nodded. The others snickered. Even Kitty smiled.

“This is not a joke!” Red flooded from Bova’s neck into her face. “I’m talking about being able to hold my head up in this town when people think my priest is a servant of the devil!” She looked me up and down. “Reverend.”

Silence.

Yep, I definitely needed a soccer team to burn off this stress. Sweat dripped down my spine. I tried to latch onto anything compassionate and respectful to say, but the only things floating through my head were four-letter words. Still, being a rumored consort of the devil was better than being outed, at least in Middelburg.

Suddenly, the theme song from Mighty Mouse flew from my pants pocket and cut through the room.

Caller ID: Marion Freeley. Best friend extraordinaire. Coming to save the day.

Phone clock: 1:23.

I switched the ringer off. “It’s an emergency. I have to go.”

“Shall I tell Altar Guild to accommodate wafers when they set up Sunday morning?” Isabella asked.

Mental note: bug Isabella. “Yes.” I tapped the green sheet on the bulletin board. “This stays put. Starting Sunday we’ll serve both bread and wafers at communion. I’ll order the wafers.”

“Already done,” said Isabella, patting her temples with a tissue.

Everyone edged toward the exit.

“Wafers taste like stale toast,” Bova muttered. “Who would serve that to the Lord our God?”

“Then we’ll raise the chalice over them,” Eddie said, “and toast the wafers with the wine.”

“A toast for the toast,” said Leon.

Bova narrowed her eyes at me. “We’ll just see what the bishop

has to say about all this.”

“Enough.” Kitty raised her hand as if about to swat a couple of mosquitos.

If we’d had a ball and a goal, we could have worked it out right there, Bova and I, a one-on-one shoot-out. That’s the beauty of soccer—clean. Conclusive. As it was I had to suffer a delay of game. “We’ll continue this discussion,” I said, “*both* discussions—at our meeting Monday morning.”

Kitty placed her hand on Bova’s arm. “Come along. I’ll buy you a nice glass of iced tea.”

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

