

The Hardest Thing: A Dan Stagg Mystery

James Lear

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Although packed with a plethora of hardcore sex scenes, James Lear's *The Hardest Thing* contains, at its core, a fine private detective mystery novel in this seventh in a growing list of similar works by the author. Any reader skimming it for the sexy parts will miss out on what is actually quite a good story.

Lear can turn a phrase and gives his hero, ex-Marine Dan Stagg, some powerful and poignant lines. "Love died when a sniper's bullet found its target in Helmand," is one of the best of the latter. It is evocative of the emotion the hero felt for a fellow marine who fell in Afghanistan and helps the reader understand and connect with the lead character. "A gun is used for killing and wounding; if you want sweet music, get a clarinet," is homage to the Raymond Chandler school of hard-boiled detective fiction.

While one purpose of the story is to provide a setting for the graphic and at times rough sex, *The Hardest Thing* would not be out of place alongside the works of other current writers of detective stories if the sex scenes had been tamed down or limited in number. Dan Stagg is a troubled former soldier-turned-bouncer and bodyguard who gets sucked into shepherding a rather tragically abused boy toy out of harm's way. "Jody was cute, Jody was adorable," says Stagg of his charge, "but Jody had been a hustler since he was fourteen years old."

The key figure in a slimy businessman's sex ring of bribery and blackmail, Jody needs protecting—and Stagg, like so many similar wounded warrior figures in literature, is the reluctant but right man for the job.

While Lear's book may be meant for an audience hungry for gay sex, readers will find here a solid story to put that sex in context. The title, like that of Lear's other books (*The Back Passage*, *The Secret Tunnel*, *A Sticky End*, etc.) is as much a winking pun as it is a coy double entendre. It is a playful bit of titillation meant to advertise the erotic rather than the detective story content of the novel, and there is plenty of the former to satiate any fan of the genre.

The Hardest Thing is directed at, and will satisfy, its target audience—one that wants its sex hard, steamy, and frequent—yet will also surprise and reward that audience with a story that is written well enough to make them want to read it, rather than just flip the pages to the hot parts.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (April 8, 2013)

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