

## **A Disturbed Girl's Redemption, by James Howell**

### **Prologue**

I am nailed to a bed and a thousand sniffing white rats are scampering over my naked body.

Tiny claws prick my hypersensitive skin and bristly noses nudge and scour every crease.

Completely paralysed, I can only twitch on my back and recoil inwardly as thin tails drag across my eyelids, whiskers slide up my nostrils, sharp teeth nibble my nipples and furry faces dip into my belly button and pant between my legs.

I want to scream but dare not open my mouth in case one settles inside.

My mind is tormented by the childhood memory of a visit to a waxwork torture museum. Plastic rats were trapped under a hot lamp strapped to the torso of a mannequin. To save themselves from being cooked alive, they had to chew their way through the hapless victim.

This is the hell that has been chosen for me and I will endure this vile tide of diseased fur until infinity comes to an end.

But wait.

The squeaks suddenly become bleeps and the omnipotent physical revulsion morphs into more specific, localised agony. My abdomen is heaving unbearably, my right thigh is throbbing and every deep breath sends a sharp lance of pain across my chest to my left shoulder.

The bleeps are slow, controlled and electronic and I have the sensation that fluid is being pumped into my system through a hole in my arm.

My mind jolts and suddenly I am surfing the peculiar border that separates the unconscious nightmares from the living ones. The brain flip-flops between the two worlds, unsure which of the two evils will be lesser.

A faint glow of light begins tugging me towards consciousness, but I hesitate. Do I really want to return to this place or would the rats at least be a more predictable torment?

I realise that the electronic bleeps are the sound of my bruised heart clinging to life, but can my broken body and ruined mind cope with another round?

I make the decision and start slipping back to the rats, when suddenly the face of a little girl appears and a tiny voice calls "mummy". Abruptly, I'm snatched back from the brink of blackness and power courses through my veins. I remember tearing a man apart with two

strangers and then a fight to the death inside a mountain. The little girl is someone precious who I must save, but she is held hostage by someone evil. This evil man looks like a rodent and I must find him, crush him and rescue the little girl.

The rodent says the word "Hannah" and I urgently sift through the notes in my brain to recall what this means.

Another word attaches to it and this word is "Harker".

Hannah Harker.

It's a name.

It's my name.

I am Hannah Harker.

There is static for a few moments and then my systems re-boot. I am Hannah Harker, the little girl is my daughter and the rodent I must kill is called Virgil.

My eyes open cautiously – frightened of the light – and I see I am in a bed in a hospital recovery room. Futuristic monitors observe my vital signs and a suspended plastic pouch drips saline solution in my bloodstream through an intravenous tube. There are no cards, flowers or fruit on the small bedside table.

I hear a click as a door opens and then the cushioned sound of padded shoes approaching. I'm unable to lift or twist my head more than a couple of centimetres but I can just make out a large figure in a long white coat. The word "doctor" crawls unconvincingly from my mouth.

The figure turns and approaches my bed. He is a black man with a shaved head and I can see that he has the firm expression of a professional, but not the benevolent or reassuring look that you might expect from a medical expert.

"I am not a doctor," the man whispers quietly, his accent French, "but the doctor sends you his warmest regards."

Internal alarms start ringing and my body tenses, but it is too late to protect myself in such a prone position flat on my back. The man sadistically tears the saline drip from my forearm then climbs onto the bed, straddles me and pushes a thick pillow down onto my face.