

# Head Games by Eileen Dreyer

## Excerpt

Molly Burke was going to die because of a clown.

And not just any clown. An alien clown. With AIDS.

She really had to quit. It was all she could think as she lay splayed out on the floor of Trauma Room Six with a screaming, two-hundred-pound psychotic sitting on her chest.

"Clowns!" the woman howled from above her, spittle flying across Molly's face like a lawn sprinkler. She was leaning so close Molly couldn't possibly miss the glitter of fresh blood on the butcher knife her new patient wielded in her face. "Big clowns!"

If it hadn't been her own blood Molly was looking at on that monstrous knife, this whole thing would have been really funny. It would be later, she decided, when she told it over drinks at the local watering hole. She'd make sure it sounded funny.

Then she'd come back into work and quit.

If she lasted that long.

She was just getting too old for trauma. Her reflexes had failed her. And without her reflexes, a trauma center was the last place Molly should be working. Especially when she couldn't spot a perfect ten on the crazy meter until it was too late.

"Big clowns with red noses."

Triage had announced a new patient to room six. Shortness of breath and chest pain. Twenty-nine-year-old female. Well, the twenty-nine-year-old female had been short of breath, all right. She'd been short of breath because she'd been holding it. Against contamination from those AIDS-infected clowns—to whom Molly evidently bore a striking resemblance. By the time Molly had caught on to the urgency of the problem, she'd been flat on her back on the floor being held down by a betrayed paranoid schizophrenic in full cry.

With a knife.

"They want the Water Child," the woman intoned in a high, eerie voice as she rocked back and forth on Molly's much-abused sternum. "They want to kidnap him and give him AIDS. They told me."

"The Water Child?" Molly managed on a gasp and a wriggle. Maybe if she could just dislodge that massive knee from her neck...

"Yes-s-s-s-s," the woman hissed, sounding distressingly like Gollum. "Didn't you see them? They're waiting for him."

"I didn't... see anybody. Maybe if I could look."

She was beginning to lose brain cells here. She had to get to the panic button on the wall so she could sound the alarm for the cavalry. She had to figure out what the Water Child was so she could climb inside the delusion and herd this crazy woman into a safety net.

She had to get her butt off this terrazzo floor before her pelvis shattered like an eggshell.

"Please," she begged. "Let me help you."

The patient stared at her. "All right."

And then, as precisely as a debutante, she simply rose to her feet. Molly sucked in her first breath in about ten minutes and scrambled up after her.

"Thank you," she rasped. "Now I can help you look."

That was when she saw the blood on the floor. Clots of it. Right beneath the patient, who Molly now realized was wearing a grimy, full-length oversize raincoat and galoshes, the kind of schizophrenic uniform that made Molly really nervous. Even without the knife.

And then Molly heard the mewling, like a kitten. From one of the big, saggy pockets.

Great, she thought. Knives and animals. All they needed was a few candles and they'd have a scene from Rosemary's Baby.

"Now then," Molly said in a calm, supportive voice. "Clowns, right? We're looking for clowns? How 'bout if I check the hallway?"

"No. Help me offer up the Water Child. He's the protection... his gift will end the AIDS...."

His gift. His gift.

And Molly, shaky and sweaty with adrenaline, couldn't think straight enough to decipher the code.

"What's your name?" she asked gently, taking another small step toward the wall and that big red panic button.

The woman stiffened. "Why, Water Mother, of course."

"Of course..."

Water Mother.

Molly stumbled to a halt. She looked down at the blood. She heard that curious mewling sound again. She finally put the pieces together.

"Holy shit..."

The clowns might have been a delusion. The Water Child wasn't. The Water Child that crazy bitch was about to sacrifice with her big, bloody knife. And she was already reaching into the pocket of that raincoat.