

Six Years Later . . .



CHAPTER 1

Clay didn't think he was the right dragon for a Big Heroic Destiny.

Oh, he wanted to be. He wanted to be the great MudWing savior of the dragon world, glorious and brave. He wanted to do all the wonderful things expected of him. He wanted to look at the world, figure out what was broken, and fix it.

But he wasn't a natural-hatched hero. He had no legendary qualities at all. He liked sleeping more than studying, and he kept losing chickens in the caves during hunting practice because he was paying attention to his friends instead of watching for feathers.

He was all right at fighting. But "all right" wasn't going to stop the war and save the dragon tribes. He needed to be extraordinary. He was the biggest dragonet, so he was supposed to be the scary, tough one. The minders wanted him to be *terrifyingly dangerous*.

Clay felt about as dangerous as cauliflower.

"Fight!" his attacker howled, flinging him across the cavern. Clay crashed into the rock wall and scrambled up again, trying to spread his mud-colored wings for balance. Red

talons raked at his face and he ducked away. "Come on," the red dragon snarled. "Stop holding back. Find the killer inside you and let it out."

"I'm trying!" Clay said. "Maybe if we could stop and talk about it —"

She lunged for him again. "Feint to the left! Roll right! Use your fire!" Clay tried to duck under her wing to attack her from below, but of course he rolled the wrong way. One of her talons smashed him to the ground, and he yelped with pain.

"WHICH LEFT WAS THAT, USELESS?" Kestrel bellowed in his ear. "Are all MudWings this stupid? OR ARE YOU JUST DEAF?"

Well, if you keep that up, I will be soon, Clay thought. The SkyWing lifted her claws and he wriggled free.

"I don't know about other MudWings," he protested, licking his sore talons. "Obviously. But perhaps we could try fighting without all the *shouting* and see —" He stopped, hearing the familiar hiss that came before one of Kestrel's fire attacks.

He threw his wings over his head, tucked his long neck in, and rolled into the maze of stalagmites that studded one corner of the cave. Flames blasted the rocks around him, singeing the tip of his tail.

"Coward!" the older dragon bellowed. She smashed one of the rock columns into a shower of sharp black pebbles. Clay covered his eyes and almost immediately felt her stamp down hard on his tail.