

THE INSIDE BATTLE

Melanie Sumrow



YELLOW JACKET

To Mom, for encouraging me to find my voice

In honor of veterans and their families, for your many sacrifices

*In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies,
but the silence of our friends.*

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

ONE

They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, so I guess that makes me an orange. I'm nothing like my dad.

"Rebel," Aunt Birdie says gently. "I told you to get your father." She slides a pan back and forth on the cooktop as she fries bacon. It sizzles and pops, the smoky smell filling our kitchen. I drop my chocolate Pop-Tart onto my plate. Maybe if I loaded up on more protein, I'd get muscles like Dad's.

I flex my left arm and squeeze my scrawny bicep with my other hand.

Aunt Birdie laughs when she sees what I'm doing.

My arm drops to my side. "One more time?" I ask, pulling my robot, a rectangular-shaped block, backward until he touches the newspaper. "You know how Dad *hates* QUEN-10."

Dad's a Marine—an actual American hero—and he got

home from Afghanistan several months ago. Or, really, the government sent him home. He likes things the way he likes them.

“One more,” my aunt says, returning her focus to the browning bacon. I set the timer on my watch and release my robot.

QUEN-10, who’s a little wider than a Pop-Tart with quarter-sized wheels, rolls across our kitchen table. “Come on,” I say as he passes the saltshaker. It doesn’t look like he’s going to stop, but then he makes an abrupt right-angle turn, avoiding the jar of grape jelly. I smile. He’s working.

I check my watch and finish my milk. “Come on,” I say again, wiping the wet mustache from my upper lip with the back of my hand.

The shovel attachment on QUEN-10 drops with a whizzing sound and then scoops a small plastic disc from the table and flips it over. “Yes!” My robot slides the disc next to the target area—the tub of butter—to bring my starting score to twenty-five points.

Aunt Birdie sets a plate of toast on the end of the table. “Time’s up, kid.”

QUEN-10 glides in reverse and returns to home base—the newspaper. I stop the timer. “If I’m going to get more

points than Ajeet, I have to make sure I can finish at least eight missions in under two-and-a-half minutes.”

Aunt Birdie hovers, drumming her glittery nails on the table. “I thought you guys were BFFs.”

I don’t even try to hide my eye-roll. I turned thirteen a few weeks ago and now my aunt thinks she’s cool when she uses “teen speak” on me.

She puts her hands on her hips, covering BB-8 on the Star Wars scrubs I gave her last Christmas. She’s trying to pretend she’s angry, but then smiles. “Don’t give me that look, young man. I know you know what BFF means.”

“Right,” I whisper so Dad doesn’t hear. “Ajeet and I are friends.”

She gives me a knowing nod. “Your dad’s taking you to school today.”

My shoulders tense.

“It’ll be okay,” she says, giving me a pat on the back. “Now clean this up and go get him for me.”

I turn off QUEN-10 and lower him into the plastic crate next to my foot. My hand sweeps across the table, corralling the remaining Lego pieces before I drop them next to my robot.

“Your dad needs to eat his breakfast before that job

interview this morning.” Aunt Birdie then lowers the pans into the sudsy sink water with a splash.

I quickly scan the table, making sure everything’s in place, and nestle the saltshaker against the pepper before positioning them to the right of Dad’s plate. “Who’s he interviewing with this time?” My dad has survived five deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. But he hasn’t been able to land a job now that he’s home in Amarillo, Texas.

Aunt Birdie sits in her chair across from me and bites into her crispy bacon. “It’s that mechanic position down at the stockyards.” She swallows and lowers her voice. “I think it’d be good for him. Might give him a healthier routine.”

Dad doesn’t like to talk about it, but he has a lot of bad memories from being a Marine, and they sneak up on him sometimes. “He’ll get it,” I say, trying to sound confident. I don’t like seeing Aunt Birdie so worried. And lately, she worries a lot about Dad.

A weak smile crosses her face as she nods. “Go on. You know how he gets when he hasn’t eaten his breakfast.” She laughs, but it comes out sounding sad.

I stand and approach the wooden bench that sits beneath our coat pegs, trying my best to ignore the bug-out bags Dad makes us keep lined along the floor in case of an apocalypse or government attack.

After placing my crate on the bench, I hurry down the long hallway, my steps muffled by the thick carpet. Our house belonged to my grandparents before they died. First my grandma, followed by my grandpa a month later. Aunt Birdie says he died of a broken heart, and since she's a nurse, I believe her.

The walls still hold the same pictures of my aunt and Dad with them getting older and taller as you move down the hallway.

At the end, there's a picture of Dad, standing in front of a tank with his platoon. He looks like a hero from one of those war movies. It was taken when he was in Iraq the first time. I was about two then.

I bite my lip and face the door to the basement. There's a KEEP OUT sign taped to it, but I knock anyway.

No response.

With my ear against the door, I try knocking again. "Dad?"

Still silence.

The door always sticks, so with one hand on the knob and my shoulder against the door, I push it open with a *pop* and stumble forward a bit. There's a dim light coming from the basement, but the wood-paneled wall blocks my view. "Dad?"

Nothing.

My fingertips slip across the flats and grooves in the paneling as I carefully descend the steep, carpeted steps.

As soon as I reach the floor, I can see that his bed is made like he's ready for someone to inspect it. He's dressed, but sits with his back to me. A white glow beams from his computer, highlighting the yellow flag with the rattlesnake that hangs above his desk.

I clear my throat, but he doesn't turn around. The picture of Mom, the one where she's laughing at Cadillac Ranch, sits on the desk to his left. It was taken a few months before she died.

To his right, I spot the handgun—the one he keeps loaded. My chest tightens. I really wish he didn't have that thing.

He's typing vigorously and, from the black sun and moon at the top of the screen, I can tell he's chatting with that militia group again: the Flag Bearers.

My fingers curl against my legs as I look to the right, where Dad has spent the last few months re-creating a battle scene on top of Grandma's old Ping-Pong table with toy soldiers, plastic tanks, and sand. He's even used cotton to mimic the smoke coming from a conquered city.

"Don't touch it," Dad barks, startling me.

I didn't even realize he'd turned around. He's pretty stealth like that. The muscles in his arms and chest bulge

beneath his cotton dress shirt. I raise my hands, as if surrendering. “I—I didn’t.”

From the light of the computer, I can see his clothes are pressed, but there’s still a shadow of stubble across his cheeks. He rubs his eyes. They’re red, which probably means he didn’t get any sleep again. Some nights, I can hear him pacing the house for hours.

He sighs; his muscles relax. “I’m sorry, bud. You startled me.”

“Breakfast is ready,” I say, thumbing toward the stairs.

Dad stares at me for a second, and suddenly, it feels like I’m the one being inspected. His eyes linger on my planetarium T-shirt before moving to my long, skinny legs and down to my running shoes that never run. I can tell he’s disappointed as usual.

“Aunt Birdie made eggs,” I say past the lump in my throat.

“I’ve got to finish this email.” He spins around, facing his computer. Immediately, his back stiffens. Dad curses and slams his fist against the desk, making the gun skitter across the surface. I jump as he starts pounding the keyboard again.

Forget it, I’ll just walk to school. I retreat up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

As I return to the kitchen, Aunt Birdie glances past me. “Where’s your dad?”

I'm a little winded from the stairs, but manage a shrug. "Busy?"

Her face twists as she snaps her fingers. "No, sir. He's not doing this to me today."

"I can walk," I offer, begging her with my eyes: *Please don't make me ask him again.*

And it works. Kind of. She stomps past me, her Crocs thudding along the hallway. "Nathan," she calls to the basement.

My fingers twist the bottom of my T-shirt. I hope Dad doesn't think I sent her.

"Breakfast is ready. You've got that interview this morning," she says. "And you need to take your son to school."

"Just give me a second!" Dad shouts.

I cringe.

"We don't have a second," Aunt Birdie answers. "You know I'm helping with that root canal this morning, and Rebel needs to get to school on time."

I lift my backpack from the peg and sling the strap over my shoulder. "Really, I can walk," I say as she enters the kitchen.

"Carrying all of your robotics stuff?" She shakes her head.

I nod and my foot accidentally knocks into one of Dad's bug-out bags. He's assembled one for each of us—a black backpack filled with dehydrated food, dry matches, a

hunting knife, and more stuff I don't know how to use. The bag tips away from my foot, but thankfully nothing falls out.

"Fine, I'm here," Dad says to Aunt Birdie as he brushes past me. I scramble to straighten the tipped backpack. He scowls; my hand comes off the bag. "Didn't I tell you I'd be up?"

I nod. "Yes, sir." Even though he didn't.

The legs of his chair scrape against the tile floor before he sits and snatches his fork, jabbing it toward his sister. "You're worse than a drill sergeant." He stabs his scrambled eggs and stuffs them inside his mouth. After a few chews, his shoulders soften. "But you sure make a better breakfast," he says, savoring the bite in his mouth before he shovels in more eggs.

Aunt Birdie zips toward her jacket, snatching it from the peg, while I grab my spare-parts crate off the bench. You never know when you might need something in the heat of competition. Then I get the crate with QUEN-10 and stack it on top.

Out of nowhere, Aunt Birdie sneaks up on me and kisses my cheek.

"Hey," I protest, leaning away from her. With my hands so full, I can't wipe it off. "Not while I'm defenseless."

She grins. "Good luck today. And don't forget your jacket," she says, pointing to my *Man Vs Robot* hoodie hanging against the wall.

I wrinkle my nose. I hate how she still treats me like a baby. Like I don't know when to wear my jacket or when to brush. I run my tongue across my gritty teeth. Oops.

"He's not a baby," Dad mutters, his mouth half-full of toast. "You shouldn't treat him like one."

Aunt Birdie presses her lips together, like she's holding something in. Probably her favorite curse word.

I shrug. "The man's got a point?"

She shakes her head. "Rebel, you'll do great today," she says and hurries toward the front door, slamming it shut.

Dad startles. His face tightens when he realizes I saw him jump.

Suddenly, I wish Aunt Birdie was still here.

But then he forces a deep breath and wipes his mouth with a napkin. "I guess you're ready to hit the road, too, huh?"

My stomach churns Pop-Tart, milk, and nerves. I eye my jacket on the hook and decide against it. "Yes, sir," I say with a quick nod before following him.

Outside, the late-spring wind swirls around me. Goose bumps lift along my arms. I shiver and hope Dad doesn't notice.

Aunt Birdie toots her car horn and pulls away from our house with a wave. I wish she could drive me to school today.

She always knows what to say to help keep me calm before a big test or competition.

Dad sticks his head out the driver's-side window on his pickup. "You getting in or what?"

I hurry around the front of his spotless maroon truck, shrugging my shoulders to my ears, trying to keep my neck warm. There's a new sticker in the lower corner of Dad's windshield: PROUD MEMBER over a black sun and a moon with FLAG BEARERS at the bottom.

When did he get that?

The wind gusts and pushes me sideways. I gulp, trying to keep everything upright and my breakfast down. My hands are so full, I bumble to open the passenger-side door, trying not to scratch Dad's truck, while attempting to balance my crates.

I finally get the door open and sense Dad's frustration without even looking at him.

"Sorry," I say as I drop the crates and my backpack onto the floorboard and get in.

The truck's engine roars, along with the radio. Dad likes to listen to talk radio. On full volume. Some guy's griping about how we should close our country's borders to all foreigners because they're stealing the jobs of real,

red-blooded Americans. Whatever that's supposed to mean.

I'd change the station—Aunt Birdie and I listen to oldies—but Dad won't let me. He moves his jaw side to side and rolls his thick neck, like he's trying to relax. "When does spring training start?" Dad asks over the radio. He slides the truck into gear; the engine rumbles as we speed down our street.

I shift when we take a right so fast, the tires squeal. I was kind of hoping to avoid this conversation. "Already did."

"What?" he shouts. Dad and basically everyone in west Texas thinks there's only one sport every boy—even the shrimpy ones—should play: football.

"It started a couple of months ago," I say a little louder.

Dad slides a stiff hand across the side of his dark crew cut. He turns left at the neighborhood park. A mom with a patterned headscarf is pushing her toddler on the swings. My hand grips the armrest. Dad's always been a bit prejudiced. But lately, it seems to have gotten so much worse. I hope he doesn't see the woman and say something cruel.

Thankfully, he doesn't seem to notice as he zooms past. I actually manage to breathe until he asks, "So why aren't you bringing workout clothes to school?"

I want to scream: *Because I stink at football! At anything that has to do with sports or using my body in any sort of*

coordinated way! Can't you see I didn't inherit your manly muscles or superhero strength?

Instead, I mumble, "Robotics and football practice are at the same time."

"So do football," he says, like it's the obvious solution.

My armpits are getting sweaty. I hope the deodorant Aunt Birdie bought really does work like the commercial says: *when you need it most*. I clear my throat. "I'm already doing robotics."

Dad glances at QUEN-10 for a second before his eyes return to the road. "Aren't you getting a little too old to play with these toys?"

I wince.

"Look, I'm only trying to help you." He nods to himself. "The world's tough out there. You need to be competitive."

I move the vent with my hand, trying to get more air, but nothing comes out. "There's a competition this afternoon," I argue.

"A *toy* competition?" He zips through a stop sign. "You need to be tough. And football helps you with that. You want to be a winner, right?"

I shrug. "I guess."

"You *guess*?"

Not this again. Not today, when I'm already nervous

about the competition. I turn away from his glare and lean my forehead against the cool window, willing us to get to school already.

The radio host is still screaming about the “evils of immigrants.” Dad lowers the volume. “You know, the government’s been letting all these foreigners in.”

Ugh. If I throw up, will he stop talking?

“And, if you’re not careful, they’re going to take over. We have to be ready.”

It feels like I’m suffocating. My breath fogs the glass as we pass Ajeet’s house on the corner and finally, *finally* reach the school.

But then I spot my best friend, nestling his robot between his jacket and shirt as he run-walks across the school’s lawn.

“God, they really are everywhere.” Dad points to Ajeet as he struggles against the wind.

The collar on my T-shirt suddenly feels too tight.

“Oh, look. He’s got a toy, too,” Dad says sarcastically. We come to a stop at the end of the carpool line. “Do you know him?”

I throw open the door. “Here’s good,” I mutter, wanting to escape.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Dad asks. “Let me pull up first.”

“That’s okay.” I jump from the truck, scrambling to grab my backpack and crates. The wind blows against my back, drying my sweat. I force myself not to shiver as I jostle QUEN-10 and the parts box, and then elbow the door closed.

My eyes zero in on the school’s entrance. I know it’s wrong, but if I hurry, Dad won’t see me talking to Ajeet. I rush along the sidewalk.

“Rebel,” my friend calls.

Oh, no.

“Hey!” Ajeet’s shoes glide across the grass, making a whooshing sound. “Wait up.”

I go faster, but then he cuts me off. “You deaf or something? I’m talking to you.”

My gaze drops to a crack in the sidewalk. “Uh, sorry.”

“Rebel!”

My knees tremble at the sound of Dad’s rough voice. He’s still grasping the steering wheel with one hand while leaning toward the open passenger-side window.

Kids rush past us. “Is that your dad?” Ajeet asks and then waves. “Hi, Mr. Mercer!”

“What are you doing?” I say under my breath, pushing his hand down. Dad scowls. My heart beats fast. “Let’s go inside.”

My friend's eyebrows knit in confusion.

"Look at me," Dad barks. He's blocking the carpool line, but he doesn't care. "That's an order, young man!"

Ajeet's mouth falls open; my toes clench the insides of my shoes.

Cars honk as I follow Dad's order.

His face is red. "We are not finished here."

I want to shout: *Yes, we are!* I want to grab Ajeet by the shoulder and scream: *This is my friend; it shouldn't matter what he looks like!*

But I don't.

Like the coward I am, I turn and run.