

head  
above  
water

S . L . R O T T M A N

  
PEACHTREE  
ATLANTA

*Also by S. L. Rottman*

HERO  
ROUGH WATERS  
STETSON



A Freestone Publication

Published by  
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS, LTD.  
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue  
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112

[www.peachtree-online.com](http://www.peachtree-online.com)

Text © 1999 by S. L. Rottman  
Jacket illustration © 1999 by Suzy Schultz

First trade paperback edition published in April 2003

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Jacket and book design by Loraine M. Balsik  
Composition by Melanie M. McMahon

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 (trade paperback)  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 (hardcover)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Rottman, S.L.

Head above water / S.L. Rottman. -- 1st ed.  
p. cm.

Summary: Skye, a high school junior, tries to find the time for both family obligations and personal interests, which include caring for her brother who has Down syndrome, dating her first boyfriend, and swimming competitively.

ISBN 1-56145-185-1 (hardcover)

ISBN 1-56145-238-6 (trade paperback)

[1. High schools Fiction. 2. Schools Fiction. 3. Down syndrome Fiction. 4. Mentally handicapped Fiction. 5. Swimming Fiction.]

I. Title.

PZ7.R7534Hd 1999

[Fic]--dc21

99-26030

CIP

# CHAPTER ONE

When I got to the locker room, everyone else was already on deck. I made record time changing, but by the time I got out there, the rest of the team was in the water. I tossed my bag on a bench and went directly to Coach Sullivan.

“Sorry I’m late, Coach,” I said, my heart pounding. This was the first time I had ever been late to practice.

“Excused?” he asked without looking up from his clipboard.

“No.”

“Stretch out and get in. Stay late tonight.”

I nodded and went through the stretches as quickly as I could without leaving out any of the essential ones. Coach would know if I skipped too many of them. And I knew the importance of stretching before getting in the water. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt myself by doing something stupid.

Hannah and I shared the distance lane with Deb and Christie. They were already halfway through warm-up, so I waited for an opening to get in and swim with them.

I took a breath and did a lazy dive into the water. It felt jarringly cool, as it always did. I knew the goose bumps would be gone before I had completed my first lap. I held a tight streamline, kicked short and strong, and got nearly fifteen yards out from the wall before I came up for a breath. Settling into my rhythm only took three or four strokes.

I had been swimming for so long, I could almost detach my mind from my body. Breathe, duck, turn, push, kick, pull, breathe, pull, pull, breathe, pull, pull, breathe, pull, pull. It had an almost hypnotic effect. I lived to swim. To feel the water slide down from my head to my toes. To watch the bottom of the pool slide by effortlessly. To listen to my breathing and the water splashing and to feel my hand slice through the still water in front of me, parting it and using it to my advantage. For me there was no other sport in the world.

When I was halfway down the pool and turned my head to breathe, I knew I'd see Sunny sitting in his spot on the bleachers. I always knew where to look for him, always knew he'd be there. I tried to picture what he had been wearing this morning when we left for school. It was a game I played, testing my memory, to see if I could remember. Today I couldn't. I had too many other things on my mind.

I turned my head, and there he was, shaggy blond head bent over his books, struggling with his homework. He was wearing his favorite Westwood High sweatshirt, which was a blue that brought out the color of his eyes.

I felt terrible about being late for practice. My best friend, Jenny, had insisted on talking to me after school

about something really important. I had to admit she had some exciting news. She wanted to tell me that Mike Banner had been asking her boyfriend about me. I had heard that Mike and DeAnna Garcia, a senior and a varsity cheerleader, had broken up at the end of the summer, right before school started, but I had never dreamed he would be interested in me. Jenny was sure he was going to ask me out.

*Forget it, I told myself. You've got too many other things to focus on.*

I turned my head back down, and I groaned out loud in the water when I released my breath. Sometimes I scream, if it's been a really bad day. The great thing about screaming underwater is that no one else can hear. And when I'm really angry or frustrated, I can tear through the water, beating it up, and by the time I finish a workout, I'm too tired to be angry anymore.

Pull, breathe, pull, pull, breathe, pull, pull, breathe, pull, pull, breathe, duck, turn, push, kick, pull. I put myself on autopilot and followed Christie's feet in front of me, staying just a few feet behind her toes, knowing it was Christie from the way her feet crossed over every third kick.

*I have a fair amount of homework tonight, so I'll give myself an hour and a half. And Sunny will need help. He has a test coming up in Western Civ, so I'll have to help him study. Another hour for quizzing him. Maybe I'll actually have time to watch a couple of TV shows tonight.*

I did a flip turn and started back down the lane.

*Dinner. What do we have in the kitchen? Some leftover macaroni. I can't remember if we have any chicken in the*

*freezer. Maybe tuna fish sandwiches and salad will do. Just once I'd like a day when I don't have to take care of everything.*

I took another breath and saw Sunny, head still bent over his notebook. He works so hard just for the little things. I really don't have the right to complain about my life.

Although Sunny is eighteen and my older brother, I pretty much take care of him because he has Down syndrome. He's a year and a half older than I am, but we're both juniors. His real name is Abraham Walter Johnson. My father began calling him Sunny before his first birthday, because Sunny was always smiling and happy. When I was born, my parents gave me the name Skye to match his nickname.

My dad liked to say that whenever his children were around, he'd have a Sunny Skye. Believe me, there's nothing anyone can say about our names that I haven't already heard. Sometimes I wish Dad had thought about what having these names would mean to us. Sunny never seemed to mind, but my name has always driven me crazy. No one ever spells it right, and half the time people ask me what my *real* name is.

Apparently the Sunny Skye wasn't enough to keep my dad happy, because he left us when I was only five. He sent checks and letters from time to time for the first three years or so, but we haven't heard from him at all in the last seven years.

Sometimes when I start to feel sorry for myself, I look at my mom. Life has been hard on her. Mom has to work two jobs, just to make ends meet. When she can, she puts a little money into savings for my college. She's a secretary in the

daytime and tends bar most nights at a restaurant downtown. But she always tries to find time for us. She doesn't always succeed, but knowing she tries means a lot. I don't know how she keeps it all together without going crazy.

Sundays are strictly reserved for family time, because it's the only full day of the week she has off. She gets up early and cleans the house before Sunny and I are even out of bed. Then we all have breakfast together and decide how to spend the rest of the day. She makes a big fuss about spending the whole day with Sunny and me, doing "family" things like going to the zoo or taking a picnic to the park. If she gets any other night off, she'll usually let me go over to a friend's house, but that doesn't happen very often.

Dealing with Sunny's problems isn't easy for either of us. Mom is always worried about his health, because he gets sick so often. I feel like I don't have room to mess up. Mom doesn't need to have any extra worry because of me; Sunny takes up enough of her worry.

Sunny takes up a lot of my worry too. Whenever he's at home, I have to be there, and if I want to go anywhere, he has to go with me. I've argued with Mom about it a lot. I keep telling her that Sunny can handle being home alone for an hour or two without a problem, but she just won't listen. It really bugs me the way she coddles him. I've always said she needs to push him to be more independent. And since last year, his school occupational therapist has told her the same thing. Mom doesn't listen, though. I think she feels bad about not being around much, so she makes up for it the only way she can. I don't know what she's going to do

when I leave for college. I intend to find a way to go to college, and I'm not taking him with me.

Everyone else in my lane finished, so I just did an extra fifty. I stopped at the wall.

"You're not done yet," Deb informed me as I took off my goggles.

"Yeah, I know. I'll catch the rest at the end of practice."

"Where were you today?" Hannah asked. We usually met at her locker after school and then walked over to the pool together.

"Jenny wanted to talk to me about something," I said.

"Did she tell you about Mike?" she asked.

"What? How did you know?"

"Everyone's heard. So, are you going out with him?"

"He hasn't even asked me out yet."

"Don't worry, he will," Hannah said. "And no girl in her right mind would turn *him* down."



I was late for practice again.

"Where were you?" Deb whispered as I hurried to join the team on deck. Coach looked at me, shook his head, and made a mark on the clipboard.

I ignored Deb's question and concentrated on the stretching. It was hard to believe that two weeks had already gone by since I first found out about Mike.

During warm-up I had trouble settling into my rhythm. I couldn't get my mind off Mike. We had been out three times already, which was some kind of miracle, considering that I had only had two other real dates in my entire life-

time. He said he had almost asked me out once last year, when Jon and Jenny had first gotten together, but I guess DeAnna stepped in about then.

“You stood me up again today,” Hannah said as we rested before sets. “It looks like things are heating up between you and Mike.”

“He met me at my locker and we got to talking,” I said casually.

“So did you get any?” she asked. Hannah enjoys shocking people with her blunt talk.

“What?” I said. I could feel my cheeks getting hot. “We were just talking.”

“Uh-huh, sure. I’ve heard that one before.”

Christie and Deb laughed with her.

“Whatever,” I said. “As if I had enough time to do more than talk.”

“Well, you know if you’re quick—” Christie began.

“Ladies,” Coach Sullivan cut in, “as soon as you’re ready to listen to your first set, let me know.”

“We’re ready,” I said quickly.

Our first set was the biggest one of the evening, and it took us nearly fifty minutes to finish. We were working hard and didn’t have time to do much talking. Then when Coach brought kick boards over to our lane, we cheered. Our second set was just light kicking. We paired off, Hannah with me and Christie with Deb, and talked as we kicked.

“So, were you and Mike talking about anything important? You know, anything mushy that would be good gossip?” Hannah asked.

“He wanted me to cut practice.”

“Then why are you here?”

I sighed. “Come on, Hannah. You know what this season means to me.”

“Skye, he is the hottest guy at school. I can’t believe you decided to come here instead of going with him!”

“*You* would have skipped, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” she said, nodding her head and grinning mischievously. “In fact, I probably would have asked him to skip with me a long time ago.”

“Well, it didn’t matter anyway,” I said, trying to save face. “Coach Peters busted us in the hall. He sent Mike on to practice, and will probably keep him there an extra hour doing push-ups tonight.”

Hannah laughed. “You’re going to have to stay for Sullivan too,” she reminded me.

I nodded glumly.

“And to think, instead of being worked into the ground, the two of you could have been off in the privacy of his car somewhere.”

“Yeah, right, it would have been really private with Sunny in the backseat.”

“No, no. You’d put Sunny in the front. You and Mike would be in the back!”

I smacked my hand on top of the water and sent a spray into her face. “You’ve got a sick mind,” I said.

“Oh, and tell me you weren’t thinking the same thing,” she retorted, splashing back.

“I wasn’t!” I felt myself flushing again. I had always listened to the locker room jokes, had even contributed

occasionally, but I had never been the object of the jokes before now.

Hannah laughed and shook her head. “If you want to play all innocent with me, fine. Just remember that I know you.”

I laughed uncomfortably. Just because I had been dating the cutest guy at school for a couple of weeks, people were already starting to assume that we were sleeping together. If I tried to set the record straight, I’d sound like a complete nerd.

Not only was Mike my first boyfriend, he was also incredibly popular. I still didn’t know what he saw in me. I was usually quiet in school and had hardly ever dated before. He was the captain of the football team and had left a string of broken hearts last year. I didn’t want to be the next one.

“So, are you and Jenny going to double for homecoming?” Hannah asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. Inside, I was excited about going to the homecoming dance for the first time, but part of me was afraid Mike and I wouldn’t last that long. “What do you think homecoming will be like this year?” I asked Hannah.

She shrugged. “The same as it’s been every year. Boring.” Hannah was a senior and co-captain of the team. She was ready to graduate and move on with her life. I could tell she didn’t love swimming the way she used to; she had burned out. Almost everyone understood that she was on the team this year for one reason: to get her four-year letter in swimming. I wasn’t sure if Coach had figured it out, though. He was still pushing her the same way he had since she was a freshman, the same way he pushed all of us.

Hannah was a strong swimmer, but after the first three meets of our season, she was still nearly five seconds off the qualifying time for the state championships in the 200 yard freestyle, and almost nine seconds off in the 500 yard freestyle.

I had my heart set on going to state this year. I was just a second and a half off in the 200, and four seconds in the 500. I had decided before the season started that I was going to state this year if it killed me. It still bugged me that I hadn't made it last year. It was the first time I had set a goal for myself and not made it.

Ever since my freshman year, swimming had been the center of my life. I joined a year-round swim team, forfeiting my allowance to pay the monthly dues. We didn't have team practice on Sundays, but I usually found a way to get to the pool to work out by myself anyway. That summer I had read biographies on Mark Spitz, Summer Sanders, and Rowdy Gaines. I had talked to sports trainers and learned about visualization and relaxation techniques. I was focused and on track. I was hoping to get a swimming scholarship to help pay my way through college.

Our local college didn't have a team, and for me that was both good and bad. It gave me a good reason to get out of town. But going to a college out of town would cost a lot more. Keeping my grades up, making state qual times, and then finding any potential scholarships had been my only goals at the beginning of the school year. But that was before Mike had asked me out.

"Of course," Hannah said slowly, "homecoming will be different in one way. I'm going with Jeremy."

I stopped kicking. "You're what?"

"Going with Jeremy," she said over her shoulder. She hadn't stopped kicking.

I just waited there in the middle of the lane and watched her turn around at the wall and come back to me. When she got close I turned around and pushed off the bottom, kicking alongside her again. "Who's Jeremy? And why are you going with *him*?"

"Jeremy Buck. He's a senior over at East."

"Hannah, you're avoiding the question. Why are you going with him?"

"Lou and I broke up last night."

I groaned. "Not again!"

"This time it's for good."

I looked at her in disbelief. She and Lou had been dating since they were sophomores. They broke up at least four times each year, and each time it was "for good."

"Have you already asked Jeremy to homecoming?"

"Yep." She nodded. "I asked him last night."

"When did you and Lou break up?" We reached the wall and turned together. "Hannah? When exactly did you break up?"

"Around eight," she admitted.

"What did you do, call Jeremy as soon as you got off the phone with Lou?"

"No!" she said.

I looked at her and raised my eyebrows.

"I called Jeremy as soon as Lou left," she mumbled.

"Hannah! I can't believe you did this!"

"What?" she said.

“Homecoming’s still a month away!”

“So?”

“So? So what happens when you and Lou get back together, but you’ve already got a date for homecoming?”

She shook her head. “I told you, we broke up for good.”

“This time,” I added sarcastically.

“I’m serious!”

“You always are!” I exclaimed. I could tell by the look on her face that this was not the time to push the issue. “Okay, okay. It’s for good this time. What happened?”

She shook her head. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“Okay,” I said. “So what’s Jeremy like?”

She grinned. “He is absolutely fine! Blond hair, blue eyes, a couple of freckles on his cute nose....” She sighed. “Plus he’s really nice. I mean, an absolute sweetie.”

“And Lou’s not?” I asked dryly.

“Well, lately Lou’s been taking me for granted.” She paused and shook her head again. “I don’t want to talk about Lou. What about Mike?”

“What about him?”

“How are things going?”

“Fine,” I said. “Even if we don’t cut practice together.”

She laughed. “I’m sure you find time together other ways. Besides, this is your year to go to state. You don’t have time to cut practice.”

“Thank you!”

“For what?”

“For saying what I was trying to tell you earlier!”

“I know.” She winked. “I told you I know you.”

We finished the kick set and put the boards up. The rest of practice consisted of a really difficult set with intervals so fast we didn’t have time to talk. I cooled down with the rest of my lane, and then while everyone else got out of the pool, I did a couple of easy laps, waiting for Coach to come tell me what my extra set would be. My stomach grumbled, but I ignored it. Dinner would be late tonight.

Gliding into the wall on the last twenty-five, I rolled over onto my back and did a lazy back flip turn on the wall. I stood up and took off my goggles. Coach was on the side of the pool, busy talking to a couple of freshmen.

Sunny was standing in front of my lane, frowning. “Come on, Skye. We’ve got to get home!”

“Sunny, just go sit down. I’ll let you know when I’m ready to leave.”

He put his hands on his hips and frowned even more. His eyebrows were drawn together, and his lower lip was sticking out. “I’m hungry!”

“I don’t care! You’re not going to starve if you have to wait just a little bit longer. Just go sit down!”

He took a deep breath as if he was going to say something, but then he just pursed his lips and stood there staring at me.

I shook my head. “The longer you stand here and stare at me, the longer I have to stay. So you might as well just go sit down now.”

Sunny turned to leave just as Coach came over to my

lane. “Hey, Sunny, how are you doing?” Coach asked, smiling.

Sunny continued to pout. “I’m hungry.”

Coach nodded. “Me too. Tell you what. I’ve got a couple of granola bars in my bag over there. Why don’t you go get one for each of us?”

Sunny’s whole face lit up. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Thanks!” He turned to run and get them.

“Sunny!” I yelled. “Walk on the deck!”

He slowed down. I rolled my eyes. He was here with me every day, and yet at least twice a week I had to tell him not to run in the pool area. It drove me crazy.

Coach chuckled before he turned to me. Then his face became stern. “Why were you late again?”

“It’s unexcused, Coach.”

“Why were you late?”

“I just was.”

He looked at me for a long minute. I could tell he was trying to decide whether or not to dig for details. Finally he said, “Skye, you’re close to state times. Do you want to go this year?”

I reddened. “You know I do!”

“Then you need to start training like a state swimmer. That means you’re here on time.” When I tried to interrupt, he continued, “And when you’re in the water, you give 100 percent to each set. Even,” he said, looking more stern, “during the kick sets.”

I looked down at the water.

“I know you’re aware of my policy about keeping swimmers after practice if they’re late, but I also know that you need to take Sunny home.”

I shook my head. “Don’t treat me differently because of him. I owe you a sprint set.”

Sunny came up, holding two granola bars. “Which one do you want? One’s chocolate chip, the other’s raisin nut.” Sunny wrinkled his nose.

Coach smiled. “I’ll take the raisin nut,” he said.

“Thanks! Thanks a lot!” Sunny said, beaming. He turned and started to run back to the bleachers. I opened my mouth, but just before I started to yell his name, he slowed down. He looked over his shoulder and gave me a bashful little grin.

“Okay, Skye. Ten one hundreds on the minute-five.”

“What?” I squeaked.

“If we’re going to get you to state qual times—” he began.

“Yeah, but this is the end of practice!”

“Skye,” he warned.

“I’m going, I’m going,” I muttered, clearing my goggles and putting them on.

I watched the pace clock till it hit the thirty, and then I took off. I pushed hard and made all ten of them, but just barely. If there had been an eleventh one, I would have missed the interval.

“Nice work today,” Coach said. “Be sure you do at least a two hundred easy.”

Panting, I nodded. I swam the first hundred nice and

slow freestyle, and felt my muscles start to relax. At the hundred I stopped and tossed my goggles and cap up on the deck. I ducked under and sighed in relief as the cool water slid through my hair down to my scalp. For the last hundred I did a mixture of breaststroke, backstroke, and even a twenty-five of sidestroke.

I got out of the pool, picked up my cap and goggles, and waved to Coach as I headed to the locker room. I took a hot shower, rinsed out my suit, and got dressed quickly. I knew that Sunny would be waiting anxiously outside. He'd probably whine all the way home, and then continue to whine until dinner was made. Thinking about it didn't put me in a good mood.

All brothers and sisters argue, but I always felt I had been denied that right. With Sunny, I couldn't really fight, because he couldn't fight back. He was my responsibility, and I had to deal with it. It wasn't always bad, but the problem was that the responsibility never went away. Sunny was always there. I couldn't do anything without him.

When I stepped out into the lobby, Sunny was waiting. He grinned as soon as he saw me, picked up his bag, and started toward the door.

“Ready?”

I sighed and nodded. It was hard staying mad at someone who was usually happy and nice.