

King of the Screwups, by K.L. Going

Chapters One, Two & Three

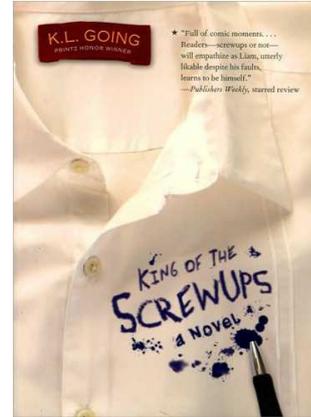
Chapter 1

Tap, tap, tap . . .

“Is this thing on? Ha! Just kidding folks.”

The newsman with the microphone grins and winks at me.

Mom, Dad, and I are perched on high stools across from him, my legs dangling in the air. The cameraman does this thing with his fingers where he counts down silently from five to . . . live.



“Gooooood day, America! It’s a beautiful sunny day in Times Square this morning. I’m Josh Harmon, and I’m here with the Gellers. Now if you haven’t heard of Allan and Sarah Geller you’ve been living under a rock. Sarah was a top fashion model for many years, gracing runways from Paris to Milan with her tremendous beauty. She’s been a Vogue cover model, a spokesperson for Shinefree makeup, featured in ad campaigns too numerous to name, and in her latest incarnation she’s the proprietor of the Style Boutique in Westchester, NY. Welcome Sarah.”

Mom smiles and nods. Her eyes glow, and I think she is the most beautiful mother in the world.

“Allan Geller,” says the interviewer, turning to my Dad, “rose from humble beginnings to become the CEO of MoneyVision, which as you all know is one of the most successful businesses in the United States. I think it’s safe to say that this man is a financial genius, and if you’d like to learn more about him you can pick up this month’s issue of Business Today since he’s being honored as their Man of the Year. Congratulations, Allan.”

Dad beams, then nods humbly. I stare at him, thinking how cool he is. “And this . . .” The interviewer turns to me. “This is their son Liam who is now . . . how old are you, Liam?”

“Nine.”

The interviewer smiles like we’re good buddies.

“You look exactly like your mom,” he says. “I bet people tell you that all the time, right?”

I nod and remember to smile. The interviewer grins back, but then he turns slyly, like he’s telling a joke.

“But are you good at math?”

Mom and Dad laugh, but I don’t get what’s so funny. I shake my head no, and the interviewer straightens in mock surprise.

“You mean you haven’t inherited the math genius gene from your father?”

I’m not sure exactly what this means, but when I look at Dad his smile is so fake I can see the corner of his mouth twitch slightly. I slide a little farther back on my stool, but the interviewer presses forward.

“Do you like school?” he asks. “Maybe there’s a subject you’re particularly good at?”

I’ve just gotten my report card so the memory of it is fresh in my mind. I think about what the media specialist said this morning, “The reporter won’t ask you any hard questions, Liam. Just be yourself and give them truthful answers that are short and to the point. And don’t forget to smile.

So I smile and say, “My grades are all very bad, and Dad yells at me a lot.”

Mom coughs loudly and has to take a drink of the water that sits by her chair. Dad shoots me a look that is so quick, I’m barely sure I’ve seen it. There’s loud laughter from the adults, but I know I’ve said the wrong thing.

The reporter can’t suppress his grin.

“I bet a lot of parents can relate to that,” he says, like he’s trying to be nice, but I can tell there’s something different about him now. It’s as if he was our friend before, happy to meet us, thanking us for doing this interview, but now he’s a shark that smells blood.

“It must be tough being parents with such busy schedules,” he says to Mom and Dad, only he doesn’t give them time to answer. “Do you miss seeing your parents when they’re busy?” he asks me.

This wasn’t a question the media specialist prepped me for.

“No,” I say. Then I think maybe that sounds bad, so I change my answer. “I mean yes.” Then I say, “I see Mom a lot, just not Dad because he’s always working.”

“Ooohhh,” says the interviewer.

Dad reaches out and takes my hand, squeezing hard.

“It’s true I don’t get to spend as much time with Liam as I’d like,” he says. “Running an international business -- which by the way, is one of the leading philanthropic businesses in the country -- is a lot of hard work, but Liam and I have fun together. We like to go swimming and we play ball whenever we can.”

This isn’t true. I stare at Dad, wondering why he’s lying on national television. Why would he say we play ball together when we don’t?

“And even though Liam hasn’t inherited my natural aptitude for math,” Dad continues, “he’s very . . . uh . . . very . . .”

Dad sputters. I’ve seen him do a million interviews and he has never sputtered even once. It’s like he’s lost his train of thought, and there’s a silence that stretches on forever.

Then Dad clears his throat.

“Liam is very social,” he says at last. “He’s Mr. Popularity. His mother and I always say, ‘just wait until he reaches high school. He’ll be giving us a run for our money by then!’”

If you didn’t know Dad you’d think he’d said something nice, but if you know him, you’d recognize the tone he uses for people who are less than worthy. The name echoes in my ears. Mr. Popularity.

My face falls. I glance towards the door of the studio even though I know I shouldn’t, but the reporter turns to me . . . again. His eyes sparkle.

“Do you think you’ll grow up to be like your Dad or like your Mom?” he asks.

I look at mom sitting straight and tall with her long legs, blonde hair, and blue eyes. Then I look at Dad with his dark hair and short, compact body. His craggy face looks nothing like mine. Even though I’ve been told every day since birth that I look like my mother, now I think it like it’s a brand new thought. “I look just like my mother. Only like my mother”.

I think about my report card and the question about math, and my heart starts to pound. There’s something behind this question, and I’m surprised to realize that I now know what it is. It’s like I’ve gotten a decoder ring to the adult world and in the last few minutes I’ve figured out how to use it.

I bite my lip and clench my nine year old fists.

“My dad,” I say, defiantly. “Because even though I don’t look like him and I’m not smart like him, he’s still my dad.”

For a single second, my father’s chest swells. His eyes go from hard to soft. But then, before I have time to savor the moment, I screw up. And it’s not just any screw up. It’s the mother of all screw-ups.

“I know,” I tell the interviewer on national TV, “because they got the paternally test and everything. I heard Mom say it to my Nana. She said, if we hadn’t got the paternally test she never would have believed it.”

Chapter 2

“You’re a screw-up, Liam. Do you think being Mr. Popularity will be enough to get you by in life?”

I’m lying on top of Dad’s desk drunk and half naked wearing only rumpled boxers and one sock while a sobbing girl who never really liked me in the first place searches for her pants and top.

“Please don’t call my parents,” Delia pleads. “I can explain, Mr. Geller. I’ll do anything. Just don’t call my parents. Please . . .”

I wonder if begging will work for her because it never does for me. I close my eyes, letting the waves of nausea wash over me. Delia finishes buttoning her shirt and gets on her knees to straighten the stack of papers we knocked over. She sets them on the desk, but I accidentally knock them over again when I try unsuccessfully to sit up.

The world spins, and I’m vaguely aware that Dad is now yelling.

“Do you think it’s okay to fool around in my office,” he’s saying “. . . on my desk . . . when your mother and I are right downstairs?” He’s looking at me, but it’s Delia who answers.

“We didn’t know you were here,” she says, crying harder.

I ought to be pleading too, but I can’t stop thinking how stupid I was to believe Delia was actually in love with me. She’s totally smart, president of the Honor’s Society and everything, so why would she ever like me? But there we were at this party, both plastered, and she’s telling me how she had this crush on me all last year when we were juniors.

“You’re so beautiful, Liam,” she practically shouts over the pounding music. “You’re sweet and funny and I’m totally in love with you.”

That’s what she said.

So who can blame me for ending up back at Dad’s office? I wanted to show her all his awards and stuff, but the whole time I kept hoping I wouldn’t say anything monumentally stupid, so I started kissing her to minimize the talking, and that’s when everything went wrong.

As soon as a girl starts taking off my clothes I can tell how she really feels about me. The first thing Delia took off was my watch. It’s a really nice watch - just the right degree of tarnished, and the worn leather band is soft. I picked it up used at this shop in SoHo, but it’s still a brand name watch so it was a rare find. Delia dropped it on the floor beside Dad’s desk like it was garbage, and that bothered me, but I was in the process of taking off her sweater, so I let it go.

Only then she unbuttoned my shirt.

The shirt itself -- a Kenneth Cole from a couple years ago - isn’t special. The thing about that shirt is the perfect metal buttons. Thin and sharp. But they could have been plastic buttons with Gap stenciled on them for all Delia cared because she didn’t even see them. She wadded up the shirt, popping a button in the process, and tossed it across the room.

Now, you could argue that she was distracted, but so was I, and I still noticed her black velvet bra, probably from Victoria’s Secret, which told me that underneath her brainy exterior, she was sexy. I liked that. But I could tell that Delia didn’t like or dislike anything about me.

And that’s when I knew.

This girl doesn’t love me. She doesn’t even like me. She just wants to be popular.

Who the hell cares when she’s taking your clothes off, right? But I cared. And the thing is . . . I kept going anyway.

Right until the moment when Dad walked through the door.

So now as he yells, I lay still and let my head spin, thinking of all the things in life I wish I’d done differently.

“ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?” Dad bellows at the top of his lungs. Delia cringes. “You’ve really compromised your future this time,” Dad hollers.

This is a phrase I hear a lot.

“Despite everything I’ve done for you -- you have no moral qualities. You are nothing I ever wanted in a son, and I don’t say that lightly.”

Although he does say it all the time.

“When a child has been given a fine upbringing and an international education and he still turns out to be delinquent, then it’s not the parent’s fault, is it?”

Dad is in the zone, and in his zeal, his thick black hair falls onto his forehead and the vein in his throat throbs. I watch it pounding.

Actually, it’s my head that’s pounding.

“I told you last time I wasn’t going to put up with this behavior. I’ve had enough of you. I’m sick of you, Liam. Sick of you.”

The words are blending together, slurring, but Dad’s not the one who’s still drunk - I am - so it must be my brain that’s slurring. Sick . . . of . . . sick . . . of . . . What’s he saying? Truth is, I do feel kind of sick. Really sick, actually.

“I want you out of my house.”

“Mr. Geller!” Delia gasps, but Dad gives her the same look he always gives Mom, narrowing his eyes until she shrinks.

I feel sorry for Delia right then. Sorry that I dragged her into this, and sorry that she has to listen to Dad yelling. I try to sit up again, and I think that maybe this time I’ll finally figure out the right thing to say and Dad will take everything back because he can’t possibly mean it, can he? So I take a deep breath trying to force my eyes to focus.

“If I can just have a second to apologize . . .”

But unfortunately, the moment I sit up, the world spins. Everything around me turns upside down and my vision narrows to a single tiny speck, then fades to black.

Chapter 3

I’m five years old, playing on the runway after one of Mom’s shows in Paris. It’s late. Really late. There are clothes everywhere and people are hanging around talking in sharp accents. The place smells like smoke and perfume, and my ears are still ringing from the pounding music.

No one has noticed me in a long time, but it's okay because I'm busy imitating all the models, remembering the spectacle I watched earlier from behind a curtain with some woman who kept whispering, shhhh, as if I didn't know how to be quiet for a show. But now I don't have to be quiet, so I stomp real loud, taking extra long strides like Mom does. I pull my shoulders back and stick my chin up. I even suck in my cheeks. Then people do notice me, and I pick out the words I recognize - the ones that are in English or French.

"Oh look at him!"

"Good God, Sarah, he's drop dead GQ. He looks just like you."

"Ohhhhhh, couldn't you just eat him up?"

There's laughter and a group of models throw kisses up at me. Mom is watching me from her position draped over a chair below and she's got these soft, half-closed eyes, but she's smiling. She looks really happy, maybe even proud, and I haven't done anything special. So I vamp it up, but in a five year old way. I run down the runway as fast as I can and I think I will leap off the stage and fly into her arms and she will catch me, only it doesn't happen that way. Mom just watches me fall into a pile of chairs.

When I open my eyes Mom is standing over me, staring at her crumpled mess of a son. I'm still on Dad's desk and every part of my body aches. Sunlight streams in through the office window, so I squint. My face is hot, and I feel sick. I sit up very carefully, then slowly slide off the desk into Dad's office chair. The movement makes my head throb.

Mom hands me a mug of coffee, then she sits down in the oversized chair next to Dad's bay window. For a moment it's silent, and I wish it could stay like this forever, but I know that it can't.

"Oh Liam," Mom whispers at last. "Why do you do these things? Why do you have to upset your father? Were you trying to make him kick you out? Is that it?"

It sounds like she's attacking me, but Mom's not like that. She just wants to understand.

"No," I say. "I didn't mean to get . . ." The words stick like cotton in my mouth. Up until Mom said it out loud, I'd been hoping that Dad kicking me out was part of a horrible drunken fog. "He hasn't changed his mind yet?"

Mom looks at me sadly, but she doesn't answer.

"How much did you drink at the party?" she asks instead.

“A few beers.”

“I’m guessing that’s an understatement,” she snorts. “Drugs?”

“Ma. No.”

Mom nods because deep down she knows I wouldn’t do that. In a strange, twisted sort of way, she trusts me.

“And the girl?”

“Delia? What about her?”

“Do you even like these girls?”

I think how I almost hated Delia as she was taking my clothes off, but that doesn’t sound right out of context, so I shrug, and Mom shakes her head.

“You’re such a little shit,” she says, and for a second she’s truly pissed, but then her face softens. Mom’s got the kind of features that you can’t help staring at. When she smiles it starts in her eyes, then spreads across her entire face and makes the room light up. That’s part of the reason she was a fabulous model. She didn’t just make people look - she made them linger.

I wish she’d smile now, but of course she won’t.

“Your father’s serious this time, Li. He means for you to leave. I’m not going to lie and say I stood up for you,” Mom adds. “Your father wants you gone by the end of the week. He’s called your grandparents and arranged everything.”

For the first time I sit up straight.

“Mom, he can’t! Gram and Gramps hate me. You know that. Besides, I’m his kid. And it’s my senior year. Isn’t there something . . .”

She holds up one hand.

“You’re right about your grandparents,” she says. “If it makes you feel any better they hate me, too. You’ll end up with them over my dead body.”

“But you won’t tell Dad he can’t kick me out? Where am I supposed to go?”

She breathes out and I can tell she’s exhausted, but Mom is always exhausted.

“I’ve been on the phone all morning,” she says. “I found someplace else for you to stay. It took some convincing but your uncle Pete will take you in for a

while. Just don't tell your father it was my idea. And be careful how you break the news because he won't be happy about it."

She stands up as if she hasn't just changed my entire life.

"Mom . . ." I start, but there's too much to say.

"Your uncle's number is on the coffee table. I told him you'd call to sort out the details once you were feeling better." She pauses. "He's enthused."

She laughs a small, airy laugh at her casual lie, and she looks so sad standing there that I want to shake her. I remember how she looked on the runway with her perfect posture and the tall, regal way she carried herself.

"Ma, please! Can't we talk about this some more before . . ."

"No," Mom says. "Your father wants breakfast. Don't come downstairs."

Then she walks out the door and disappears.

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