

# The Super Secret Case of the Vaporized Professor

## Chapter 1: Spies, spies, everywhere

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Don't panic. They'll be here. There's no reason to worry. Sure, it's your first time in a large city airport all by yourself. But you're 12 years old. You can handle it. Just get your luggage and relax.

But no matter how much Eric tried to rationalize, he still felt completely stressed as he watched the bags go by on the conveyer belt at the San Francisco International Airport. What if they didn't come? What if his parents gave his grandma the wrong date? Things like that happened all the time on television. What if he had to sleep in the airport the entire summer? Did they have a stranded passenger program?

"Your first time alone in an airport?" came a voice beside him.

Startled, Eric jumped. To his left was a girl about his age. Her long, shiny black hair hung loose and a purple knapsack was casually slung over a shoulder with the latest boy band etched out in sparkles. She looked normal enough, but the strange thing was that even though he was almost certain the voice had come from her, she wasn't looking at him. Instead she was staring straight ahead, focused on the bags tumbling down the ramp.

"Scared you, didn't I?" she asked grinning, still staring straight ahead.

“Are you talking to me?” asked Eric, confused.

“Duh,” she replied. “And stop looking at me. I don’t want anyone to know we’re talking. A big airport like this is filled with suspicious people and you never know who else could be watching.” She shrugged off her knapsack, dumping it on the floor beside him. “You really need to be more careful.”

“How’d you know it was my first time alone?” asked Eric, suspiciously. Taking her advice, he tried to focus his gaze on the baggage belt while speaking. But it was much harder than it looked and he couldn’t help peeking at her from the corner of his eye.

“It was very obvious actually,” she replied matter-of-factly. “I first noticed you on the plane. You were sitting beside the heavy guy in the gray suit and didn’t say a word to him the whole trip. Obviously you weren’t together, so that was my first clue you were traveling alone. Secondly, you nearly hyperventilated when we hit the air pocket.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked Eric, defensively. In his opinion, the idea that she had been spying on him during the four-hour flight was more than a little bizarre. Not to mention a bit unnerving.

“Well, a seasoned traveler, like myself, already knows air pockets are nothing. So I knew right there, you haven’t been on a plane much. And really, even if the plane was going to plummet to the earth in a blazing ball of fire, what are you going to do about it? No sense in panicking. Just relax and pretend you’re on a ride at Disney Land.

“Me, I’ve been traveling by myself for years. Let me give you a piece of advice.” She leaned into him and whispered, “If you want to blend in, never appear like you’re lost.”

“I’m not lost,” mumbled Eric. He shifted his heavy knapsack to the other side of his thin, gangly frame and scanned the conveyer belt desperately. Where in the world was his luggage and why was it taking so long?

“Oh, really? Could have fooled me.”

For a moment she said nothing and Eric hoped that would be it. But unfortunately this was not the case.

“My name is Xerena Kobi by the way. That’s Xerena spelled with an ‘X’.” She held out her hand.

“I’m Eric,” Eric muttered, reluctantly taking her hand. “Eric Wong.

He took in her pleated skirt, crisp white blouse and conservative old-school blazer. “So do you go to a private school or something?” he asked, feeling a little grungy in his faded jeans and worn t-shirt.

“I go to the Ackermann School for Young Girls. Heard of it?”

Eric shook his head.

“Didn’t think you would have,” she replied with a sigh. “It’s a very exclusive school specializing in strategic thinking. I must say I was super lucky to get in. They only take 25 new students each year, you know.” She looked at Eric for some kind of recognition, but he only shrugged.

“Anyways, I spend the summer home in San Francisco with Sieka, my nanny. We live in the French Quart –” Suddenly she stopped, and Eric followed her gaze across the baggage deck.

“Do you see him?” Her voice had dropped to a whisper. “The tall bald guy? The one with the strange bag?” She nodded towards a man with a shaved head and stubbly beard carrying a paisley bag.

“I couldn’t help noticing him on the plane. He was acting so strange. He refused to put his bag in the overhead compartment and nearly had a fit when the flight attendant offered to watch it for him.” She laughed and then narrowed her eyes, still focused on the bald man. “Check out how he’s clutching the ugly old thing. What do you think he’s got in there?” she asked.

Eric peered at the tall old guy. He had to admit, he was holding the bag rather protectively. Instead of using the handles, he held it safely against his chest with both arms as if he was afraid that at any second someone would steal it. “Something of value, like money or jewels?” Eric guessed.

“Either that or something illegal.” Xerena grabbed onto his arm and her hazel-green eyes glinted with excitement. “I bet it’s toxic bacteria hidden in a piece of cheese or stolen genome DNA duplication software.”

Eric stared at her dumbfounded and pulled away. “Is that all you do? Spy on people?” he asked as he watched the man glance up at the arrivals screen and then disappear into the crowd on the other side of the security doors.

“Pretty much,” she replied nonchalantly. “I’m going to be a secret agent. So, it’s important to practice ones surveillance skills whenever possible. Take, for example, the woman there with the big frizzy hair.”

Eric looked in the direction Xerena was gesturing and watched as a young woman with hair that looked like it got stuck in a light socket loaded up her trolley with luggage.

“I bet she’s working undercover for some hi-tech German company and she’s here on a mission to seduce the VP of Microsoft and gain access to top secret files.”

“How do you know?” asked Eric, amazed. He glanced over again at the suspected spy, this time with more interest.

“Easy. I overheard her on the plane talking German to the flight attendant. I also noticed she was listening to something intensely on a mini disc player. Probably a message from spy headquarters.”

Eric continued to watch the woman as three young children between the ages of two and five came running through the security door towards her shouting, “Mommy, Mommy!”

Laughing, the woman scooped them up in her arms.

“Or,” replied Eric, grinning. “She could just be a woman with three kids returning from a trip.”

“Maybe. But what would be the fun of that? Anyways, what’s to say she isn’t a spy *and* a mother?” She caught Eric’s disbelieving face. “What? It’s possible.”

Eric rolled his eyes and ignored her. More bags tumbled down the chute and as he watched them go around on the conveyer, his stomach did a little nervous leap. He still couldn’t believe he was actually here in San Francisco...by himself. Two months with no parents, no school, no homework and no chores. How great was that?

Yet for some reason his stomach wouldn’t stop churning. What if this wasn’t such a good idea? What if his grandparents really didn’t want him to stay, or worse, what if he didn’t like them? He hadn’t seen them in over two years. Maybe they weren’t as cool as he remembered. Maybe they had suddenly turned boring and spent the day

complaining about the weather and politics. What would he do all day? His stomach gurgled loudly in reply and he swallowed deeply, trying to block out the image of the three of them sitting in rocking chairs on the front lawn, knitting socks.

Another clump of luggage came tumbling down the conveyer belt, and he returned his attention to locating his bag. Beside him, Xerena was still talking.

“...and you know, I bet those kids aren’t even her real kids. They’re probably spies too. Did you notice the one with the red hair? It didn’t even look like her.”

Eric shook his head in disbelief. The girl was still rambling on about the ‘German spy woman’ and had not even noticed his total lack of interest in the conversation. Finally, in what seemed an eternity, he spied his black duffle bag coming around on the conveyer. He grabbed it and dumped it onto the trolley.

“Well, that’s it for me,” he said to Xerena as he quickly turned to leave.

“Okay, great meeting you. Maybe I’ll see you around this summer,” she called after him.

Eric sincerely hoped not. He was pretty sure he didn’t want to spend any more time with someone as spy-crazy or as chatty as she was.

Making his way through the mob to the automatic airport security doors, he scanned the crowd for his grandparents. It didn’t take long to spot them. There they were, right in the front, waving excitedly with a huge sign that read ‘Welcome Eric’. His grandma had dyed her short, spiky hair a shocking bright red since the last time he had seen her and was wearing a vintage long beaded vest over faded jeans and a hot pink top.

His grandpa was a little less bizarre. Dressed in a 1960s’ tie dyed t-shirt and jeans, his hair, still its original silver-white, was tied back in a long thick ponytail.

“Come along, honey-bunch,” said Nora, giving him a tight hug and relieving him of his knapsack. “Aiden will take your bag for you. We almost didn’t make it. Traffic was crazy. Crazy, I tell you! It’s nearly impossible to figure out which lane you need to be in on the freeway and Aiden drives like he’s blind. Just swerving everywhere.”

Eric looked at his grandpa, who shrugged and gave him a hug. “Got us here though didn’t I?” he replied with a devilish grin.

They made their way to the parking lot and climbed into the car. Eric’s grandparents drove a baby blue Mustang from the early 1960s. Aiden had bought the car for Nora the day she got her driver’s license and she was very proud to say it was still running after all these years. Of course, she never drove it, preferring to travel in other ways, but she was right – it was in mint condition. The seats were protected with fluffy light blue covers and so was the steering wheel. When inside, Eric always felt it was a little like sitting on a large, hairy blue dog, except it smelled like old leather.

“Ready everyone?”

Without waiting for a response, Aiden thrust the car into first gear and it moved forward in a lurch.

“Back up! Back up!” shouted Nora. “See what I mean? He’s going to get us killed before we get home.”

“Oh, Nora. I’ve been driving for hundreds of years and haven’t killed us yet. Besides it not all me. I think the triglyceride petrol I poured in the tank this morning isn’t reacting well with this ancient carburetor.”

“You what!” exclaimed Nora, whipping her head around and staring at him with her eyes wide. “I can’t believe you put that stuff in the tank. What if the car self-destructs?”

“What stuff?” asked Eric, concerned. The possibility of the car exploding on the ride home wasn’t exactly his idea of fun. Plus the strange odor reminiscent of burnt dill pickle chips that was slowly wafting its way through the vents of the car was making his nose itch.

His grandma rolled her eyes. “Your grandfather thinks he’s some sort of scientific genius and has decided to use fermented lima bean oil to fuel our car.”

“C’mon Nora,” replied his grandpa with a grin. “You have to admit, using those vile tasting beans for driving is much better than having to eat them. And, I’ll have you know, I spent all last night improving the recipe.”

“Really?” Nora raised an eyebrow skeptically. Eric, too, was curious about the improvements. More and more burnt dill smoke floated into the car and he eyed the growing pungent cloud hovering above them nervously.

“Yeah, I added some aromatherapy oils to the tank so it would smell better.”

Nora took a deep whiff of the smoke and wrinkled her nose. “Please don’t tell me you added pickle juice!”

“Well, you do always go on about how much you love them so.”

Nora burst into laughter and shook her head.

“So this smoke,” interjected Eric, still concerned. Even though his grandparents were now giggling like crazy, he was not feeling safe at all. “This is normal?”

“Afraid so,” replied his grandpa. “Chemical reaction. Take my advice. Never mix pickles and beans. If it does this to a car, imagine what it does to your intestines.”

Eric looked worriedly at his grandma and she nodded in agreement. “Better buckle-up back there, Eric. We may be in for a rough ride.”

Eric had barely got the seatbelt into the clasp when Aiden thrust the car in reverse. The engine revved and before he knew it, they were squealing out of the parking lot at full speed.

“Hang on everyone!” shouted his grandpa from behind the wheel. “Can’t seem to get her to slow down. The oil must have corroded the pistons – another side effect, I’m sorry to say.”

Focused on the road, his grandpa zigzagged dangerously around pedestrians heading to the terminal, taxis dropping off travelers and vehicles making their way towards the freeway. Clinging desperately to the door handle, Eric prepared for impact. Every muscle in his body was squeezed tight, except for one thing – his eyes. Not able to decide which was worse – watching his life pass before him or imagining it – he scrunched his eyes halfway between open and closed and observed the scene in a blur.

Suddenly, his grandpa slammed on the breaks. The car skidded to a halt midway through a crosswalk and a loud burp exploded out the exhaust pipe followed by a huge cloud of pickle gas.

“Oops. Excuse us!” shouted his grandpa to the terrified pedestrians walking by. “She’s a bit gassy this evening.”

Then waving away the aromatic smoke, he adjusted the stick-shift and floored the accelerator. Swerving dangerously across two lanes, he headed straight for the freeway just as the exhaust pipe let out a second jarring burp.

More dill gas filled the car.

“Whew, I can’t believe how much that stuff reeks!” Nora declared pinching her nose and waving frantically as she quickly rolled down the car window. “Aiden-honey, I know you did this for me, but you know I may never eat pickles again!”

“What about lima beans?”

“Nope, pretty much off those too,” she replied still waving.

Smiling widely, his grandpa caught Eric’s eye in the rearview mirror and winked.

Eric grinned back and relaxed into the ride. No, there would be no knitting of socks this summer.