

Prologue

One week after placing my ad for a French teacher in the local newspaper, I met Rob at a local café.

“Linda, your plan may backfire,” he warned, frowning his brow.

My eyes searched his face. “I guess I’ll take that chance.”

“All right then, I’ll help you.”

Most lies are told with the expectation that no one will uncover them. In the summer of 1979, I told a monumental lie, fully aware that mine would be discovered.

I was twenty-one and working as a medical assistant for a busy family practice clinic in Seattle. Every morning at seven o’clock, I dragged myself to the office and performed the same mundane tasks—answering phones, scheduling appointments, and escorting patients to examining rooms.

My roommate’s burgeoning career presented a dazzling contrast to my dull job. Carline, an aspiring model, returned home from auditions bubbling over with enthusiasm as her glamorous vocation took off. Dressed in stylish clothes, she dashed in and out of our apartment from one appointment to another.

Cindy, my other close friend, seemed poised for stardom. She took to the stage, blowing audiences away with her strong voice and artistic abilities, her years of hard work finally paying off.

Months passed, and I grew increasingly disenchanted with my career.

“That’s it. I’ve had enough,” I mumbled, frowning at my reflection in the mirror. “I’m finding a new job.”

Intrigued with the notion of overseas travel, I researched my options and decided to pursue a flight attendant position with an international airline. I imagined myself on sojourns in cities around the globe, meeting fascinating people and living life to its fullest.

My resume landed me an interview with World Airways, Inc. and three weeks later I flew to California for the event. The panel of two women and two men voiced their approval as I answered a battery of questions, but their smiles vanished when they discovered I didn’t speak a second language.

“I’m sorry, Miss Kovic, but World Airways requires all flight attendants to be bilingual.” The interviewer’s words struck like daggers in my heart. “However, if you learn another language, we might consider you for a position in the future.”

“Which one would you recommend?” I held his gaze to emphasize my sincerity.

“Spanish, French, or German.”

“Thank you,” I replied, rolling back my shoulders as I left the room, already contemplating my next move.

French appealed to me more than the other languages because I loved the way it sounded, and total immersion seemed the best way to become fluent in the shortest amount of time. Once I learned the language, I would return home and reapply for the flight attendant position. But where would I get the money? I only had a few hundred dollars in my bank account.

A coworker came up with a remarkably simple solution. “Maybe you can become an *au pair* for a family in France?”

Unsure what this would entail, I wrote to several agencies and received applications along with informational brochures detailing the job expectations. My primary responsibility would be childcare, twenty-five to thirty hours a week, along with some light housework and cooking. In return, I would have my own bedroom, a small allowance, and one day off per week. One brochure boasted, “the *au pair* becomes almost like a member of the family as he or she is immersed in a new cultural experience. Often both parties remember the experience fondly for the rest of their lives.”

Reading on, I discovered a colossal problem. All the agencies required prospective *au pairs* to have familiarity with the language, conversational French at the very least.

How will I get around this, I thought. Maybe I could fill out the applications as though I spoke French. I would hire a private tutor and learn some common phrases before I left. Once I arrived in France, I would somehow persuade my host family to allow me to stay.

Aware that the hoax would upset my parents, I kept this element of my plan a secret, confiding in only a few of my closest friends. Both Carline and Cindy questioned my judgment on more than one occasion, but I dismissed their concerns. I had set my mind to go.

With Rob's help, I completed four applications. A month later, one of the agencies replied detailing a possible match. The response read like this:

We have found you a host family living in a real-life castle in a small town called Songais within the Loire region of France. Monsieur and Madame Dubois have two children, with another one expected very soon. They are excited to welcome their first American *au pair*, and they are especially impressed with how well you write and speak French. How soon can you make the trip to France? Can you stay for a full year?

The Dubois family sounded perfect, but a shudder ran through my body as I formed my next thought. *I hope they'll forgive me when they learn that I lied.*

Pulse jumping with anticipation, I wrote back, agreeing to all their terms, with an expected arrival date in August. I purchased my ticket, sublet my apartment and gave notice to my employer.

Three weeks later, captivated by French illusions, I boarded a plane for Europe.

PART ONE

The Dubois Family





“*J*e suis américaine. Je ne parle pas français.”

It took equal parts sign language, broken English and even more broken French before I understood the train attendant in Paris. *Two more transfers? You've got to be kidding*, I thought.

Cursing my high-heeled shoes, I dragged my luggage down endless platforms before boarding my final train. An hour later, just as the sun set across the Loire River, we pulled into Songais. Only three other people disembarked and went off their separate ways, hastening around me as I wrestled my suitcases into the station.

Filled with both apprehension and excitement, I surveyed the room, looking for Madame Dubois, but no one there fit her description. Wandering over to one of the tall arched windows, I pressed my face against the pane, peering left and right.

The Songais train station sat along a narrow cobbled street, lined with one white stone building after another, each attached to its neighbor. The structures varied in height, either two or three stories, their rooftops gabled, some with severe peaks. A few buildings presented Juliette balconies trimmed in black wrought iron, their built-in flower boxes filled with raspberry-red geraniums. Seeing no cars or people in either direction, I refocused my attention inside the building.

As I waited, a million thoughts jumbled through my head. How would Madame Dubois react when she discovered my lie?

What would I do if she refused to let me stay? Was there a train back to Paris tonight? Even if I could persuade her to let me stay, what about her husband?

The longer I waited, the more agitated I became, starting whenever I heard the slightest sound. A woman entered the station, her heels tapping a steady beat on the linoleum floor. When I saw she carried a suitcase, my heartbeat moderated.

“Avez-vous du feu?” My body jerked as a handsome young man leaned toward me.

Fumbling through my reference guide, I found the word *feu*, which meant fire, and tried to make sense of his question. Convinced this was a come-on, I glared at him and refused to answer. His shoulders slumped and he shook his head as he walked away. A few minutes later, it occurred to me he merely wanted a light for his cigarette, but by then he had vanished.

“Bonsoir, Mademoiselle Kovic.”

I spun around and saw a tall, statuesque woman, far advanced in her pregnancy, walking toward me. A burst of adrenaline discharged in my brain. With each step, her dark blue wool coat opened, exposing a large belly. Stopping in front of me, her lips forming a thin smile, she extended her hand in one swift motion.

“Bonsoir, Madame Dubois.” My voice quivered as I clasped her palm against mine. “Good evening” was one phrase I managed to learn, but what to say next? *“Parlez-vous anglais?”*

Madame Dubois frowned and tilted her head sideways. “Yes, I speak English fluently, but you speak French, correct?”

“The truth is, I speak only a few phrases.” Inhaling deeply, I continued. “I realize this must come as a shock, but I hope you’ll let me explain before you make a decision whether or not to let me stay.”

Her eyes hardened, the color drained from her face. Seconds ticked away as I swallowed firmly against the bile rising in my throat.

Finally, she spoke. “Clearly, I am stunned by this turn of events, but you are here now. As you can see, I do need an *au pair* very soon. We will discuss the situation with my husband and decide what to do then.”

She motioned with her hand for me to follow her and moved toward the exit. I felt so relieved by her words, it took me a moment to react and pick up my bags.

With her nose raised higher than necessary, Madame Dubois led us around the few remaining passengers and out the door to her Peugeot.

“Put your things back here,” she said, opening the trunk with her keys.

I shoved my bags inside with a grunt, slid into the front seat and Madame pulled out of the train station’s side parking lot. As she maneuvered the car through the town’s slender streets, I studied my new patron. She appeared to be in her early thirties. Her thick blonde hair was pulled back from her face into a low ponytail, emphasizing her prominent nose. Unadorned by makeup or lipstick, no one would have called her pretty, but her alabaster skin glowed flawlessly, and her reserved demeanor suggested self-assurance in her social standing.

Hoping to ease the tension, I ventured, “Is it far to your home?”

“No, we live only a short distance from town.”

“How convenient,” I said, twisting to gaze out the window, marveling at an ancient stone church and then catching a glimpse of a grand, elegant chateau rising above the town, its multi-towered turrets extending skyward.

“Have you lived here long?”

“I grew up in Songais and so did my mother before me.” Madame Dubois’s voice sounded cool and aloof. “I would not consider living anywhere else.”

Her chilly reception increased my anxiety. I shifted my position, trying to relax my clenched teeth. At least she didn’t put me back on the train immediately. Somehow I would have to persuade her and her husband to give me another chance and let me stay on as their *au pair*.