

An excerpt from *You're the Cream in My Coffee* by Jennifer Lamont Leo

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Chapter One

First off, I need to set the record straight. In a town the size of Kerryville, Illinois, rumors have a way of catching fire and burning a hole straight through the truth.

Despite what you may have heard down at Madge's Cut 'n' Curl, the fact that I, Marjorie Corrigan, fainted in the balcony at the Orpheum during the Sunday matinee had nothing to do with the movie's intense Great War battle scenes. Or the steamy romance between an American soldier and a French farm girl. Or the scandalous appearance of a curse word right there in black and white for the whole world to see. It had nothing to do with Myrtle Jamison's off-tune piano accompaniment, or the refreshment stand running out of Coca-Cola even before the feature started.

Above all, it had nothing—absolutely nothing—to do with my being in the “family way,” a rumor as mortifying as it was untrue. Honestly! I realized the good ladies of Kerryville thought my engagement to Dr. Richard Brownlee had dragged on entirely too long, but spreading malicious rumors was not the way to speed things along.

Here's how it all began. On an unseasonably warm April afternoon, the theater grew close and stuffy, especially up in the balcony where my kid sister, Helen, and I were seated. The new air-cooling systems, all the rage in city theaters, had not yet made it to little Kerryville. I pressed my handkerchief to my face and debated whether to sneak down to the lobby for a cold drink. I knew the picture by heart, anyway. Helen and I had already watched John Gilbert in *The Big Parade* several times. The feature selection at the Orpheum changed with glacial slowness, and the owner swapped in an old favorite now and then when new reels were slow to arrive. Still, I hated to annoy people by crawling over their legs in the dark, so I stayed put and watched a favorite scene in which the soldier and the French girl first meet in the village near her family's farm.

As the doughboy and farm girl flirted onscreen, I mentally recast the scene. The French village became Kerryville, the farm our family's dry goods store, and the French girl was me, stocking thread and cutting fabric on an ordinary day, when in walks a handsome soldier, ready to change my life forever. What would it be like to have my whole world turned upside down by this soldier, his dazzling smile hinting at adventure and mystery? What if he invited me to run away with him? What if he held out his hand to me and said—

“Stop hogging all the Jujubes.” Helen reached over and snatched the candy from my hand. With a start I snapped back to reality, guilty I'd been caught daydreaming, especially since the soldier in my fantasy clearly bore a face other than that of my fiancé, Richard. With a sigh I relinquished the sweets. Real life wasn't anything like the movies.

Helen had begged to see *The Big Parade* yet again, but playing around the misty edges of my mind lurked the real reason I had given in. In John Gilbert's soulful expression, in his strong jaw and khaki uniform, I saw Jack. Jack, the sweetheart lost to me forever on some battlefield in France. And for just a little while, in the dark, I could think back and remember.

For heaven's sake, Marjorie, snap out of it. I straightened my spine against the velvet cushion. *It's been ten years. You're engaged to someone else. Move on with your life. Forward, march.*

Sternly I directed my mind to imagine Richard in the soldier role, but it didn't quite work. For one thing, Richard hadn't served in the war. For another, he was not prone to impulsive romantic gestures. Our courtship proceeded on a steady course, free of drama. Silently I recited his good qualities, a habit I'd acquired of late. Richard was kind. Generous. Faithful. Prosperous. Toss in thrifty, brave, and clean and he'd make the perfect Boy Scout. In fact, he made perfect husband and father material. Everyone said so. If together we seemed to lack a certain, well, *spark*, then so what? A girl can't build a future on castles in the air.

At sixteen, Helen still firmly believed in air castles. Beside me she mused, "I wonder if our brother fell in love with any French girls during the war."

Or if Jack did, I wondered against my will, then chased that thought straight out of my head. Remembering my old flame invariably brought on useless comparisons between *then* and *now*.

"Not likely," I whispered to Helen. "Charlie's never mentioned any girls."

"Not that he'd tell us, of course. You don't tell that sort of thing to your sisters."

"*Sssh!* Watch the picture."

Helen fell silent, but she'd seen the movie too many times to become engrossed. Minutes later she whispered, "I wish you and I could travel to France."

"Maybe we will. Someday."

She snorted. "You say that now. But once you're married, we'll never get to go anywhere or do anything fun, ever again."

This time the "*Sssh!*" came from the row behind us.

My sister's words echoed in my head. *Never do anything fun again.* Suddenly, in spite of the heat, shivers that had nothing to do with John Gilbert's dreamy dark eyes raised goose bumps on my arms. The screen blurred. The flocked-velvet walls closed in on me. My pulse pounded. I needed air.

I nudged my sister. "Come on. We have to leave."

Helen gaped at me in the flickering light. "What's the matter?"

The rows of seats rearranged themselves in dizzying patterns.

"Now, please. I'm—I'm not feeling well."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I just feel—strange."

She gestured toward the screen. "But the soldier and the French girl—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Helen," I hissed, gripping her arm. "How many times have we seen it? War happens, he leaves, he comes back, they kiss, end of story."

"*Ow.* Stop it!" Helen yanked her arm away, swatting the man in front of us. He turned and glared. "Sorry," she whispered, then to me, "See what you made me do."

The theater dipped and spun. "I mean it, Helen. I have to leave. Now."

She peered at me. "Jeepers, Marjorie, you don't look so hot."

I stood and lurched over legs and handbags toward the exit. "Sorry. Sorry."

And the next thing I knew, I was lying flat in the aisle, Helen rubbing my wrist, a pockmarked usher shining his flashlight in my face, and Eugenia Wardlow, the town's biggest gossip, leaning over me with a look of delighted concern.