



JESSICA'S STORY



Fifteen-year-old Jessica Ingram knew what this evening's "family meeting" was about, even though Mom would not tell her anything specific. Jessica's sister, Karen, and brother, Mark, knew too. You'd have to be blind, deaf, and brainless not to understand what was going on. Dad and Mom were planning to announce to their three children that their "trial separation" had not worked and that they were getting a divorce. The "Divorce Meeting"





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would be as horrible as the “Separation Meeting” had been three months earlier, Jessica knew. She would rather dive into a vat of sulfuric acid and disappear forever than be here tonight. Not literally, of course. She knew suicide was really a coward’s way out of anything, besides being a sin. But what was the point of an Ingram family meeting when everyone would go away feeling even worse than they felt now? Why glorify a divorce by sitting down at the dinner table to announce it?

Flopped across her bed, Jessica turned up the volume on her CD headphones so she could not hear the silence in the house. Her eighteen-year-old sister, Karen, would be home from work in half an hour, just before the dreaded dinner meeting. If she were home now, Karen would be storming around the house slamming doors and cupboards and biting everybody’s head off. Venting, she called it. Karen had always been very upfront with her anger about Mom and Dad’s breakup, beginning in the middle of the “Separation Meeting” back in April. At least when Karen was venting, Jessica felt a little better. The silence was awful.

Their little brother, Mark, twelve, was at home, but he was the exact opposite of Karen. After the “Separation Meeting,” Mom had asked him how he was doing. He had just shrugged and had gone back to his computer games, acting as if nothing had



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happened. He was likely in his room right now with his own headphones on, systematically annihilating the evil warriors of Planet Zarg on his computer. Jessica knew that the family crisis was affecting him, that the kid was just blocking out his feelings or something. She was afraid of what might happen when it all caught up with him.

Mom was home too, Jessica knew, but she was buried in a corner of the house with one of her romance novels. Jessica thought she would feel better if her mother were in here ragging on her to clean up her room or do her chores. But Mom was apparently in retreat mode like she and Mark.



Dad was not home, of course. After the "Separation Meeting," he had moved into an apartment four miles away. Dad was bringing a couple of pizzas for dinner tonight, Mom had said. Jessica wrinkled her nose at the thought. What a cruel joke—to sit down and casually eat pizza while dismantling the family. Jessica wasn't hungry. She hadn't been hungry for three months. She hadn't slept well either, bothered by an itchy skin rash and horrible nightmares. It had all started in April. If this is how she felt after the separation, how much worse would she feel when Mom and Dad finally divorced? She didn't want to know.

As the music pounded in her ears, Jessica tried to pray. She had been a Christian almost a year now,

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having trusted Christ the previous summer at church youth camp. She had noticed a positive difference in her life since meeting Jesus. Prayer, Bible study, and worship were now significant parts of her life. But so far that difference had not extended to her family—particularly her parents. They only attended church about once every two months, when the youth music team, with Jessica singing, was on the program. And her parents had drifted farther apart in the past year, even though Jessica prayed for them regularly.

Praying for her parents' reconciliation now seemed almost hopeless. For one thing, Jessica assumed that the breakup was partly her fault. She could have been more obedient, compliant, and helpful, especially before becoming a Christian. Her stubborn behavior at times had made Mom and Dad's life together more difficult, she knew. Jessica had asked God many times to forgive her for not being a better kid. With Dad's arrival less than an hour away, Jessica mainly prayed for Mark and Karen—and herself.

The "Divorce Meeting" was a sham of family life. Dad and Mark shoveled down pizza and talked about baseball as though it were a party. Jessica, Karen, and Mom took courtesy bites, then pushed their plates away and sat in silence. Mom seemed on the verge of tears. Karen had fire in her eyes, like a ticking time



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bomb set to explode. Jessica just wanted it to be over so she could go back to her room.

“Your mother and I have something to tell you,” Dad announced finally. “Our problems have gotten worse instead of better since I moved out. The separation and counseling haven’t helped. So we have decided to get a divorce. We want you kids to know that this is not about you; it’s about Mom and me. We both love all three of you, and we will—”



Karen jumped to her feet so quickly that her chair toppled backward and hit the hardwood floor with a crash. “This is so sick!” she screamed at both parents. “If you really loved us, you wouldn’t do this to us. Why can’t you work things out? I don’t think you’re really trying. I don’t think you want to try.” Spicing her anger with some strong words Jessica had never heard her sister use before, Karen vented big-time. Dad tried to interrupt a couple of times, but it was like spitting into the wind. So he just sat there and took it. Jessica knew it wouldn’t change his mind. Mom squeezed her eyes closed and cried silently. Mark occupied himself by nibbling on pizza crust.

The more Karen blazed, the more Jessica could feel her own anger and hurt. Karen said things she wished she could say. It was as if her older sister were venting for both of them. And when Karen started crying, Jessica felt a swell in her throat and a warm tear on her cheek. Even though she could not



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agree with everything Karen said or how she said it, Jessica envied her sister's ability to blow off steam.

In less than two minutes—which seemed more like two hours to Jessica—it was all over. Dad had said his piece, and Karen had exploded. Then Dad explained that he and Mom were still discussing living arrangements—who would live with whom and for how long. This was a new fly in the soup for Jessica. Dad had moved out and left the kids with Mom. Karen had told Jessica that she was pretty sure Dad was already dating and that he probably wouldn't want the girls or Mark living with him, for obvious reasons. Now Dad was talking about splitting up the Ingram family even more. And he was looking at Jessica when he said, “Maybe when school starts in September, someone would like to come live with me.”

Jessica wasn't about to choose between her parents, but neither was she ready to become a ping-pong ball bouncing between them. Her room and her stuff were here. Jessica felt her place was with her mother, Karen, and Mark. She didn't know how she would tell her dad that she wanted to stay with Mom.

Jessica's father had a business appointment at 7:30, so he left a few minutes after 7:00. Jessica loved her dad, but she was glad to see him go. She had had enough of “family unity” for one night. Karen helped



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Mom clean up after dinner, Mark beamed back to Planet Zarg on his computer, and Jessica slipped away to her room and headphones.

She knew Mom and Karen would rehash all the gory details of the evening, which was the last thing Jessica wanted to do. A divorce was something that should be decided in private and then buried there, she assessed. It's not something you chat about, like how you liked a movie. And it's not something you talk about with friends, like, "I just got a new pair of Nikes on sale, and my parents are getting a divorce."

Jessica was suddenly aware of one benefit of being a Christian she had not previously realized. Her best friends were church friends, including the adult leaders, Doug and Jenny Shaw. And since none of her friends knew her family, they would not hear about the divorce unless she told them—which she would not. Even her best friend, Natalie Simmons, who had invited her to church camp a year ago and prayed with Jessica when she trusted Christ, knew only that her parents were separated. It would be important that Natalie help her keep the divorce a secret. But, of course, Natalie had to know about the divorce if she was going to help keep it a secret. So Jessica decided to tell her—and only her.

"Going to Natalie's, back by ten," Jessica called out to her mother on the way out the door. She was



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on her bike and headed down the driveway before her mother could respond. It felt good to be outside on a warm summer evening. It felt even better to be away from the house where the aroma of pizza kept reminding her of Dad's announcement. She wondered if she would ever be able to eat pizza again.

"Your parents are getting divorced? Oh, Jessie, I'm so sorry." Natalie's words took Jessica by surprise. There was so much feeling in them, so much love, and not an ounce of blame. The two girls had biked over to the city park and were sitting in adjoining swings when Jessica told Natalie about the dinner meeting at her house.

"Thanks, but it's a secret, all right?" Jessica responded.

"A secret? What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't want anybody at church to know," Jessica said insistently. "And now that you know, I don't even want to talk about it anymore."

"But why, Jessie?" Natalie probed.

Jessica hesitated, wavering on how honest she should be. Having told Natalie everything so far, she decided to be up front with her, even though it was difficult. "Because . . . because . . . the Ingram family isn't normal, all right? My parents are not Christians, and I'm not proud of the fact that they are doing this. I'd rather people didn't know." Then Jessica pushed herself back and lifted her feet to swing. Natalie did



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the same, and the two girls glided silently side by side for several minutes.

When the swings were almost still again, Natalie said, "What about Jenny?"

Jenny Shaw and her husband, Doug, in their thirties, were volunteer youth leaders at church. Jenny had also been present when Jessica trusted Christ last summer. Jenny had disciplined Jessica one on one for several weeks after camp.

"What about Jenny?" Jessica said.

"She's a spiritual big sister to you," Natalie returned, "you said so yourself. I think you should tell Jenny what's going on at home. She could probably help you deal with your parents' divorce."

"I am dealing with it, Natalie. I'm just dealing with it... well... more privately than other people do."

"A divorce is a very big thing to handle privately," Natalie said, sounding a bit like a big sister herself.

"I told you, didn't I?"

"Yes, and I'm going to be praying for you," Natalie assured her. "I'm your friend, and I'm here for you. But I think Jenny may be able to help you deal with your emotions better than I can."

"Emotions? I'm not the emotional one in the family. That happens to be my sister, Karen." Jessica didn't want to argue with Natalie. But she didn't like her friend telling her what she needed, even if Natalie was right.

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Natalie was silent for a minute, causing Jessica to wonder if she had given up. Then she said, "Remember when my older brother was killed two years ago?"

Jessica thought about it. "I barely knew you then. It was an accident at work, right?"

Natalie nodded. "Skip's death rocked the whole family pretty hard. I thought the best way to handle it was to get back to normal as soon as possible. So I told myself to get over it and get on with life. I didn't realize that there is a natural grieving process I had to go through. Jenny and Doug helped me get my feelings out where I could deal with them."

Jessica waited for the punch line, but Natalie said nothing more. She didn't have to. *A divorce is like a death*, Jessica recited to herself the unspoken admonition. *You need to grieve it; you need to pour your feelings out to someone who can help you deal with them. Jenny is your spiritual big sister. You need to go see her.*

After a few more minutes of silent swinging, Jessica said, "I'd better get home. I'm worried about Mark. I need to spend some time with him."

Before they got on their bikes, Natalie gave Jessica a long hug. "I really hurt for you, Jessie. I'm so sorry you have to go through this."

Jessica returned the hug. "Thanks. Thanks for caring."



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Jessica didn't take the most direct route home. She wanted to think a little more about whether she should tell Jenny Shaw about one of the saddest days in her life.

