

ONE LITTLE GIRL. FOUR TRAGIC MURDERS.
HER LIFE ~~DESTROYED.~~
reclaimed.



I am
JESSICA

JAMIE COLLINS

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This is a true story, written to share my cousin's life story, including real events that forced her to stand in the space she now occupies between worlds—the one she knew before this tragedy and the one she would come to know in its aftermath. I have recreated some conversations and told all elements of Jessi's life story to the best of my ability, since nearly three decades have passed since that day in April 1989. While the words may not be verbatim, every element of this story is authentic to Jessi's reality, as she lived it. She has recalled the events as best as she could, given the nature of the trauma and circumstances surrounding her loss. We've chosen to refer to most people referenced within this book by pseudonyms for purposes of respecting the privacy of those individuals and making the story easier to follow. As for the individuals whom we address by their given names, they have formally appeared in public records, evidence, newspaper clippings, and various media interviews shared over the years.

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Where stories breathe on paper.™

JESSICA'S DEDICATION:

*To my husband and children,
The ones who gave me a family and a
place in this world.*



JAMIE'S DEDICATION:

*To my son Gavin,
Don't wait for life to come to you.
Go to it.
Be the light.*


*And lastly,
To the resilient ones living in the “after.”
The ones we are.
The ones we know.
The ones we meet.
The ones we love.
And all those left behind.*

*We stand with you.
And we will not whisper any longer.*



TRIGGER WARNING


This book depicts real events that deal with violence, trauma, and the difficult emotions experienced by a person who survived a horrific tragedy. Parts may be triggering for some trauma survivors.



*Upon the embers of sorrow and courage,
she will rise above all that transpired to destroy her.*

—Jamie Collins
(for Jessi)





Each of us is born innocent; a clean slate, and a pure soul.

*One that will later be etched, irrevocably,
by the things that happen to us along the way.*

We each battle our own darkness.

We each seek our own light.

We each stand in the glory of our own truths.

And we speak the words of our own story.

Of these things, I am clear:

Where there is darkness, there is light.

Where there is evil, there is redemption.

Where there is despair, there is also hope.

*Resilience grows steadfast through the cracks
we unwillingly possess.*

It is shaped by the stories we'd rather not tell.

*Where tragedy ends, a new beginning stands
at the end of a long, dark road.*

Each of us has a different story to tell,

but our purpose remains:

To find our own way through the darkness.

To find our own way back to the light.

Even after our darkest days,

we may shine.

—Jamie Collins



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

One day during the spring of 2016, three months into our discussions about this book, I chatted with Jessi by phone. She and I had been talking for quite a while about various things, when I asked her a rather pointed question. “Jess, so let me ask you this. This is something people are going to want to know. *Why* are you stepping forward to tell your story now? *Why now*—why after all these years? You’ve been silent for almost three decades, and now you’re telling this story. So, why now. Tell me why.”

In the most sincere, compelling tone, she replied, “I guess the reason I’m doing this now is because I want people to SEE ME.” The last two words left her lips with intense passion, saturated with yearning. I was captivated by her tone and I found her choice of words interesting. I knew this had to be significant, so I continued, “When you say that you want them to ‘see you,’ what do you mean by that? I remember you saying those exact same words to me once, but you didn’t say them that way, it was in a normal, flat, matter-of-fact tone, like it was no big deal. I remember it clearly. But this time, when you said it to me, you really meant it. I could *feel* it, when you said those words—the ‘see me’ part—so help me understand what you mean when you say that.”

In a serious tone, she said, “I want people to SEE ME. I want them to *know* that I *actually* exist. That I’ve been here *all these years*. Everyone else went on with their lives. I guess I did, too. But I’m still here.”

I was intrigued by this statement. I knew there was something big hanging just beneath those words. I had to figure it out. I continued, “I can tell this means a lot to you. Do you think you can tell me a story or give me an example to help me understand? I can tell it means a lot to you when you said those words, but I need you to help me understand *what* it means *to you*.” She replied, “Well, this tragedy changed every single part of my life. It was

such a big deal at the time it happened that it made national news and was later featured on those shows (*Unsolved Mysteries* and *Dateline 20/20*). Hell, my extended family has never really been around. They've barely interacted with me over the years, with the exception of a few Facebook likes. The people who knew my family, people who lived in Lakeville, Indiana, or read those news stories, or watched those TV shows seem to have no idea that I exist. It's like everyone seems to think that I died, too. But here I am, alive. I've struggled all these years to deal with this terrible thing that happened in my life. I lost everyone I loved. I lost everything I had. And people don't realize that I even exist. That I even lived through this shit. That I'm still here. That there was a survivor. And that survivor is me. *I feel like I'm suffocating in the middle of the street and no one can see me.* I want them to **SEE ME**, to know that I exist. I'm not sure why I survived, but I did. I always felt like my life had a purpose, that I was left here for a reason."

Mind. Blown. As Jessi spoke those words to me, my eyes pooled with tears, and a few slipped down my face. My breath caught in the back of my throat, and I took a hard swallow as I hung on her every word, trying to keep it together while fervently scribbling the words and the significance of them down on the page. Of all the words Jessi ever spoke to me, those words were the most powerful of them all. I'll never forget them. "I want them to **SEE ME**."

That moment hung between us. Those words. They mattered. It was the entire reason she was willing to lay her life bare, down to the bones, to allow others to take a hard, long look. It was so all of us could see her: the broken little girl *and* the resilient woman she had become.

Her other words hadn't been lost on me, either, when she said she knew she "had a purpose for still being here, a reason for being alive." Jessi stepping forward to tell her story in an effort to help others out of their own personal darkness is a large part of that purpose.

For her, I would find the words. I would help the world to see her for the first time in three decades. The little girl whose

childhood was annihilated at the age of nine. The rebellious teenager who would fight, claw, and crawl through all the years of her uprooted life in a swirl of instability and emotional chaos. And the beautiful woman now speaking on the phone with me: my resilient, awe-inspiring, fierce, bold, beautiful cousin. A survivor of tragedy who now stands on these pages, vulnerable. A survivor of tragedy who now stands on these pages, strong.

On this day, I saw the little girl Jessica clearly. And I saw the grown woman Jessi, too. I saw them both. And it became my sacred mission to find a way to share *both* of them with you. The vulnerable girl. And the strong one. They're one and the same. I see that now.

I've also learned that real life stories often don't end the way we *think* they will, tied up in shiny satin ribbons, without any flaws revealed in the packaging. Real life has a way of breaking our preconceived notions and, at times, annihilating this writer's carefully created plans for telling the story the way I initially thought it would end. That's something I learned the hard way while writing this book, in real time, as certain events transpired in our lives. I had no way to know what would happen eight months into our journey on this book. It was an ending I never saw coming and one I was not at all prepared to live out, much less write about. I had no way to know those hypothetical ribbons holding together a beautiful human package would fall undone in a heap of turmoil and memories, and that I would become the cousin, turned author, who would find herself bearing witness to the loudest silence almost *never* heard: the sound of the human soul splintering.

Be warned: This is one of the craziest true-crime-stories-turned-memoirs ever written. If you didn't know it was a true story, you'd probably never believe it to be one.

For those readers looking for one hell of a story, this is it. True crime junkies, buckle up. This is the untold story of my cousin, Jessica Pelley. And we don't sugarcoat a thing.



Olive Branch United
Brethren Church

Lakeville, Indiana

May 3, 1989

*M*y name is Jamie Collins. I'm Jessica Pelley's cousin and the author of this book.

Back in May of 1989, three little girls found themselves seated in the wooden pews of a small white church in a small, rural farming community in Lakeville, Indiana. It was tragedy that put us there. On that day, that place of worship and spiritual light became a sanctuary where sadness dwelled.

The sobs in that room are something we will never forget. We were children surrounded by rows of wooden pews filled with adults, all of whom were deeply immersed in the soul-swallowing throes of grief, some crying, others sobbing. Audible gasps for breath punctuated the silence, bending our ears and breaking our hearts. Sorrow hung heavy in the air like a thick blanket of fog, enveloping us at every angle. The depth of grief around us was palpable. All at once, every person in the room began to sing along to the chords of a piano, in unison, the words: "*Amaziiiiiiing Graaaaaace, how sweeeeeeet the soooooound, that saaaaaaved a wretch liiiiiiiike meeee . . .*" Hundreds of people sang the words. Sobs filled the air. Tears poured from our eyes, streamed in long, wet lines down the front of our faces, fell onto our laps, and clouded our vision. It was hard to breathe through the sobbing. The little girls were not singing. They couldn't. The words to this song would forever be burned into the soul of every person in this room, a religious sanctuary in which we would find no solace. An emotional scar etched permanently across our hearts like a scab waiting to be torn open again at any time. A song that

would go on to haunt us for the next three decades. We will *never* forget this moment. Never.

There would be no closure. Not for us. Not for Jessica. Not for anyone. Closed caskets don't really afford a person the final formality of saying a proper goodbye to a person. Not even close. Just wooden caskets and flowers to serve as a placeholder for the people you loved, now lost. Our minds involuntarily flashed to vivid mental images of their final hellish moments here on earth . . . before the boxes. So young. So beautiful. So full of life.

Now gone.

And today, Jessica and those two little girls—me and her childhood best friend, Stephanie, who were both seated in that little white church with her nearly thirty years ago—are finally stepping forward to tell the story of an unfathomable tragedy. May her story cast a light into the darkness for those who need it most.



JESSI

(That's the name I go by now.)

April 29, 2016

April 29, 1989.

A date I cannot forget.

Numbers forever seared deep into my soul.

*I*t was 27 years ago, today. *Jesus. Get a grip, Jessi. They're just numbers. They don't mean anything. You're giving them power over you, again.* That's what I tell myself. But the numbers—those damn numbers—they haunt me. They always will. I cannot escape them. Not now. Not ever.

For most people, dates are just numbers on a calendar. No big deal. Random markers of time affixed to the top left corner of small, white squares on a page to depict days filled with choices, chances, and opportunities. At least that's what they are for the *normal* people. But I'm no longer one of them. For me, they serve as numeric reminders of the girl I used to be.

The 29th day of April: the date I will never have the luxury of forgetting. A tragedy that would irrevocably and mercilessly alter the life of a little girl wearing dark blue jeans, canvas lace-up sneakers, and a white tee shirt, accessorized by prominent coke-bottle glasses, her hair hanging in a messy bob. Her life would be forever dismantled. Gone. The moment they told me the words. The ones that I will never forget. At that moment, my life froze and shattered into pieces, splintering like bits of broken glass, dropping down onto the ground around me, like the remnants of a cracked windshield, falling fast before the spinning mind and tattered heart of a wide-eyed little girl.

Life, as I knew it, was over in that moment. What happened on that day has scarred me forever. A day that started out normally, before it became ensnared in marred memories, tucked between

folds of tragedy and darkness. The lingering memories cut straight to the core of the hollow girl left behind.

The darkness delivers itself to me, every year, on schedule. Steadily. Greedily. Relentless. Haunting. It taunts the pieces of me that remain. *Every single year.*

I try to lift myself out of the darkness. I tell myself the numbers shouldn't matter. Not after 27 years have passed. *Jessi, It's just another day. You can do anything you want with it. Don't slip into the darkness.* But not even the voice in my head believes those bullshit lies I tell myself. Year after year, my happiness recoils, my thoughts run to a dark place filled with foggy memories and a void that swallows me whole. The door of despair opens and I'm trapped: alone, numb to the bone, emotionally deplete, devoid of all reality, space, and time. I hate the helplessness as I slip further into that dark place. A place that, long ago, was filled with light. A place where three little girls would sing happy songs, pick flowers, hold hands while skipping through tall blades of grass, and sit down at the dining room table, where they would bow their heads to pray before plates filled with food, in a home filled with laughter. Then it hits me—the life-defining, self-inflicted images of horror—of their final moments—screams, fear, blood everywhere, dragging me deep into the darkness. A place I would dwell for days, weeks, and months, turned into years.

Twenty-seven years ago . . . and I'm *still counting*. It's clear—I'm fucked. Forever damaged. There is no escape. There is only here. Only now. I hear the songs and laughter. I remember the little girls. The swinging, the playing, the happiness. And then I realize it's all gone.

But I'm still here . . .



JESSI

AGE 37

December 2016

I find myself seated on a twin bed in a stark hospital room in the psych ward a few weeks before Christmas. It's cold. It's lonely. I feel empty inside, like a shell of a person. And it sucks.

It's hard to imagine how a person ends up here with deep wounds in her heart, sad thoughts in her head, and a tattered soul. But this is precisely the type of place a person like me succumbs to after living through all that befell me, even if it is 27 years later. The load I was forced to carry in life became too great a burden; it nearly broke me. The sorrow within me runs so deep, it sits in my bones. I am too tired of silently struggling to keep my shit together for one more day. So, here I sit, "self-admitted patient, party of one."

They would allow me to leave this place if I wanted to. I'm past the initial holding period for psychiatric evaluation. But I'm staying here now because I want to. I choose to. Everyone around me can't wait to get out of this place. They hate it here. I hear them constantly complain about how much they hate the rules. Unlike me, they must not really need to be here. I'm staying because my life is spinning out of control. The routine fell apart. The habits and rituals could not protect me. I'm afraid to cry because I know once the tears begin to fall I will not be able to stop them.

I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of feeling alone. I'm tired of running from my past. I'm tired of tucking it away and trying to forget about it, when I know I never will. Hell, at this point, I'm tired of being tired. I'm over all of it. I'm the girl who finally broke apart.

The breaking apart started following several major life "triggers." That's what the psychiatrists call them. The things, in