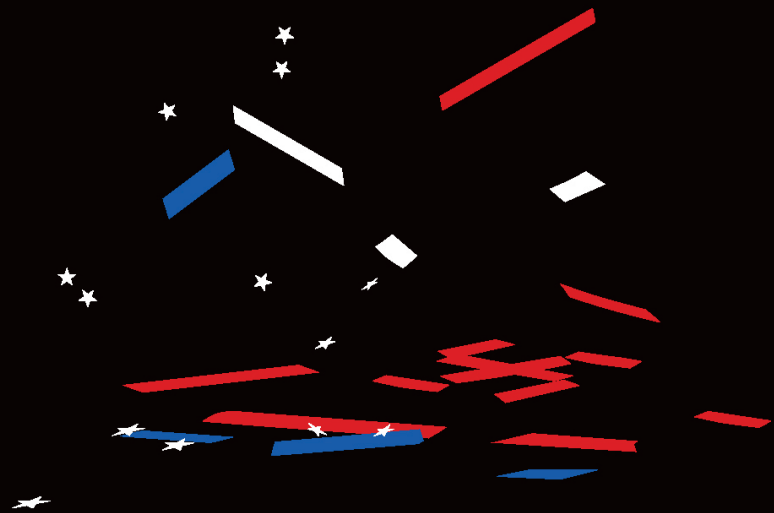


BREAKING HATE

CONFRONTING THE
NEW CULTURE OF EXTREMISM



CHRISTIAN PICCIOLINI

Author of White American Youth

More praise for
BREAKING HATE

“A rare, exquisitely narrated tale of journeys to the edge and back, *Breaking Hate* illuminates a creeping danger that threatens to polarize American society and split it apart. It documents Christian Picciolini’s inspired efforts to turn back a tide of hate about to engulf us all. A must-read for anyone who cares to understand what feeds violent extremism, and how it can be countered.”

—Dr. Arie Kruglanski, Distinguished Professor of Psychology
at the University of Maryland and author of *The Three Pillars
of Radicalization*

“Those who ignore Picciolini’s agonizing and dire warnings about the pervasive and systematic alt-right movement, do so at all of our peril. We must instead listen intently to what he is telling us and internalize his poignantly told personal story and fervent efforts to repair fractured souls lost to forces beyond their control. Our survival as a civil society may depend upon it.”

—Glenn Frank, coauthor of *From Broken Glass:
Surviving Hitler’s Death Camps to
Inspire a New Generation*

“At a time when the bonds of multiracial democracy and pluralism are being torn by political strife, growing hate group activity, and acts of white-supremacist terrorism, Christian Picciolini provides us a roadmap to a new sense of community and justice. As a former extremist himself, Picciolini knows what turns people into ticking time bombs and what it takes to defuse them; and more to the point, what it takes to prevent still more fuses from being lit. In *Breaking Hate*, he combines a keen sense of history with human psychology, sharp storytelling and the kind of hopefulness it will take to emerge from our current moment a healthier and more just nation. In this impressive volume he provides a critical glimpse inside the broken humanity of not only individual extremists, but the brokenness of America itself.”

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“With piercing insight and unrivaled compassion, *Breaking Hate* tells the tragic story of how extremism has torn our communities asunder and how every American can work together to end the epidemic of violence that has taken so many of our loved ones. In a country where more than 96 percent of mass shootings are perpetrated by men, we need to find ways of helping our boys grow into healthy young men who not only reject hate but also feel they have paths forward in today’s economy.”

—Andrew Yang, Democratic presidential candidate

BREAKING HATE

For Review Only

ALSO BY CHRISTIAN PICCIOLINI

*White American Youth: My Descent into America's Most Violent
Hate Movement—and How I Got Out*

For Review Only

BREAKING HATE

CONFRONTING THE
NEW CULTURE OF EXTREMISM



CHRISTIAN PICCIOLINI

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*For Britton, my boys, and Buddy,
who have lived these pages with me in magical ways
for the last thirty-odd years—
and always with love*

For Review Only

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Prologue

The Crossroads of Union and Division

I SPENT THE SUMMER OF 1987 shadowboxing my teenage demons, buzzed on a steady diet of cheap beer and bitter-tasting ditch weed—two substances I hoped would become easier to score when I started high school in three months.

On Friday nights in Blue Island, Illinois, the center of my universe became whichever garage I decided to lean against in the dead-end alley behind the corner of Union and Division Streets, a block downwind from the weekly fish fry in the basement of Saint Donatus Church. My *nonna*—the Italian grandmother who practically raised me—dragged me to Mass there every Sunday, making me kneel, sit, and stand so many goddamn times I could only pray to God to please make it stop.

I jumped ship on the Holy Spirit at the end of eighth grade when my parents moved us from the suburbs back to Blue Island on the southwest side of Chicago. After ditching the halls of my Catholic elementary school, I decided I wouldn't be anyone's faithful servant anymore. I grew up that summer, and not just physically—in addition to sprouting hair on my chin and my chest all of me got older, wiser. When I got to my new neighborhood, carving a path to escape my family's shadow became paramount to my existence. I assured myself this would be the year I'd make real friends and everything would change for me. I could feel it in my new, stocky bones.

Blue Island was the working-class, mostly Italian neighborhood on the edge of the city where my parents lived before I was born; where my

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grandparents now raised me while my mom and dad worked in their beauty shop around the clock. Buddy, my four-year-old baby brother, needed relatives to look after him when my mother went back to work styling hair, my parents claimed, and that's why they needed to move back near my grandparents. I knew my mom and dad were lying; it was because the shop wasn't doing well and they were going broke. I figured poverty wouldn't be half as bad as being almost fourteen and only having my kid brother to hang out with.

"This is some shitty ditch weed, dude," I said to Scully—one of the neighborhood burnouts—on a muggy, otherwise uneventful August night. Scully was a year older than me, though we'd both be first-year high school students in the fall. His long, curly auburn hair fell around his shoulders, framing pimple-covered cheeks as red and bright as his Michael Jordan jersey. He wore that Chicago Bulls jersey every day, even though it was two sizes too big for his gangly frame and hung past his shorts. Scully got held back in fifth grade for kicking his gym teacher in the nuts for making fun of his freckles, so I wasn't going to be the one to tell him his jersey looked like a dress—even if we weren't smoking his weed.

My fingertips burned on the last few pulls from the joint as my buzz kicked in. Scully had copped it for five bucks from bow-legged Jimmy Beausoleil at the old abandoned train bridge before the police hassled them for underage drinking. In exchange for their case of Miller High Life, the cops let them go with a warning—again. They hadn't found the weed and wouldn't be back until they wanted to drink on the job for free or flirt with the high school girls who drank there after Friday-night football games.

As I turned to pass the roach to Scully, a thunderous roar punched a hole in the dense night air. Two bright columns of light and the nose of a rumbling muscle car tore through the alley toward us. Emerging from the pale glow of a giant dust cloud, the black firebird bounced over the rough backstreet and skidded to a stop in front of me, kicking up bits of gravel that stung my face like raining hail.

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I stood frozen, realizing Scully was long gone.

The door of the iron beast groaned open, and a thin, fair-skinned man at least twice my age stepped out. He looked worn, like a mercenary back from war. The flickering lamppost overhead was enough for me to catch glints of beaded sweat resting atop his clean-shaven scalp and flashes of his stubbled and determined face. As the man advanced toward me, crossing through streams of headlight, I fixated on his tall, black combat boots. Time seemed to slow as brilliant glimmers of amber light bounced off their shiny leather surface. Before I could process what was happening, he closed the distance between us and in one swift motion—like if Bruce Lee were a bald white ninja—smacked the side of my head with one hand and snatched the tiny joint from my fingers with the other, dropping it to the ground and crushing it with the heel of his steel-toed boot.

I wasn't sure whether to be more upset about losing the last of the weed or that I was about to get my ass kicked.

It was too late to run. The bald man's hand was already on my shoulder.

He leaned in, aimed his intense slate eyes into mine, and spoke with purpose: "Communists and Jews want promising, young white men like you to get hooked on these nasty drugs so you're kept docile through your own genocide. Did you know that?"

I did not.

I hadn't ever met a Jewish person. I knew the priests at school didn't think much of them, Jews having apparently crucified their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But communists were a different story. Even at almost fourteen, I knew they were the bad guys. Why else would my boyhood idol Rocky Balboa knock the snot out of a Russian commie in the greatest "Italian" film of all time? The man's other words—*docile*, *genocide*—were so foreign to me I could only assume he knew what he was talking about.

"Tell me your name, son." He straightened up and spoke in a fatherly tone, his voice sounding like he'd swallowed fragments of the

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fractured pavement beneath my trembling legs. Mocked throughout my childhood for having a surname that could be rhymed however unfortunately with *weenie*, I was afraid to tell him. Worse, if he caught even a whiff that I was the weird foreign kid everyone picked on for bringing Nutella sandwiches to school for lunch, he'd pound me into minced meat. With no meaningful friendships and zero protection against bullies, I was an easy target—something I'd become used to by then. There was no chance of this encounter ending well for me.

Bracing myself, I let out a lukewarm: "Chris... Picciolini." The instant jab I expected from the imposing bald man in boots never came.

He instead paused for a moment and gave me a friendly pat on the back before letting his arm fall at his side. "Italian!" he proclaimed. I kept my body clenched in case he was planning a surprise attack.

"Yeah. My parents are from Italy, so what?" My eyes darted around the alley, studying it for getaway options and coming up empty. The only escape was hopping a fence at least eight feet off the ground, far higher than I could reach even with a good jump and a running start. "But I'm American," I replied.

"Now Rome, that was once a glorious empire!" he said. "Roman women are one of God's most exquisite creations." He rested his hand on my shoulder again, gripping it like an old friend.

"Um...hmm, yeah," I muttered, confused by his reaction but relieved I wouldn't have to explain another shiner from bullies to my parents.

The bald man continued to ask me questions as we stood there talking for twenty minutes. Having no close friends, my world consisted of parents who worked ninety-hour weeks and grandparents who were too old to connect with their teenage grandson. It seemed twenty minutes longer than anyone had ever engaged me in my entire life.

So, I listened.

He regaled me with tales of the rise of the Holy Roman Empire and the fall of Constantinople, the Battle of Carthage, and other European conquests and civilizations—all of which he described as "glorious."

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Explaining the impact that “white men” made throughout the annals of world history, he illustrated in great detail how America would be a third-world country if it weren’t for the “boldness of whiteness.”

A freight train roared over the tracks behind us, unleashing a loud, repeating thud. I jumped. In my nervous state, intrigued by the man’s attention and overwhelmed by the concepts he had unfurled before me, it sounded like a tommy gun.

The man laughed. “There’s a lot to be afraid of in this world, son,” he said, nodding at the train, “but that old locomotive ain’t one of them.” Inaction, he claimed, was what I needed to fear. He stressed how mighty cultures of the past had faded into oblivion because of their ambivalence toward conquering what he described as an invasion by “lesser” civilizations. It was, he cautioned, a tale of the tragic consequences suffered by white nations throughout history that hadn’t fought for their survival.

After offering me a Marlboro from the crumpled pack of cigarettes tucked under his T-shirt sleeve, he told me about how white civilizations around the world were under attack by the “globalist agendas of the Washington capitalists,” and that if I cared for my future I needed to stand up to stop this “cultural massacre” from happening. Once I figured out he wasn’t talking about a secret plot by the professional hockey team in DC, his wisdom sank in, and it wasn’t long before I became hooked on the worldview he revealed to me.

For twenty short minutes—a lifetime to me as a teen—the bald man in tall, black combat boots stayed with me in that stinking alley, connecting with me until I felt important and respected. Knowing I felt undervalued, he told me I mattered. It was the first time in my young life that I felt someone—anyone—saw me.

Clark Martell, America’s first neo-Nazi skinhead leader, then extended his right arm in a stiff Roman salute and welcomed a barely teenage me into his burgeoning new white-power skinhead movement. I had just become one of its earliest and youngest members; I just didn’t know it yet.

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No one saw my radicalization to extremism coming. Not my parents, grandparents, my teachers, or the gang of teenage bruisers who made my life hell growing up. I didn't even know what happened at first. When I unveiled my new radical persona as a white-power skinhead, the people around me were shocked and horrified, scrambling to make sense of it—but by then, it was too late. I had forged my frustrations into a weapon to use against them, digging in and doubling down to show them they had failed and abandoned me and that I was better off without them.

Following that fateful meeting in the dead-end alley at the crossroads of Union and Division, I allowed myself to forget I'd been born into a decent, hardworking, Italian American *immigrant* family. I dove headfirst into America's racist underground, empowered by the offers of camaraderie and meaning—and I traded obscurity for hate, making it the currency that ruled my life for almost a decade.

Adapting to this new world was thrilling at first. The more I absorbed what Martell and his crew of older skinheads told me, the easier it became to justify the violence that accompanied my new beliefs. It was everyone else, the willing “enemy combatants” of the world, who were the source of my angst and pain. And they deserved punishment for their crimes against me and the white race they were trying to annihilate, or so I believed.

Though I was hard-pressed to find any evidence of the “antiwhite” plots I feasted on and swallowed whole, I didn't hesitate to blame “shadowy Jews” and “secret globalist agendas” for “destroying” white civilization, or insinuate that “blacks” were responsible for all the crime, drugs, and violence in our cities. Socially conscious whites also became my enemy—“race traitors.” Overlooking my brutality against people of color during that time, I became deaf and blind to generations of suffering endured by women and people in marginalized communities—many of whom still face the same injustices today. Believing immigrants were stealing jobs away from white Americans allowed me to betray the non-racist upbringing of my Italian parents, who were often the victims of prejudice

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as new immigrants, and who struggled to keep a small business alive with no outside help.

Convinced my fight was the good fight against a world conspiring to oppress me—a straight, white male—I was determined to emerge as the victor, whatever the cost.

In 1990, three years after my radicalization into extremism, I inherited Clark Martell’s hate group—the Chicago Area Skinheads (CASH)—making me second in a notorious lineage the world eventually saw marching, albeit in tidier appearance, through the streets of Charlottesville in 2017. When Martell was sentenced to ten years in prison for one of the first hate crimes ever prosecuted in the United States, I took over running America’s first neo-Nazi skinhead gang. By then, I was already recognized around Chicago as a vicious street brawler, and I was stockpiling illegal weapons and ammunition for what I believed was an imminent race war. I fronted one of the world’s earliest white-power bands, and in 1992, we became the first American skinhead group to perform in Europe and spread our racist message through music—toxic propaganda I am still unable to scrub from the Internet decades later.

During my eight years in the American white-supremacist movement, I led a division of the violent Hammerskin Nation, a neo-Nazi group that almost became implicated in a plot to conspire with late Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi to ignite an armed revolt against American Jews. By sheer luck, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service intervened before my cell became involved, and the unlikely terror alliance between homegrown white extremists and radical jihadists overseas—against what they collectively view as “the Jewish problem”—didn’t materialize, at least not yet.

I recited and honored the racist “Fourteen Words” mission statement that white supremacists cleave to their chests: *We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.* What I didn’t know then was that instead of setting into motion the imaginary white utopia the pledge purported to guarantee, my actions in its pursuit did

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nothing but inflict senseless trauma on undeserving victims and their loved ones, including my own.

Many of my old comrades died. More went to prison. I carry this cautionary tale with me—along with the memories I can't erase—everywhere I go, and I share it, hoping it might help others see danger lurking ahead before they travel too far down the same damaging road I once walked alone. Though I was ashamed of my personal history at first, I shared it anyway because running from my past was the wrong thing to do. Now it brings me peace, knowing that when I discuss my story with someone who is disengaging from extremism, or if I bring it to a classroom, stage, or media interview, the knowledge I've gained through my painful mistakes and the intense self-reflection that followed now helps others change their lives for the better. My journey has been amazing, and I'm inspired every time I see light bulbs turn on when people finally understand how it's possible for someone to allow hate to eat them alive—but also find their way back to humanity.

One question almost everyone asks me: How did a young Christian Picciolini, a shy, “normal,” and idealistic kid from Chicago, raised by a modest immigrant family, with no apparent bigoted influences, get so lost down the path to hate and extremism?

One word: *potholes*.

My journey through an otherwise privileged childhood was riddled with metaphorical potholes that widened and multiplied with time and neglect. Potholes are the unresolved traumas buried deep within us. These roadblocks can detour us or carjack us altogether if we're not careful—and they can keep us from discovering a more positive and life-affirming path.

My life as a teenager, like the lives of so many young Americans today, was an obstacle course of emotional and psychological land mines. The weighty uncertainty of not knowing who I was, where—if anywhere—I belonged, or what meaning my life held overwhelmed me, so I wandered aimless and uncertain.

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I was desperate for healthy doses of *identity, community, and purpose* (ICP).^{*} Had I discovered them in positive spaces, instead of through a skinhead on a grimy backstreet, my personal trajectory would have been much different.

The need to fulfill ICP is so essential, I have found the hunt for them to be a critical ingredient in the descent into extremism of every person I have worked with. Whether positive or destructive, ICP are the foundations one builds their core beliefs upon; decisions, actions, and behaviors all stem from their pursuit. Throughout my youth, I groped for them as if crawling through a thick fog with eyes wide shut. Without someone to help me decipher my ICP deficits, and to guide me responsibly around my potholes, I started alone on a dangerous and rocky trek into an alternative reality dominated by “us” versus “them” narratives, where everyone but myself was condemned as a threat to my existence and the future of civilization as I saw it.

Since leaving the white-power movement in 1996, I have obsessed over the questions of *how* and *why* I ended up radicalized into a life of hate and extremism, dissecting every folly from those squandered years. Understanding the motivations of my misguided youth became more critical in 2004 when my twenty-year-old brother, following in my destructive footsteps, lost his life to senseless gun violence on the streets of Chicago.

The intense self-evaluation that followed my brother’s death forced me to confront the actions of my past. Dealing with what I had done head-on, I became driven by the notion that after so many grave personal errors, I could somehow help prevent the sickness I once spread from infecting others. It was all I could do to keep myself from

^{*} *Author’s note:* My theory’s name, ICP, should not be confused with Insane Clown Posse, the white rap/hip-hop duo from Detroit, Michigan—although with a few minor tweaks, this book could very quickly describe their fanatical and “extreme” clown-makeup-wearing subculture. In 2011, the FBI classified the band’s Juggalo supporters as a “loosely organized hybrid gang.”

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falling back into despair and finding false comfort down other dark pathways.

I am fortunate and privileged to have survived my painful ordeal, however scarred it left me to know that the harm I once caused could never fully be undone. It took years for me to accept it, but I could not ignore my responsibility to ensure my sinister legacy didn't repeat itself with others. This voluntary penance for my past sins is both the impetus and backbone of this book.

What I learned from my journey into and away from hate now helps me combat it. Today, the number of former extremists—"formers" as we're known in my circles—I have helped disengage from extremism is in the hundreds. From white lone-wolf terrorists and suit-and-tie campus Nazis to ISIS foreign fighters and would-be school shooters in America's heartland, with my guidance, they have navigated the unforgiving mountainous terrain back to humanity.

The return journey is never accomplished through heated ideological debate or argument. I don't use shame or physical force to change their minds. I don't bother paying anyone lip service, and I certainly don't bust lips anymore. I try not to tell people they're wrong—though having lived their mistakes I know, perhaps more than most, they are. And I avoid calling them *monsters*. I don't label them with anything demeaning, because I understand the negative implications of such dehumanizing tactics. Instead, I work hard to earn their trust, and I listen with empathy. Responding with equal parts cautious vulnerability and measured compassion, I help them uncover the truth about who they really are—keeping accountability for their misdeeds at the fore as the terms for their forgiveness going forward. What often moves me is not what people say but instead the pain, trauma, and uncertainty they say little about or that no words can describe.

I filter out the deafening white noise of ideology, ignoring it to focus on which underlying motivations detoured them to those wrong conclusions—and I discover which potholes still exist.

Then I become a pothole filler.

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Contrary to how extremists win the hearts and minds of unsuspecting “marginalized seekers”—passionate but vulnerable idealists like I was at fourteen—by manipulating their hopes and fears; I win back those frightened hearts and manipulated minds through empathy, humanization, and reflection. My goal is to send them off into the world as “enlightened seekers,” equipped to repair the harm they caused.

Nothing worth pursuing comes easy. The process known as *de-radicalization*—disengaging from a violence-driven political or religious extremist ideology—is complex and requires a careful approach. Because ideology is often used as convenient reasoning to project pain—pain that requires confronting—it is much easier to radicalize a person than it is to bring them back. But rest assured, positive change can occur in even the most “lost” of causes and redemption *is* possible. It just doesn’t happen overnight, and the immense rebuilding it requires is raw and sometimes painful.

As outsiders, learning to *see the child, not the monster*—regardless of whether the individual is sixteen or sixty years old—is essential to understanding how we can end this vicious cycle of hate. Empathy for a racist does not mean appeasement of their hateful beliefs nor equate to an endorsement of criminal or violent behavior. People *must* be accountable for their actions—I’ve held myself to task and continue doing so. But I also know that receiving unexpected (and often unwarranted) compassion from someone we might not otherwise show it to ourselves is the *only* thing I’ve ever seen truly break hate. It’s never simple or comfortable, but it’s a wonder to witness every time it occurs.

Through a series of interwoven vignettes, we’ll venture into the dark world of extremism and examine the phenomena of radicalization and de-radicalization. By examining the lives of some of those hoping to escape hate for a brighter future, we’ll witness how even in the most troubling of circumstances change *is* possible. It is thanks to these essential stories that I can guide you through the intimate process of extremist disengagement.

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Hate is real, and the stakes of eradicating it from our society are existential. Ambivalence only perpetuates hate's toxicity and widens our fractures. Let's instead harness our ability to amplify the goodness in one another and commit to being the antidote to hate.

We can persevere through this bleak period in our nation's history.

This time, though, it is imperative we learn all it teaches us.

For Review Only

BREAKING HATE

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PART ONE



PRE-RADICALIZATION

“The Marginalized Seeker”

They hate because they fear, and they fear because they feel that the deepest feelings of their lives are being assaulted and outraged. And they do not know why; they are powerless pawns in a blind play of social forces.

—Richard Wright, *Native Son*

I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

1

Warning Signs: The Prelude to Hate

Kassandra

“**S**HE’S GONE, CHRISTIAN,” Meredith sobbed.

The din of clanking flatware and midday chatter inside my favorite Chicago delicatessen made her words pulsing through my mobile phone hard to decipher. When Meredith’s number popped up on my screen, it was always a crapshoot whether something horrible had happened—again. Miming to my colleague that I needed to step outside to take the call, I cupped a hand over my free ear and snaked through the scrum of hipsters and busboys at Manny’s Deli and out the front door.

“Campus police called...they found Kassandra’s phone in her dorm.” Meredith’s hurried words ebbed into staccato whimpers. “Jack is with me, and we’re driving... to meet campus police... dear God.”

“Meredith, please slow down.” Rain speckled the cracked pavement around me. “Breathe. I can’t understand you—say that again.”

I already sensed whatever came out of Meredith’s mouth next would mean one of two terrible things: yet another significant regression with her seventeen-year-old white-nationalist daughter, Kassandra, or worse, Kassandra’s Nazi boyfriend followed through with what he long threatened and physically took her from her family. Neither scenario was good, but the latter would be devastating.

“Jakob abducted Cassandra,” was all I heard before losing the rest of her words to the ether. The humid Chicago air squeezed the remaining breath out of me. Meredith’s voice was flat with despair, empty and heavy like the fog rolling in from Lake Michigan. I lowered the phone and pressed it against my chest, the speaker vibrating my skin as she wept for her missing teenage daughter a thousand miles away. I shuddered, feeling responsible, as if my chronic fear of this moment had somehow manifested it.

My head spun as thoughts raced inside of it—and it all rushed back in a flash.

Like a tornado of binary fragments, a stream of digital evidence from my year-long investigation into Cassandra’s online tormentors swirled in my mind—the suspects, aliases, accomplices, doctored videos, manipulated images, IP addresses, map coordinates, and countless screen grabs of bogus alt-right and pro-Trump social media accounts. Thousands of them all linked to Cassandra through a single nexus—Jakob Bergsson, her online Nazi boyfriend. Following the never-ending trail of rancid breadcrumbs to protect Cassandra and her family from Bergsson consumed me.

Now, she was gone.

It no longer mattered that I had made a solid identification on two suspects I believed were conspiring to lure Cassandra into thinking “Jakob Bergsson” was a real person: a Peruvian man living in Northern California named Santiago Amaro, and his partner, Maksim Volkov, a Russian millennial in Moscow, whom I labeled *Troll Zero*. As far as I could tell, the pair used the Jakob Bergsson fake-boyfriend alias to catfish at least four other underage female victims besides Cassandra. I warned the girls’ families that an imposter boyfriend was grooming their young loved ones as white-supremacist mouthpieces but none responded to my phone messages or emails. The other girls likely shared revealing selfies like Cassandra had, and the looming threat of blackmail was also keeping them compliant.

The dizzying scenario made me question my sanity many times since meeting Cassandra. But I was damn sure of one thing: Jakob

Bergsson—the blond-haired, blue-eyed Aryan avatar Cassandra fell in love with over the Internet, the romantic twenty-three-year-old German American Nazi boy from Eagle, Idaho, who stole her heart and robbed her of her mind—did *not* exist in real life. He was a fraud.

The bizarre notion of a Russian Internet troll and a Latino immigrant living in Northern California conspiring to impersonate an American neo-Nazi was puzzling enough, but that they would go to such insane lengths for over eighteen months to dupe a random American teenager and her family gnawed at me. It was unlike any case of extremist radicalization I had encountered in almost twenty years of disengagement work, and I couldn't figure out why she was being targeted by these two discrete foreign men. *Sex trafficking? The Russian mob? A doomsday cult?* I wrestled with every possible warped scheme.

Jakob Bergsson—Kassandra's virtual boyfriend—was a self-anointed white supremacist, to be sure, but at least one of the real people behind the Bergsson alias appeared to be nonwhite and into non-movement-related cybercrimes like deep-web drug sales and financial pyramid schemes. The whole charade left me confused and in constant worry about Kassandra and her family's safety.

When I first discovered a connection between the Jakob Bergsson alias and thousands of fake pro-Trump social media accounts, I wondered if it was somehow related to the upcoming election before quickly whiffing it off as farfetched. Four months later, on January 6, 2017, when the CIA and FBI announced Russian president Vladimir Putin's intelligence directorate—the FSB—had meddled in and influenced the 2016 US presidential election in favor of Donald Trump, it confirmed my suspicions.*

How did Kassandra's radicalization fit into this? None of it made sense when I first stumbled on it. But as evidence piled up, a telling

* *Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution"* (Washington, DC: US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017).

picture emerged. Still, my revelation to Cassandra and her family about the two men behind her fake boyfriend's social media accounts had failed to wake her from her nightmare.

I am not losing my damn mind, I convinced myself for the millionth time. Battling legions of doubt, along with a Russian troll brigade engaged in a furious siege on my will, took its toll on me. Bergsson had promised to come for Cassandra before, but the veiled threats never amounted to anything. This time, though, the elusive digital specter kept its word.

"Everything kosher?" my colleague asked as she approached me in the parking lot with an open umbrella and two bags of deli takeaway in tow. "I figured you got tangled up in that call, so I ordered us a couple of pastrami sandwiches to go."

My eyes lifted from their locked-downward stare, drops of dangling rain leaping from the brim of my cap. *I gave the FBI all my evidence on Jakob Bergsson. Why wouldn't they use it to stop him?* Eight months after I turned over evidence of Bergsson's social media scam to the feds, I was still pissed at them for not following up with me—and now Cassandra was missing.

I tried in vain to say some comforting words to Meredith on the other end of the line, but the truth was I was a mess, too. After gathering the details of her daughter's abduction, I said a clumsy goodbye and left her crying on the other end.

Sensing my distress, my colleague leaned in closer with her umbrella to shield me from the downpour I had somehow ignored. "You're soaked. Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

"Yeah," I replied, breaking my daze. "To the airport."

Most of my many interactions with ideological extremists over the years have not involved high-stakes abductions or international espionage, as young Cassandra's did. Still, neither of those frightening scenarios is much of a rarity in my workload these days either. Typically, these extremist disengagements—or *off-rampings*—begin with a concise but

cautious appeal from an individual nearing their bottom, or, more commonly, a panicked or puzzled bystander—a loved one or acquaintance—who is worried that someone they care about has “suddenly” become lost to hate. Almost always, the frantic email, social media message, or phone text will include the same two vulnerable words: *Please help.*

In Cassandra’s case, the desperate plea came to me from her father, Jack, a year before she went missing. On September 4—two months shy of the 2016 US presidential election—Jack and his wife, Meredith, discovered that their daughter Cassandra transitioned from the bright and shy girl they thought they knew into a neo-Nazi YouTube sensation.

My wife and I learned this morning that our seventeen-year-old daughter has been posting content online related to Nazi beliefs. She’s also in an online relationship with an older, twenty-three-year-old “boyfriend” from Idaho who has influenced her in ways we are just now learning about. We’re shocked and very concerned. Cassandra is a good kid, maybe a loner and a little awkward, but she’s not hateful. Please help.

—Jack



His feet planted in his terry cloth morning slippers, hair still damp from a shower twenty minutes before, Jack stepped aside to let his next-door neighbor Mitch through the front door.

“Morning, pal! What’s brought you over so early, Mitch? Is the homeowners’ association threatening to fine me again because my grass is too long?” Jack joked, not yet aware of the seriousness of his friend’s visit. “No? Must be the aroma of Meredith’s cinnamon apple biscuits in the oven that’s brought you over, then.” Jack gestured for Mitch to join him and his wife in the living room for coffee.

Meredith set her magazine down on the ottoman and asked Mitch if she could pour him a cup.

He declined her offer and eased into an armchair. "I'm afraid this is serious. I need to tell you both something."

"All right, Mitch, what is it?" Jack asked, anxiety brimming as he wondered what his neighbor had come by to tell him at seven on a Sunday morning. Jack lowered himself down onto the sofa next to Meredith. "Everything okay at home?"

"It's about Cassandra." Mitch paused to measure his words. "She's involved in some white supremacy nonsense and is spewing horrible, racist things online. Against Jews and Muslims. It's awful, just awful."

Without giving Jack and Meredith time to digest his bombshell about their daughter, Mitch rushed on. "She seems to be some sort of Nazi sympathizer, or worse—a Holocaust denier."

Meredith slid her hand over her husband's tensing fist to keep him from rising. They listened in stunned silence as their concerned neighbor continued to explain their daughter Cassandra's situation in chilling detail. A childhood classmate—a Jewish girl from the same upper-middle-class gated community in Trenton, New Jersey, where the family lived—had stumbled across an anti-Semitic video online and recognized Cassandra's face. After following the link, she discovered a dozen more disturbing videos on Cassandra's YouTube page. Word of her neo-Nazi rantings spread throughout the family's predominately Jewish community and, within hours, an emergency neighborhood meeting convened to discuss the threat Cassandra posed. Mitch slept on it overnight, after which he decided to warn Jack and Meredith about their daughter's activities and the not-so-neighborly pitchforks headed their way.

The revelation shocked Jack and Meredith. Like her identical twin, Simone, Cassandra never exhibited any hateful behavior or said such disturbing things out loud before.

Jack rose from his chair, tugging at his jowls as if teasing loose a knotted rope. "Wait a minute, Mitch. Are you saying one of our girls is

a *Nazi*?” He paced around the room behind his neighbor. “This must be a mistake or some cruel practical joke. Someone has lost something in translation. You’ve known us and our girls since they were born. For Christ’s sake—Kassandra? She couldn’t be doing what they’re accusing her of.”

“I saw her saying these things in the videos, Jack. We all did. I’m sorry, but there’s no denying it’s Kassandra. I saw one where she said Jews are like cancer, and then she faces the camera and salutes Hitler, the maniac who annihilated half my family. Many Jewish families in our community also lost loved ones to Nazi horrors. You can imagine how *meshugana* they all are this morning.” Mitch frowned. “Listen, you *are* good people. I know Kassandra is a good kid. I just wanted to let you know before it escalated.”

Jack squinted, angry. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“There was talk last night of involving the police, Meredith.” Mitch turned to her to plead. “The high school kids are upset. God forbid, I’m afraid of what they might do. You know how impulsive teenagers are.”

Jack slumped down into a chair, the momentum nearly toppling him backward. “And now there’s an angry mob gunning for our daughter,” he murmured, shaking his head in his hands.

“It’s some kind of crazy political nonsense she’s gotten herself into,” Mitch explained. “I don’t understand it, but her videos have a bunch of ‘Trump for President’ campaign stuff mixed in with garbage about dropping immigrants into volcanoes and establishing part of America as a white homeland. You know I’m a Trump guy like you, Jack, but I had to look away—it was too much.” Mitch choked up, clearing his throat and drawing a deep breath.

“This is insane!” Jack clamored. “Kassandra doesn’t even like politics. She bugs out to her bedroom when we watch the news on television. We’re God-fearing Republicans. We hate no one. This is ridic—”

“Thank you for letting us know, Mitch,” Meredith cut in, grabbing Jack’s hand again. He turned to his wife for support and saw a befuddled gape had settled on her face. “I assure you, we will talk to

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Kassandra right away and make sense of this. We're awful sorry for any trouble this caused anyone. Please extend our concerns."

"All right. Let me know if I can help," Mitch said, "besides keeping the angry villagers from breaching your moat." He laughed mechanically before excusing himself.

"Jack," Meredith whispered once Mitch left, her hand finally releasing its grip on his. "I think I saw something strange on Kassandra's computer last week."

Jack's head rebounded as if rear-ended by a semi. "What do you mean you saw something?"

The shock of learning their teenage daughter was a neo-Nazi Internet propagandist was rivaled only by Jack and Meredith's frustration at having missed the warning signs of Kassandra's radicalization. But there weren't many clear indicators to speak of—at least as far as radical ideology was concerned.

What Kassandra's parents, even her identical twin, Simone, had missed was something else in plain view all along. She took her first steps in a long, solitary walk toward extremism *years* before making her hateful videos or meeting her Nazi recruiter boyfriend online. The red flags unfurled early in Kassandra's childhood, but no one noticed.