*“Mfh, ah…yes…oh, Stephen, like that…”*

*“Hold it tighter…Mmmm…oh, Adam…”*

*“Ahhh, oh…Ahhhhh!”*

*“Shhh, be quiet or—”*

*“Your mother’s wondering if either of you—Oh my God! Adam? Stephen?”*

*“Ack, shit, uh…oh no. Shit, this is bad!”*

*“Dad! I-It’s not what it looks like! Please, where are you going!”*

*“Adam!”*

The memory of that day, now in the context of what I knew, almost made me fall to my knees. Lowell had to keep me standing with an arm around my shoulder.

“Stephen,” I eventually said it aloud, “Stephen is a…a *tithingman*?”

“He is…” Johanna’s voice seemed distant, as if her echo came from across the continent rather than a small, outfitted hotel room. “And according to the List’s records, your parents didn’t report you to the Archangels the day of your arrest. He did it. His membership to Project Parish and the other tithingmen across Devout America goes as far back as three years.”

Three years. Had I really known a betrayer that far back?

“I still…I still don’t get why he can’t be in the field to help catch this fucker,” Lowell commented to my left. “Adam’s a little new, but he could—”

“Catch?” I muttered vacantly. “Catch…him? Wait…so what do you plan to do to him?”

What was I kidding? Even I knew the answer already before it finished leaving my lips.

“Cracking open the List was one stage of Operation Crucible,” either Johanna or Lucius told me. “The next step is to capture a tithingman, do everything to make him confess on camera, then leak the footage and everything on this file to the Internet. The rest will be history.”

“We’ve determined that Stephen will be the best candidate,” Lowell understood it as much as I did. “And Adam was to help out?”

“Adam,” Johanna told me as I continued having my crisis, “at first, you were going to provide watch for Lowell, Hector and Blu as they captured a tithingman in the field. Given this new information however, I can’t trust your judgement in the field. Donald will take over your role instead. I am sincerely sorry, Adam, but you know what I said.”

I understood completely; it would be a conflict of interest, given I literally grew up with the target and even considered him my best friend at one point. He was my honeypot.

Lowell then asked another important question, “Why snatch that fucker though?”

“Because it will help us kill two birds with one stone,” Lucius graciously told the wolf and I, “Capturing an on-duty tithingman where they least expect it…”

Johanna finished the raccoon’s thought for him, “And convincing a certain medical doctor and his wife to join the Defiant. They’ll have a good reason too. The same tithingman we kidnapped watching them also sent their son away.”