

but some forking, refracting, orbiting trace of time and space by which she, in Springfield, phased and flickered and was, in her way, linked to that field, those rockets, those men. Targeting them in her own way. She pulled no trigger and was no soldier. But she was a participant. She was not apart from it. It was all the same world.

“I know you’re not working,” Barbara said.

Stacey tore off her headphones. “What?”

“I said I know you’re doing your weird spy stuff,” Barbara said. She had her fingers just on the pinnacle of the cubicle, her perfect fingernails, as if she understood boundaries and crossing them, exactly at the halfway point of the dividing wall—her leering face hovering in space as if she were mashing it up against a glass barrier separating their private universes, but of course there was no barrier.

“You know what, Barbara—”

“Hold on, honey,” Barbara said. “Hold on. I won’t tell on you.”

“Oh yeah?” Stacey said. “And what do I owe you?”

“Oooh, a shakedown. Yeah, that’s a good idea. But no.”

“Then what?”

She’d never looked much at Barbara before. She was one of those women of indeterminate age who were everywhere, but never noticed, motivations unconsidered. 55? 65? She knew Barbara took a lot of time off. She knew that Barbara never came in late. Other than that she knew only that she did not trust or admire her. She was surprised to realize this was a failure of her Open-Source Intelligence capabilities. Who was this woman on the other side of the wall? Once or twice Stacey had stood up to stretch or adjust her noisemaking fan and she had caught, on her tiptoes, the slightest glimpse of Barbara, on her side of the wall, with her eyes closed—hitting the keys so the sound of typing echoed, like she were in a trance or practicing concertos from memory. She had sometimes fantasized about filming it—mutually assured destruction.

“How old are you?” Barbara said.