

## Sting of the Drone — Excerpt

Tuesday, June 30th  
The Situation Room  
The West Wing, The White House  
Washington, DC

Winston Burrell was late. His chair, at the head of the table that filled the room, was empty. The Seal of the President of the United States hung on the wall behind his chair, giving the room an aura. This was not a corporate boardroom, not a Congressional committee room. It was a place where power was the currency. Meetings in this space had saved lives and taken lives. Today's meeting was about taking lives.

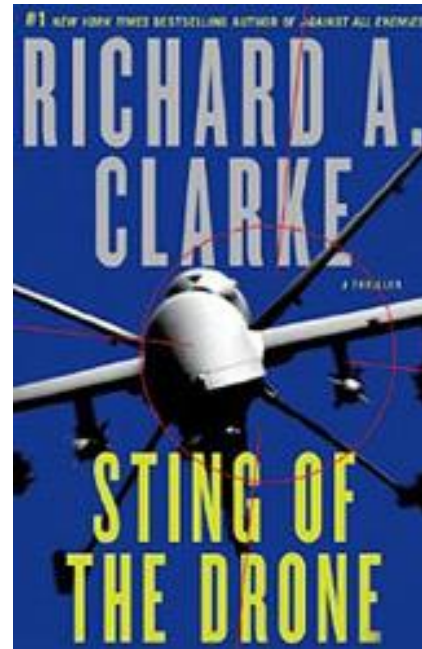
The old chair had been replaced with one that better fit Burrell's height and weight. He was not of average build. He was not average in many ways. For a man who had started his professional life as an international relations academic, he had become the quintessential behind-the-scenes operator, making things happen first in state government, then in the corporate world, and then in national politics as the White House National Security Advisor. While he could recite the details of almost any national security issue, it was in understanding their domestic political relevance that he excelled. The President was focused on domestic policy challenges. Burrell was intent on not letting national security get in the way or take up too much of the leader's time. He saw his job as preventing disasters, promoting those causes that bought the President domestic support.

The men and women who waited were far from displeased to have some time together without the National Security Advisor. This was when the number twos and number threes from the departments and agencies got to meet, gossip, ask each other for favors, trade and deal, complain and bargain, with only one aide each looking on. This time, before the meeting started, was where the wheels were greased and coordination accomplished, without rhetoric or pretense.

"Sorry to be late," Burrell said as he entered the room and plopped down in the big chair. He wasn't sorry, of course, and everyone knew it. "Sorry, too, that we haven't been able to have this meeting sooner," he said. Most of those around the table doubted that, too. They knew he found these sessions distasteful. He disliked having to decide who lived and who died.

Winston Burrell looked around the table. The two highest ranking representatives were the Under Secretaries from State and Defense, both women. Nancy Schneidman from Defense might be the first female Secretary of Defense in a few years. Her opposite number from State, Liz Watson, was a career Foreign Service officer. She had been ambassador to Turkey.

Admiral Harlan Johnston was a SEAL assigned to the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. Like many of the "Special Operations community," he did not look the part. Slightly shorter than average, he probably weighed less than anyone in the room. As he opened his briefing book, he donned a pair of black glasses that would have made his social life difficult had he still been in high school, but he wasn't. He had served in combat in Somalia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and places where the Pentagon never acknowledged the presence of US military personnel. Then they had made him an admiral and assigned him to Special Operations



Command headquarters in Tampa, where the endless Power Point slides and bullet papers had caused him to see the optometrist.

Ron Darden from Justice was probably the wealthiest person at the table. He had been Managing Partner of a Los Angeles law firm before joining the administration as Associate Attorney General. He was also the only person of color at the table.

The Intelligence Community was two headed. Seth Kaplan was the number two at CIA, but he was accompanied by Todd Hill, who ran the National Counter-Terrorism Center. Hill frequently, awkwardly, made the point that the NTCT did not report to CIA. Both men sat at the table.

“I know the requests have been piling up. So let’s get started. You all have the files. Let’s start with the Pentagon nominations. Admiral?”

“We have six nominations,” Admiral Johnston began. “Two in Afghanistan, one each in Yemen, the Philippines, Algeria, and Chad. All are AUMF cleared by the Pentagon.”

The Under Secretary of Defense, Nancy Schneidman, representing the civilian control of the military, concurred. “Right, Winston, we believe all of these six men pose an ongoing, continuous, or imminent threat to US military personnel and/or are senior officials of AQ or an al Qaeda affiliated group. As such, they are all eligible under the criteria for Authorized Use of Military Force.” She had said the magic words, chanted the incantation that would place a hex on and doom men probably then asleep, thousands of miles away.

Two rows of three squares appeared on the large screen at the other end of the table from Burrell. Each square had a photograph of the intended victim, a codename, his real name, and some words in a font too small to read.

“Everyone has had these noms for a while now,” Burrell observed. “Any questions or objections?”

“I have a question about the guy in the Philippines,” Liz Watson, the Under Secretary of State, began. “Explain to me how a guy in the jungles of Mindanao is a threat to US forces. And is the civilian government aware of this? I mean, at what level have the civilians signed off on this in Manila? Their President know?”

Burrell nodded to the Admiral to answer.

“You would be speaking about Rambler,” he said, pulling a green file folder out from a stack he had placed on the table. Each folder was covered with a red and black striped coversheet with the words TOP SECRET in a large font size at the top and bottom.

“Rambler?” Burrell asked.

“We’re using old car names now as codewords,” Under Secretary Schneidman explained. “Someone objected to our using Native American tribe names.”

“Rambler,” the Admiral began, reading aloud from his file, “is known to be planning the kidnapping or assassination of American military personnel acting as advisors to the Philippine Armed Forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations in Mindanao against an AQ affiliated offshoot of the indigenous Islamist militant movement.”

“And we briefed the civilian Defense Minister and the President’s Chief of Staff in Manila,” Nancy Schneidman added. “They concur. It was actually the Philippine military that first suggested we drone this

guy. He's holed up in a mountainous, jungle area where any attack force would just be slaughtered. Fact is this guy's invulnerable except to drones."

"See, this is exactly what I was talking about last time," the Justice Department representative interjected. Ron Darden often felt like an outsider in the acronym punctuated interagency discussions. He was more at home in corporate boardrooms. "This guy didn't bother our military so much, our guys weren't so threatened by him, that they nominated him. The local government asked us to go after him because they can't do it without maybe losing a few guys in the operation. If he's not really a threat to Americans, we should not be going after him."

The admiral removed his glasses, turned to stare at Darden, and then used his baritone voice to note, "We have solid intelligence that Rambler is planning to kidnap or assassinate American military personnel. And yes, we don't want to, what did you say, lose some guys, to get him. But we also want to get him before he gets us. OK?"

"These are US troops we are talking about, at risk," Nancy Schneidman added. I don't want to have to go to Dover one more time to welcome back a coffin or go to Arlington to meet one more widow if we don't have to."

Burrell looked at the Defense Under Secretary as he might have regarded a disappointing student in an honors seminar. "We don't need to go there, Nancy. We have all been to Dover and Arlington too often. Everyone at this table has a right, indeed a duty, to question the nominations that come before us." The room was silent for a moment.

"All right, then. Does any agency object to any of the Defense nominations?" Burrell asked.

"I'm okay with the guy in the Philippines, assuming we do the usual Pattern of Life thing to make sure there will be no collateral damage," Watson, State's Under Secretary, interjected. Behind her, in one of the "back bench" seats against the wall, her "plus one," an Assistant Secretary of State, squirmed and frowned. He had clearly put her up to complaining about the Philippines target and now she had withdrawn her complaint. "But tell me why the guy in Yemen is a Defense Department target and not a CIA target. I thought the strikes in Yemen were supposed to be covert operations done by CIA."

Admiral Harlan Johnston was ready for that question. Without consulting his notes, the Admiral replied, "Studebaker is known to be plotting an attack on the US Embassy in Sana'a. That constitutes a direct threat to US forces, our military mission in the embassy, as well as the Foreign Service and Other Government Agency personnel."

"In that case, Harlan, fry his ass," Liz Watson replied. Before she was in Turkey, Under Secretary Liz Watson had been Ambassador to Yemen six years ago.

"All right then, shall we consider the six Defense nominations approved, subject to the rules of engagement on collateral damage?" Burrell asked. No one dissented. "Now, let's move on to the Agency nominations, Todd and Seth."

Todd Hill was the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, an independent intelligence organization that reported to the Director of National Intelligence. Seth Kaplan was the Deputy Director of CIA, which had its own large, Counterterrorism Center. The White House budget staff had suggested merging the two groups, but Burrell was reluctant. Even though he also thought having two big Centers was ridiculous, he also knew that if there were another significant terrorist attack after the White House had "downsized" the counterterrorism intelligence staffs, the CIA and its friends on the Hill would blame

the President. Better to waste a billion or so a year than to put the President at risk of appearing soft on terrorism.

In reality, the President was very far from soft on terrorism. He had given Burrell broad but extremely clear guidance: “Winston, I don’t want to micro-manage this stuff. Just make sure we do not get attacked again. Do what you have to do. Minimize the negative press, no torture and hold down the collateral damage to an acceptable level, but err on the side of killing the bad guys. If we fuck up trying to kill bad guys, I will be fine. If we fuck up because we didn’t kill the right bad guy and he then kills a bunch of Americans, particularly in the homeland, then I get in trouble. Understood?” Burrell had already understood that, intuitively.

Todd Hill from the National Counter Terrorism Center flashed a similar set of mug shots on to the screen, three rows of four. These faces had only code names attached to them on the graphic. They were named after fish.

“Flounder is the head of the Qazzani group’s European operations, drug distribution,” Hill began. “Not normally an offense that would get him on the Kill List, but we have a very sensitive source that has informed us that the Qazzanis have signed a contract with AQ to conduct attacks on targets in Europe, specifically U-Bahns, German subway trains.”

“Where is our attack to take place?” the Under Secretary of State asked.

“Probably Austria. We have a technical source that says Flounder is meeting with his subordinates in Vienna to go over the plans,” Seth Kaplan, the CIA number two explained.

“Jesus Christ, what is wrong with you people?” Under Secretary Watson responded. “Austria is a friendly state. They are cooperative on counterterrorism. You can’t go bombing Austria like it was 1944 again. It’s in the heart of Europe.”

“She has a point,” Winston Burrell observed. “Why can’t we just ask their polizei to round these guys up when they are having their little meeting?”

“They don’t have a legal basis for arresting them. No evidence we can give them,” the CIA man, Seth Kaplan said. “Our source is too sensitive to tell anyone about.”

“Including me?” Burrell asked.

“We can give you a little bit more detail in private, but this source is way too valuable to risk more broadly,” the CIA man replied.

“So, let me get this straight, we can’t have the Austrians arrest this guy because we can’t give them the evidence against him. So we have to kill him? What if we were able to kidnap him and bring him to the US and indict him here,” Darden from Justice asked. “Under a 1992 Supreme Court ruling, the US courts do not care how a person arrives before a US court as long as he was not tortured along the way. It’s legal under US law to kidnap him. It may violate Austrian law, but...”

Seth Kaplan looked uncomfortable. His staff at CIA had predicted this Kill Nomination would not go down well with Justice. “I appreciate your flexibility, Ron, but even if he were standing outside the White House fence, we could not arrest this guy. The evidence we have against him is far too sensitive to share with a US judge or jury, let alone a defense attorney. So it’s actually a good thing he is not in the US, because I am not sure we could do anything to him here.”

“But because he is overseas, we can kill him?” Darden asked.

“Yes, of course,” Kaplan replied. “That is what we have been doing, using the President’s Covert Action authority under the Intelligence Act to remove terrorists from the battlefield in other countries. His Covert Action authority has no legal basis inside the US.”

“Well, thank goodness for that Seth, or you would be coming after me I suspect,” Under Secretary Liz Watson intervened. “I’m half joking, Seth, but this is a serious problem. You are asking us to approve killing a guy in a friendly European country and you won’t tell the Austrians, or even this committee, who the source is so that we can judge for ourselves whether to believe that there is a risk that justifies this action. You have only one source? No corroboration? What is this source’s motivation? What is this source’s past record of reporting? How long has he been reporting?”

Again, the room fell silent.

“I’ve said all I can say. We have good reason to believe the source,” the CIA man finally replied, looking down at the tabletop.

Normally backbenchers were quiet, but the man sitting behind Winston Burrell spoke up. Raymond Bowman was the Director of the Policy Evaluation Group, a small, unconventional unit that theoretically reported to the Director of National Intelligence, but really worked directly for Burrell. PEG was his “second opinion” team, his independent, low profile unit that trolled through the other agencies’ intelligence, but also mastered open sources. They talked to subject matter experts no one else had found, and had a track record for prediction that consistently beat the rest of the gigantic Intelligence Community. Although they all knew him, it was Bowman’s first time attending the Kill Committee, as some of the participants had taken to calling the meeting.

“Putting aside the sourcing for the minute,” Ray began, “how exactly are we planning to fly a drone into Austrian airspace and then cause an explosion somewhere in their country without them figuring out that we violated their sovereignty?”

Burrell intervened before Bowman’s question could be answered. “You all know Ray. I have asked him to serve as my, sort of, informal deputy on all things drones. So, in the future, when you hear from him on these issues, he is me. Good question, Ray. Goes to the operational risk assessment. Seth?”

The two Intelligence Community men looked at each other, both clearly upset that they would now have another intelligence professional second guessing them. Bowman’s PEG already did that to their analysis on a regular basis. Now that group of odd balls was going to start questioning their operational judgment? It seemed that neither Intelligence representative wanted to be the one to get into the operational risk details. Todd Hill from the National Counter Terrorism Center, however, grudgingly explained, “We will be using new, covert drones. They will be launched from a rural area inside Austria at night. The attack ordnance will self-incinerate, leaving no forensic signature. We will provide the Austrians with information that leads them to conclude that a rival drug gang did the attack using a hidden parcel type bomb.”

“Oh, shit. This just gets better and better,” Liz Watson said. “I can tell you, Winston, that the Secretary of State will not support this. You are going to secretly smuggle drones into Austria. You are going to convert some Austrian farm into a secret US drone base. You are going to lie to the Austrians about what happened. And you are going to blame some other group for the attack, probably leading to them being killed in retaliation for something they did not do. Beautiful, just beautiful.”

"I'm afraid the Attorney General will join in that dissent," Ron Darden added.

The Admiral and the Under Secretary of Defense sat silently.

"Well, I will have to discuss this with my boss," Burrell said. There was no indication what he would recommend to that boss. "There are eleven more IC noms, Mackerel, Salmon, a whole Sushi bar here. Has everyone had time to go over the rest? Any comments or questions on those?"

"I do," Ron Darden from Justice answered.

Burrell slumped back in his chair. He had clearly been hoping that this session was nearly over. He could not help but think of himself and the others as Roman Senators in purple-trimmed togas, sitting in the Coliseum and holding out their arms with their thumbs up or down, signaling which of the Christians and slaves would be killed. Only none of these victims were Christians.

"Pike and Pickerel," Darden began, "they are both Mexican drug kingpins. How is it that they are being put on the Kill List? I thought that the Finding only authorized us to go after al Qaeda and its affiliates. Since when is the Rico Martinez cartel an AQ affiliate? And again, why can't the Mexican authorities get them? Or do you have an ultra secret source you can't tell us or the Mexicans about there too?"

"Good questions," Burrell commented. "CIA, Dr. Kaplan?"

Todd Hill replied instead. "I've got the brief on this one. Hezbollah has approached both the Martinez and the Montevilla drug gangs. The leaders of both groups, Mister Pike and Mister Pickerel, have agreed to smuggle terrorists into the United States in return for a lot of money from Hezbollah, meaning ultimately Iran. Hezbollah is also on the list of terrorist groups we can peremptorily attack."

Liz Watson returned to the fray, on behalf of the State Department. "So, since you can kill Hezbollah guys if they are planning to kill Americans, therefore Hezbollah guys being smuggled into the US are automatically assumed to be planning to conduct terrorist attacks in the US and Mexicans who have agreed to help them with the human trafficking are therefore assumed to be affiliated Hezbollah terrorists and subject to death by drone. And the reason you can't tell the Mexicans is again some sensitive source bullshit?"

"No, Ms. Watson," Todd Hill began slowly, "We actually have told the Mexicans. They asked us to use UAVs against these two gentlemen because the Mexican authorities said that they are too well guarded for the Mexicans to arrest or attack, even if they used the Mexican Marines."

"Have we used drones in Mexico before?" Ron Darden asked.

"Homeland does, but they are unarmed," the Admiral chimed in.

"Now may not be the time to open up another theater of operations for lethal drone attacks, particularly so close to US territory," Winston Burrell noted, sitting up straight and folding his fingers together on the table, forming a little tent above his papers. "Seth, Todd, maybe you could come back to us with an alternative to the Hezbollah Mexican human trafficking caper?"

The two Intelligence Community men nodded.

"Anything else for the good of the order?" Burrell asked. "Good, then we are adjourned."

As he left the Situation Room and walked down the hall to the take-out window of the White House Mess, Burrell wondered how it had happened. He had just signed the death certificates for sixteen more

men, plus however many others who would have the misfortune of standing nearby them. On average that number was four. So, he had just ordered sixty-four executions and, he thought, he wasn't even the Governor of Texas.

He ordered a large coffee, black, from the young sailor at the take out window. It would take a while, he knew, maybe a few months, but based on past practice, the targets would all be found at a place and time when they could be killed without unacceptable collateral damage. Some would probably die tomorrow. How had he ended up doing this? When they had started using the drones to kill, right after 9-11, it had seemed like a welcome way of finally stopping terrorist attacks on Americans. Somehow, it had grown into an industry, and he was the CEO of the industry leader.

Burrell looked up and saw Raymond Bowman exiting the Situation Room with Admiral Johnston. He signaled Ray to join him upstairs.

"Well, you too are now indictable by the War Crimes court," Burrell started when Ray walked into the National Security Advisor's office, carrying his own large coffee. Burrell dropped into a large, wing-backed chair. Ray sat in another one opposite him.

"That's what I was just thinking," Ray replied. "Why me?"

"Who else? You saw the way they are all playing their games down there. I need somebody I can trust, somebody with no agency agenda," Burrell said. "You realize, of course, that the Mexican thing was a ruse. They nominate a few every month for me to reject. Makes the other agencies think I am being tough on the CIA."

Ray laughed. "I thought that might be happening. And the Austrian thing. Think the President is going to go for that?"

"We're not going to ask him. Too risky. We need to insulate him. Deniability. Protect the Principal," Burrell explained.

"So you tell them no?" Ray asked.

"Quite the contrary. You are going to tell them to go ahead. And you are going to imply that it has gone up to The Man, but you are never actually going to say that. It will get you off on the right foot with CIA, giving them the go ahead."

"Do I also have to tell State and Justice?" Ray asked.

"No, they'll read about it in the papers when it happens," Burrell replied.

"Ok then," Ray said. "And you're not overly concerned about the operational risk?"

"No, we've done this kind of thing before. A lot, actually. They never get caught. It's the one thing the CIA seems to be able to do well, fly drones," Burrell said. "And actually, it's not even CIA that flies the goddamn things, it's Air Force officers seconded to CIA. We've got this joint CIA-DOD coordination center that flies the sensitive missions and coordinates all the others. In fact, the new director of it is coming in to see me. You ought to join me in the meeting. Let me see here," he said looking at his schedule. "Ms. Sandra Vittonelli."

"Sandy?" Ray said, spilling some of his coffee.

"You know her? Is she good?" Burrell asked.

“She was when I knew her,” Ray smiled. “She is one tough cookie.”

“Good, that’s what we need in that job.” Burrell got up and walked back to his desk, signaling the meeting was over. As Ray was getting near the door Burrell added, “Oh, and Raymond, now that you are a member of the Kill Committee...”

“Yes sir?”

Burrell looked across the wide office at him. “Don’t call it the Kill Committee. And we don’t call them drones.” “Why not?” Bowman asked. “Because that implies that they are autonomous and they’re not.” “Really, what do you call drones then?” “Now we say RPAs, “ the National Security Advisor explained. “What’s that stand for?” “Remotely Piloted Aircraft. Reminds people that there is a human in the loop, if not actually inside the aircraft.” “I thought they were UAVs, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, “ Bowman said, “They were, but now they’re RPAs. The human involvement wasn’t clear with the use of UAV. See, actually they are not Unmanned. Its just that the man, or woman, is on the ground.”

“Okay, but I hear that the pilots call them Fuckers.”

“I’ve never heard that. Why would they say that?” Burrell asked. “FKRs, Flying Killer Robots. The Predators are the Little Fuckers and the Global Reach are the Big Fuckers.”

“No, don’t call them Fuckers. I don’t want that to spread. Very bad messaging.”

Bowman nodded and left the room.