

CARLTON GARDNER

Shadow of Goliath

First 3 Chapters

Copyright © 2025 by Carlton Gardner

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

Prologue

The year was 1962. A low, persistent dread hung over the nation. In city after city, familiar buildings—schools, post offices, libraries—suddenly bore black-and-yellow signs: **FALLOUT SHELTER**, stark warnings of a world on edge. Inside these shelters, stacked in quiet corners beneath government basements, sat drums of water, boxes of dehydrated food, and basic medical supplies—silent testaments to a country preparing for the worst.

Across the nation, Americans braced themselves. Families built private bunkers in their basements and backyards. Classrooms echoed with the thud of children dropping beneath desks during “duck and cover” drills. Television screens crackled with the now-routine broadcast: *“This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. This is only a test”* Outside, however, the air raid sirens screamed something far more urgent.

Then came October. The Cuban Missile Crisis. For thirteen harrowing days, the world hovered on the brink of nuclear war. Soviet missiles in Cuba. American warships forming a blockade. Kennedy’s somber voice on every television, warning of possible annihilation.

Newspapers blared doomsday headlines, and grocery shelves emptied overnight. Church pews filled with silent prayers as pastors spoke not of heaven, but of blast radii and moral reckoning. Fathers paced living rooms with transistor radios pressed to their ears, tracking every movement of Soviet freighters inching toward Cuba. The Cuban Missile Crisis was more than a geopolitical standoff—it was a countdown, a nation collectively holding its breath.

And yet, while all eyes turned outward—toward missile silos, Khrushchev’s proclamations, Kennedy’s televised warnings—something darker was stirring at home. A shadow, quiet and methodical, took root within American soil.

Beneath the streets of New York City and other key American cities, an operation took shape—one not aimed at defense, but destruction. Hidden within the belly of the country, buried under concrete and steel, lay secrets so deeply embedded they remained untouched for decades. Chosen for their strategic importance, these sites became silent, invisible threats—coiled in darkness beneath the ordinary rhythms of daily life.

When the Cuban Missile Crisis passed, the nation rejoiced with cautious relief. Teachers canceled drills. Newspapers turned to lighter fare. But the relief was premature. For the most dangerous weapons had not been fired. They had been planted—patiently, invisibly—and left to slumber beneath the very country they were meant to destroy.

Waiting.

I

Part 1: The Echoes of Leviathan

The Whispering Wires

The Empire State Building groaned, a low, metallic sigh that resonated through Parks McCormack's bones. He'd been chasing a phantom signal for three nights, a faint, intermittent hum that interfered with the building's antiquated phone system. They were relics, the old analog lines, a network of copper wires snaking through the building's labyrinthine interior, a vestige of a bygone era. His task: find the source of the interference, a seemingly simple maintenance request that had spiraled into an obsession.

He traced the signal, his handheld scanner chirping erratically, leading him deeper into the building's forgotten spaces. The air grew thick with the scent of dust and ozone, and the fluorescent lights flickered, casting long, distorted shadows. He finally stopped at a wall, a seemingly solid expanse of reinforced concrete, tucked behind a disused service elevator shaft.

The scanner's chirping intensified. The signal was coming from *within* the wall.

He ran a hand along the surface, feeling for seams, for any sign of an access panel. Nothing. He pulled out his tools, a set of specialized scanners and sonic probes, remnants from his time in Afghanistan. He'd

learned to see beyond the obvious, to find the hidden threats.

The sonic probe revealed an anomaly: a void, a hollow space within the concrete. He tapped the wall, listening for the telltale resonance of an empty chamber. It was there, a dull, muffled thud.

He located the old phone line that was causing his problems. It was going into the wall. He followed the wire with his hand, and found that it went into a small junction box. He opened the junction box, and found that the phone line was not connected to the building's internal phone system, but was instead connected to a separate, isolated circuit.

He then used a small endoscopic camera, and pushed it through a small hole in the junction box. The camera's light revealed a smooth, metallic surface, a cylinder nestled within a cradle of wires and electronic components. Puzzled and a little apprehensive, he adjusted the scope to get a better look. The faint radiation symbol, barely visible in the grainy image, sent a jolt of ice through his veins.

This wasn't a maintenance issue. This was something else entirely.

He needed to get into that room.

He began to scan the wall with a thermal imager. A faint heat signature emanating from the center of the wall confirmed his suspicions. Something was generating power within that hidden chamber. He then used a drill to create a small hole in the wall and inserted his endoscopic camera once again. The camera revealed a small, enclosed room with no visible entrance that he could see. The metallic cylinder he had seen through the junction box was the centerpiece, surrounded by a complex array of wires and circuitry. And, most disturbingly, an old, rotary-dial telephone, its receiver resting in a cradle, connected to the isolated phone line.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. He knew exactly what he was looking at: a bomb. The presence of the familiar radiation image on the cylinder could only mean one thing. His pulse quickened, his head spinning with the ramifications.

The phone... a trigger?

He pulled back, trying to think, to analyze, his heart pounding. The device had likely been hidden here for decades, its presence masked by the building's complex infrastructure. And it was still active, still connected to an active telephone line.

Parks McCormack wasn't just a maintenance tech. He was a relic of a world where shadows and secrets were currency. His time in Afghanistan, serving in the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit, provided him with a unique, and terrifying, knowledge base. He'd seen the ugly side of technology, the weapons born in clandestine labs, the devices that could turn cities to ash. He was intimately familiar with the telltale signs of improvised explosives, the crude but deadly contraptions that could be hidden in anything, anywhere.

The metallic cylinder in the grainy endoscopic image...it wasn't just a cylinder. It was a core. The faint radiation symbol, almost invisible, was a death knell. He'd seen similar configurations before, in black ops briefings and classified intelligence reports. But never this elaborate. Never this old. Never in his country!

He ran the camera again, carefully navigating the cramped space. The wires weren't just random connections; they were precisely laid out, forming a complex network of detonators and sensors. The rotary-dial telephone, an archaic piece of technology, had to be the trigger, a direct line to...what? A remote detonator? A fail-safe? He didn't know, but the simplicity was terrifying.

He noticed the intricate array of capacitors and transformers, far more sophisticated than any standard industrial equipment. They were custom-built, designed for a specific purpose. He recognized the signature of a Faraday cage, a shielding mechanism designed to protect sensitive electronics from electromagnetic pulses. This wasn't just a bomb; it was a weapon of calculated destruction, a relic of a bygone era, meticulously preserved.

McCormack's breath faltered. The device was a hybrid, a terrifying

fusion of Cold War technology and modern engineering. It was more complex than anything he'd encountered, even in the war-torn landscapes of Afghanistan. This wasn't just a threat; it was a nightmare from the past, a weapon designed to level a city, to level New York City.

He pulled back, his heart pounding. The device had been hidden here for decades, its presence masked by the building's intricate infrastructure. And it was still active, still connected to an active telephone line.

He knew what he had to do. He had to find a way into that room, and he had to do it before anyone else found out what was hidden within, before anyone realized it had been found.

He reached for his phone, his hand trembling. He needed help, now.

Ghosts of Kandahar

The dial tone hummed faintly in McCormack's ear, a sterile sound that did nothing to quiet the storm inside him. His hand trembled as he gripped the phone, knuckles white, the receiver heavy in his grasp. The device in the wall, its presence, its silence, seemed to radiate an oppressive weight, like a coiled predator waiting to strike. This wasn't a maintenance job gone wrong. This was a vestige of a world he'd tried desperately to leave behind, and it demanded his attention in the worst way possible.

He wasn't calling 911. He wasn't even calling his supervisor. This was far beyond their realm. His finger hovered for a moment over the keypad before he forced himself to dial a number he hadn't used in years, the distant echo of a life he'd abandoned. The line clicked, crackling faintly as it connected.

"This is 'Hammer'..." A gruff voice came through, the familiar growl punctuated by static. The sound was like stepping into a memory, warm and cold at once.

"Hammer, it's McCormack. Parks McCormack." His voice carried a tightness, his name feeling foreign as he said it aloud.

A pause. The sound of a heavy breath. "McCormack? Damn. Haven't

heard that name in years. Last I checked, you were probably selling artisanal coffee and complaining about city taxes. You alive and kicking, or is this a ghost on my line, still trying to get out of PT?"

McCormack let out a short, hollow laugh that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Just barely. And no coffee. Unless 'coffee' is code for 'something big enough to make the Kandahar sand look like a picnic.' I need your help. I found something...something big. Big enough to smell like it belongs in one of our nightmares, but worse. It's in the Empire State Building."

The tension in the silence that followed was intense. "The Empire State? What the hell are you doing there, McCormack? Did you finally take up window washing? You always said you wanted a job with a view."

"Maintenance work. Long story. Involves more dust bunnies than IEDs, usually. But this isn't a maintenance problem, it's something else. A device. Think Cold War relic, maybe with a little modern spice to it. The kind of 'spice' that makes you remember why we never got that good night's sleep for a decade. I need eyes on this now."

"Cold War..." Hammer's voice trailed off, and McCormack could almost see him running a hand over his face, weighing the implications. "Alright. You still know what you're asking for, right? Dragging up the team, pulling old shadows out of the dark? This ain't 'duck and cover' drills, McCormack. You sure you want to open that particular can of whoop-ass again?"

McCormack exhaled, the weight of his past settling on his shoulders. "Hammer, there's no time. If I didn't think it was worth trading my quiet life for a probable heart attack, I wouldn't have called you. Just trust me." His fingers dug into the edge of the table as he waited for Hammer to respond.

The bomb wasn't the only thing pressing on his mind. Memories unspooled, weaving through the tension like jagged threads. The dry heat of Kandahar came rushing back, the air filled with the acrid tang of

explosives and sun-baked dust. Dark memories from the past whispered through the cracks in his resolve.

Kandahar Province, Afghanistan – Nine Years Earlier

The sun beat down like a hammer, distorting the air above the dusty, broken road. The convoy was strung out, a line of tired Hummers and MRAPs kicking up ochre dust that coated everything: the soldiers, their gear, the dry, cracked earth. McCormack, then a Staff Sergeant with a decade of EOD experience etched into his face, squinted against the glare, his helmet heavy on his skull.

“Clear to target, Overwatch,” McCormack rasped into his comms, the words tasting like grit. He was leading the dismount team, walking point with his handheld scanner, the familiar chirp of its detector a constant, nervous melody. Their mission: a suspected IED on a route frequently used by supply convoys.

Beside him, Liam, fresh out of basic, barely twenty, his face still round with boyish enthusiasm, clutched his own scanner. “Getting a faint read, Staff Sergeant. Left side of the road, near that culvert.” His voice was too eager, too bright for the grim reality of their task.

McCormack had immediately turned, his hardened gaze assessing Liam. “Easy, kid. Don’t chase ghosts. Keep your eyes up, keep your sweep steady. We work the grid, you hear me?”

He’d tried. God, he’d tried. He’d seen Liam’s face, barely old enough to grow a proper beard, a blur of excitement and nerves when he’d first arrived in the sandbox. McCormack had taken him under his wing, a bond formed not out of choice but necessity. He could still see Liam’s bright, earnest grin, hear Sarah’s laughter echoing from a barracks phone call. Sarah. She’d pulled McCormack aside before their final deployment, her voice low but firm. “Liam’s good, McCormack, but he’s green. You’ve been out there. You’ve seen it. Promise me you’ll bring him back.” McCormack had nodded without hesitation, the weight of that promise settling easily on his shoulders. It hadn’t seemed heavy then. It hadn’t seemed fragile.

They were within fifty meters of the culvert when the subtle anomaly registered on McCormack's own advanced scanner – a metallic signature, deeply buried, irregular. "Hold! Contact! Buried—!"

But Liam, in his eagerness, had veered just a foot outside the designated sweep lane. His scanner shrieked, a high-pitched, insistent wail that pierced the dusty silence. McCormack lunged, a desperate, animalistic cry tearing from his throat – "LIAM! NO!"

The explosion was a flash of blinding white light and deafening sound that consumed everything. Dust and fire. Blood and silence. The force of it threw McCormack backward, slamming him against the hard earth, the world a ringing void. He clawed his way through the acrid smoke, his ears screaming, his vision blurred by tears and dust, searching for Liam. Only a smoking crater remained where the young man had stood.

He remembered Sarah's voice on the other end of the phone line, breaking apart with every sob as he tried to apologize, tried to explain. "It was my fault," he'd told her, voice raw with guilt. "I should have, "

"You promised!" she'd shouted, the words like shards of glass. "You promised to keep him safe!"

The words, sharp and unforgiving, had cut deeper than any shrapnel. He couldn't argue. He knew she was right. He had failed. He had failed Liam, and he had failed her.

The aftermath was a blur. He'd resigned, a broken man, unable to face the world, unable to forgive himself. He'd become a shadow, a man weighed down by the unbearable burden of a life taken too soon. And now, standing in a maintenance room in the heart of Manhattan, facing an echo of that same terrible weight, the ghosts were clawing at the edges of his mind.

"McCormack? You still there, or did the ghosts of Kandahar finally drag you under?" Hammer's voice cut through the fog of memory, a familiar lifeline.

“Yeah,” McCormack answered, shaking himself free from the past, though the edges still clung. “I need you to understand, Hammer. This isn’t just another scare tactic to get me to buy life insurance. This thing... it feels like it’s waiting. Like it’s been lying in wait for decades, enjoying its beauty sleep, and now it’s ready to wake up and be a real problem. I can’t explain it on an open line, but this is serious. You’ll see when you get here. And you’re gonna wish you were retired.”

Hammer sighed on the other end, the sound heavy, but with a familiar, weary chuckle beneath it. “Always did say you had a knack for finding trouble, McCormack. Like a magnet to shrapnel. Alright. I’ll pull the team together. But listen, you know this is going to drag up all kinds of old shit. For you. For all of us. Don’t expect any parades for this one, either.”

“I know,” McCormack said quietly. “I’m counting on it.”

Hammer’s tone shifted, taking on an edge of authority, the professional snapping back into place. “Jolluck’s already in the city. Little too eager for a ‘security consultant’ these days. He’s working some security job for a private firm. I’ll contact him, have him rendezvous with you ASAP. Use him to lock things down until the rest of us can mobilize. And try not to let him break anything expensive before we get there.”

McCormack nodded to himself. Tyler Jolluck. Solid, reliable. And probably itching for some real action. That was something. “Good. Send me your cell number, I’ll forward what I’ve got so far, video. And Hammer? Thanks. Really.”

“Don’t thank me yet, McCormack. We’re not out of the woods. And if this thing is as bad as you say, I’m taking you to a proper bar, not one of those fancy places you probably frequent now.”

As the line went dead, silence seeped back into the room. The walls of the Empire State Building seemed to close in, the hum of the bomb, an unbearable weight, pressing against the edges of his consciousness. McCormack stared at the smooth concrete wall, at the deadly secret

hidden just beyond its surface. This time, he wouldn't run. This time, he wouldn't fail.

Mobilization

Chapter 3: Mobilization

Hammer stared at the phone, the echo of McCormack's voice still reverberating in his mind. "Cold War relic... modern kick... Empire State Building." The words carried a weight he didn't like. McCormack wasn't one to exaggerate. If he said it was big, Hammer knew it was more than big, it was bad.

Just then, his phone pinged. A video attachment. He opened it, squinting as the grainy footage unfolded on the screen. The cylinder was sleek and metallic, cradled among a chaos of intricate wiring. He felt his gut tighten when he spotted it, the faint, yet unmistakable, radiation symbol etched on its surface. His stomach churned as the video looped back to the start.

He forwarded the video without hesitation and its location in the Empire State Building, punching in the number to bypass protocol.

"Sergeant Major Evans, this is Hammer. I need the CO. Colonel Richter. Now. It's Code Red urgent."

"Hammer?" Evans' voice came in sharp, laced with an immediate shift

to concern. "What's going on? You sound like you just saw a unicorn with a rocket launcher."

"Worse. Patch me through. And I mean *now*. Keep this tight. Need-to-know. No leaks. You copy, Sergeant Major?"

Evans paused for only a moment. "Understood. One minute, Hammer. Don't hang up."

Hammer didn't hang up. He stood there, jaw clenched, the phone pressed to his ear, listening to the muffled sounds of Evans working the patch-through. The minute stretched. The line dropped.

Before Hammer could even react, the click of a door opening echoed, and Evans's face, tight with a mixture of concern and urgency, appeared in the doorway of Hammer's own office. "He's waiting for you, Hammer. Go."

Hammer wasted no time getting to Colonel Richter's office. The tension in the air was thick, as the Colonel analyzed the video on a tablet, a grim set to his jaw. He didn't look up, his eyes glued to the metallic object on the screen, rewinding and pausing repeatedly at the radiation symbol.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low and deliberate, almost a growl. "A device. In the Empire State Building. McCormack says EOD level?" Richter finally met Hammer's eyes, a steely glint in their depths. "This isn't just something left behind by amateurs, Hammer. This is high-level. Deliberate. Purpose-built, from the look of it."

Hammer pointed at the screen. "Exactly, sir. McCormack doesn't rattle. Ever. But he sounded... off. He wasn't calling in a favor, Colonel. This was a lifeline."

Richter leaned back, his eyes narrowing as he processed the information, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "Custom-built. High-grade components. The precision here... this isn't just an old Cold War souvenir, Hammer. This is something else entirely. Something... malignant." His gaze hardened. "We mobilize. Quietly. If this leaks, we're looking at

panic city.”

“It won’t,” Hammer interrupted, his voice clipped. “The team’s on a need-to-know. I’ve already started reaching out. We’ll need recon, remote handling gear, and... Jolluck. He’s already in the city, working that private security gig.”

“Tyler Jolluck?” Richter asked, raising a skeptical brow, a flicker of an old memory in his eyes. “Wasn’t he with McCormack back in Kandahar? The quiet one? Thought he’d gone off-grid to be a monk or something.”

“Yes, sir,” Hammer said, a hint of pride in his voice. “And he’s a damn genius, especially with older tech. If this thing is a Cold War relic with a ‘modern kick’ as McCormack put it, Jolluck’s the best we’ve got. And he’s already in the city. I can have him on-site within the hour, clearing paths and probably making their phone system actually work for once.”

Richter tapped a pen against his desk in thought, the sound sharp in the quiet room. “Good. Get him on the line, Hammer. And make damn sure he understands the gravity of this. No ‘private security’ grey areas. This is green light, full priority. McCormack doesn’t spook. If he’s calling us, this isn’t a scare. This is real. This is *bad*.”

Hammer nodded. “Understood, sir. He knows.”

Richter turned to his phone, punching a number with practiced speed. “Evans, get me the 192nd on alert. Full mobilization. High-priority domestic threat. I want a TOA estimate for New York City. Priority transport for equipment. Keep this controlled. And for God’s sake, I don’t want panic.”

“Yes, sir,” Evans replied, his voice steady but urgent.

The Colonel hung up and turned back to Hammer. “We’ll coordinate with the NYPD bomb squad, but keep them at arm’s length for now. No one gets near this until we know exactly what we’re dealing with. And I mean *no one*.”

Within minutes, the 192nd Ordnance Battalion roared to life. Vehicles were prepped, gear meticulously checked, personnel rapidly briefed. The

controlled chaos crackled with a quiet urgency. No one spoke above a murmur, everyone understood the stakes.

“TOA estimate, sir.” Evans appeared in the doorway, clipboard in hand. “Full operational capability in New York City in twelve hours, assuming priority air transport. A small advanced recon team can deploy in six hours via civilian transport.”

Richter frowned. “Six hours is too long. We’ll need to push that forward. Get me the Pentagon. And bring in HazMat teams. We can’t rule out a CBRN threat with that radiation symbol in play. Not on my watch.”

Hammer stood silently as the operation unfolded, his mind running through a checklist of what needed to be done, and what might already be too late. He thought of McCormack, alone in that building with whatever nightmare was hidden inside those walls. He thought of the man he knew, capable and determined, but burdened by demons that could shake even the strongest.

“Sir,” Hammer said finally, his voice low, “if McCormack says this thing feels different, we’d better treat it that way. He knows what’s at stake. We need every resource we’ve got on this. Every single one.”

Richter nodded, a grim resolve in his eyes. “Then let’s make damn sure we’re ready. Because I have a feeling we’re going to need it.”

As the orders continued to flow, Hammer clenched his jaw, the weight of the past pressing against his thoughts. Kandahar. The team. The ghosts they’d left behind. McCormack had walked into the fire once, and now he was walking in again. Hammer knew one thing for certain: they’d follow him, wherever this led.