

The background of the cover is a digital illustration of two characters in a post-apocalyptic setting. On the left is a woman with long, flowing brown hair, wearing a white crop top and dark tactical gear. On the right is a man with spiky dark hair, wearing dark sunglasses, a dark hooded jacket, and a tactical vest with a knife on his back. The background is a hazy, orange-tinted landscape with some buildings.

**Robert Silverberg - William Joseph Roberts**

Edited by:  
Alyssa Casto

**WILLIAM JOSEPH ROBERTS PRESENTS**

# **TALES OF THE APOCALYPSE**

Al Hagan - Anthony Roberts - David Norling

JL Curtis - Jon Fain - Linda Kay Hardie

Lorraine Sharma Nelson - Michael Craig - Sarina Dorie

# Grenade Blows Up

By Linda Kay Hardie

Grenade popped the top of the can and scooped the contents into four bowls, which she set on the kitchen floor. “Din-din, kitties!” she called. The clowder swarmed around her ankles, four friendly Abyssinian cats, two ruddy and two fawn in color. One of her scavengers had found an entire case of cat food, so it was treat time for her fur babies. A break for her, too, since it was a meal she didn’t have to chop and mix and cook for them. Cats, being obligate carnivores, need an all-meat diet. Taurine, an essential nutrient for cats, was hard to come by, except in animal products. Grenade often hunted and scrounged for meat for them.

The lack of electricity was a burden, but not insurmountable. Grenade scrambled eggs for her own breakfast on the propane camp stove out on the back porch. She traded with a neighbor several streets over for eggs and the occasional old chicken or young rooster, a rare treat. She had just finished cleaning up her breakfast dishes and gone back outside, when there was a knock on her backyard gate. Grenade felt for her .32 holstered at the small of her back, then walked over to the gate. Her vision blurred briefly—*damn, it was getting worse*—but after blinking, she could see a shock of ruffled brown hair above the six-foot-tall fence, so she knew who was there.

“Yes?” she said anyway, by way of greeting.

“It’s Marmot.”

Grenade unlocked the combination lock on the gate and let him in. The teenaged boy carried four canvas bags with old grocery store logos, full of treasures. He’d brought her the case of cat food last night, a special trip since it was a heavy item. Marmot set the grocery bags on her wooden picnic table and sat down. Grenade sat down opposite him.

Marmot reached into one bag and pulled out a stack of paperback books. James Patterson, Laura Lippman, Susan Palwick. He scratched his chin where a scraggly beard grew. “These two are best sellers,” he said. “I’m not familiar with the third one, and I have no idea what a ‘necessary beggar’ is, but the cover is intriguing.”

He handed over the trade paperback showing dark hands clinging to a chain-link fence. Grenade smiled. Palwick was a local Reno author. Not a best-selling author, but a very good one. The Patterson and Lippman were new books, published just before the End. Grenade hadn't read them. The Palwick was a classic, and she already had a copy, but she didn't mind having a spare. Few other people bought books from Marmot, and he was the only scavenger who bothered with books.

"I'll give you three hard-boiled eggs," she said.

"Five."

"Four."

"Deal." Marmot stuck out his hand.

He also had tools, but none was anything Grenade needed. Finally, he pulled out his prize, a brick of .22 cartridges that would fit her rifle. They haggled, and in the end, Grenade paid him 20 strips of rabbit jerky.

That's when Houdini appeared on Marmot's shoulders. Dini, a ruddy cat, rubbed his cheek against the boy's. For Dini, there were no strangers, only friends he hadn't met yet. Marmot reached up to skritch the cat's ears. Grenade picked up the cat and settled him on her own shoulders. She had no idea how he'd gotten out of the house, but that's why he had that name.

Marmot left with his food and tools, and Grenade locked the gate. She took Dini back into the house, then put away her new purchases and cleaned up the cat bowls. She was glad the water still ran because it was a hard necessity. Grenade sat down with her spiral-bound notebook and began to write. She used to keep a journal on the computer, but now she used notebooks and pencils. She liked to write down what she'd been up to, what she thought about it, what her wishes and dreams were. In the morning she would write what she planned to do that day and what her hopes were; in the evening she would write what she'd accomplished, what she thought about it, and how she planned to do better the next day. Between journaling and the cats, she didn't get lonely living by herself.

Today was a typical day in the wild west, year one PW. Post war. It wasn't much of a war. The asshole-in-chief hit the red button after feeling emasculated by Estonia's female head of state, nuking Tallinn, which was awfully close to St. Petersburg. Europe endlessly discussed economic sanctions, but before they made any decisions, Putin nuked Washington D.C., solving one problem. Civil war broke out in America, and the union fell apart,

each state declaring its own martial law. The rest of the world stepped aside and said fuck it, cutting off contact, and went about its business.

Locally, Reno emptied out as people fled back to where they'd originally come from. It wasn't entirely lawless, but it had reverted to the wild west. Grenade was lucky, having learned to shoot years ago when her best friend, Jack, taught her how to protect herself after her divorce. He helped her recover her essential self, too. Jack had died in the early chaotic days, and she missed him terribly. He was the one who'd resurrected her childhood nickname. Her father had called her Grenade because of her red hair and fiery temper when provoked beyond reason. There was a lot of gray in that hair now, and menopause had softened her temper, but it was a good name for the post-war world.

The manufactured housing community where she lived had emptied out to only about 10 percent occupancy, with people simply abandoning their homes. Even the corporation that owned the land pulled out. Reno still had running water, but no electricity. The homes still looked okay, with a distinct lack of weeds, thanks to chemicals sprayed before the End.

Grenade had a .38 revolver and a .32 semi-automatic in addition to her .22 rifle. They all came in handy during the bad times and the End times. The .38 was a good, solid gun. The .32 was a little small, but useful enough since she was a good shot. The .22 rifle she used for hunting. She still lived in her small three-bedroom home that she'd bought with her divorce settlement, cooking and doing laundry in the backyard. Grenade was glad she'd bought this home with a decent-sized yard since many of them in the community had no yard at all. Most lots in mobile home communities were barely larger than the houses, but this lot backed up to a flood run-off arroyo, so there was more room than most people had.

Today was Grenade's day of rest, partly thanks to the case of canned cat food. She had enough food for herself on hand for a few days, and she was caught up on laundry, wood-chopping, and other post-war household chores. She sat down with the new Lippman book, but she was interrupted in the first chapter by a knock on the front door.

The Banshee, a fawn Abyssinian, ran to the door and stretched up toward the doorknob. "*How!*" She howled. Her tail switched.

Marmot had already come by, and Grenade wasn't expecting any other scavengers today. She picked up the .32 from the coffee table and stood to the

side of the door. "Who's there?" she called out.

She heard a mumble through the door. No, it couldn't be. Not Tweedledum. Gun in hand, she opened the door.

"Hello, Roger," she said to her ex-husband. She was surprised at how calm she felt, but the lack of any longing for him or their old relationship was a welcome feeling.

"Long time no see, Renee," he said to her with a grin.

"Not goddamned long enough. What are you doing here?"

Roger's grin disappeared when he noticed the gun in her hand. "Whoa, what's that?" He took a step back.

"This is my friend, Beretta," Grenade said. "Why are you here?"

She stepped out onto the front doorstep, closing the door behind her so the cats wouldn't escape. She didn't want Roger in her house.

"I came to see you," he said. "Look, I brought gifts."

He lifted his hands to show a slightly-swollen can of peaches and a half-empty jar of peanut butter.

"Not interested," she snapped.

"What are you doing with a gun?" he asked.

"Maybe you didn't notice, but the world has changed a lot recently," she said, holding the gun steady, fighting against a slight tremor in her hand. Her vision blurred a bit again, too, but squinting helped with that, and it made her look angrier, she figured. Damn these symptoms though. But she certainly couldn't let Roger know of her condition, because he would exploit it, just as he had every other weakness of hers.

Grenade and Roger had been divorced for 16 years after 20 years of marriage and a year of contested divorce. He had asked for the divorce, but he expected her to do the paperwork to get an easy Nevada divorce without giving her any of the equity in their large home, so when she hired an attorney, he had done the same and fought the divorce every step. She got her share of the property. He had married again the moment the divorce was final.

"Look, honey, I just wanted to say I never should have left you," Roger said. "I miss you."

"Uh-huh," Grenade muttered. "Where's your wife?"

Roger's glance flickered down, then back up to look Grenade in the eyes again. "Connie left me."

Liar. Grenade didn't remember him being so easy to read. He must have a big secret he was afraid she'd find out, or else he wouldn't be so obvious. Or maybe Jack had taught her even more than she'd realized.

"And you thought I'd take you back?" Grenade barked out a laugh. "Fat chance, Tweedledum. But you did stay married longer than I expected. I thought you would divorce again when you hit 50 a decade ago."

Roger's glance turned away again. But before he could answer, there was a crack and zing sound. Grenade reflexively pushed him to the ground and ducked behind a bush. She looked around but didn't see the shooter. There was a new chip in the concrete doorstep.

"All right, come in," she said. She grabbed Tweedledum's elbow and pulled him into her house, locking the door behind them. Dammit. She didn't want him in her house, but damned if she'd let him die before finding out what was going on. She loved a good story.

"What was that sound? What's going on?"

"Someone shot at you. Who's after you?"

Roger didn't reply. Grenade scowled at him.

"I don't know," he finally said, not meeting her gaze.

"I'm tired of you lying to me. You can go back out there and face the shooter by yourself."

His plump, pale face got whiter. He'd gained weight since she last saw him at their divorce hearing. Back then he was trying to look attractive to prospective girlfriends. He wore his hair the same, looking like he used a bowl on his head as a guide for his haircuts. A good wind could blow his bangs back off his forehead and expose his rapidly receding hairline.

Grenade swallowed a few expletives. She was going to have to help him, at least until she figured out what was going on. Nearly every word out of his mouth so far had been a lie, and she had no idea what it would take to get the truth out of him.

Maybe she should kick him to the curb, but she could always choose to do that at a later time. And she was also curious as to why the sniper hadn't fired again. Or stormed the house to fire through the windows. Courteous sniper, this one.

She turned around to see Dini, Aidan, the Banshee, and Fiona watching from the kitchen door. They were just as suspicious of Roger as she was.



Of course, Tweedledum didn't have any luggage. He didn't have any food—besides the spoiled peaches and almost-gone peanut butter—or tools, or anything useful. He still professed not to know who was shooting at him, and Grenade still didn't believe him. But she said he could stay until dark.

Tweedledum claimed to have walked from his home in south Reno—formerly their home—but Grenade knew even without his tell that it was a lie. It was nine or 10 miles. With gasoline expensive and in short supply, a lot of people walked or rode bicycles these days, and Roger used to hike back when they lived in Fresno, California, but that was more than 20 years ago. What was his game?

It wasn't the lying that bothered her because he'd been a world-class gaslighter back when they were married. She'd gone from being an independent woman to an emotionally-abused wallflower. When he had his mid-life crisis 17 years ago and told her he wanted a divorce, it was the best gift he'd ever given her, because after she'd gotten away from his influence, she realized that when she thought she married for love, she'd really married out of fear of being alone. The irony was she was alone now and much happier.

And Grenade was angry that Tweedledum had ruined her day off. She was angry that she had to deal with him at all instead of sitting and reading one of her new books with a cat or two on her lap and a glass of cool sun tea on the coffee table. Goddess, but she missed ice.

The cats were still avoiding Roger, even though he crouched down and made kissy noises at them, trying to look friendly and attractive. Grenade wished she could ignore him, too, but she had to deal with him to get him out of her home. Her hands started to shake, and she clenched her fists to hide the disease's tremors.

“Renee! Do you have something to drink?”

“This isn't a social call. Tell me what's going on and why I should care, or I'll shove you back outside for the sniper.”

His face crumpled, and his eyes glistened. But he looked her in the eyes.

“Connie's trying to kill me,” he said.

“Your wife? What did you do to her?”

“Nothing.” He didn’t meet her gaze this time. Finally, he continued. “She wanted to move back to Ohio, and I didn’t. That’s why we split up. But she wanted me to find a way to pay her for the equity in our house, and she didn’t listen when I said there’s not really any equity anymore since few people use money and nobody’s buying houses in Reno.”

While the real estate facts were correct, it still sounded fishy to Grenade, but she’d never met Connie, so maybe Connie was crazy as a bedbug, to mix metaphors. She’d married Tweedledum after all. Then again, so had Grenade.

“Where’s your ham radio? I would think you’d be busy helping people communicate these days,” she said.

Roger looked down. “Connie wouldn’t let me take any radios when she kicked me out.”

“You show up with no food, no tools, no radios, nothing helpful, you keep lying through your teeth, and you have the nerve to ask for a huge favor from me. Why should I help you?”

Roger shrugged. Grenade scowled.



Against her better judgment, Grenade finally agreed to let Roger stay the night. The sniper was still out there, and Grenade hadn’t gotten to the bottom of Roger’s story yet. But she let him share her dinner of cool sun tea, rabbit jerky, and dried apple slices. She let him use her sleeping bag in the spare bedroom, and she locked her bedroom door.

The Banshee woke Grenade. “*How! How! Now!*” the small cat howled.

She jumped out of bed, grabbed her gun, and staggered into the living room. Her legs feeling all pins and needles, where Roger had his hand on the front door knob. Grenade leveled her gun at Tweedledum.

“Hold it right there, asshole,” she said. “What are you doing?”

His glance flickered down again as it had so often the previous afternoon.

“Don’t lie to me. I’ve had my fill of that. Look, there’s a round chambered. If I pull this trigger, you’re dead.”

He dropped his hand from the doorknob. “You can’t shoot me. You’ll wake the neighbors. Someone will hear and wonder what’s going on.”



“Did anyone rush to help you when the sniper fired? And remember that popping noise we heard on and off all afternoon? That was gunfire from people hunting. And I don’t have any neighbors on this cul-de-sac. No one cares, especially about you. Why are you sneaking out in the middle of the night?”

“When did you learn how to shoot? I thought you hated guns.”

“Don’t change the subject. Jack taught me for self-defense after our divorce. And don’t get any ideas. Jack called me Annie Oakley because I’m a crack shot. Talk.”

The Banshee howled again. “Now!”

“What’s with that cat? Since when do abys talk so much? I would have gotten clean away if she hadn’t woke you.”

“That’s the point. If you don’t talk soon, Aidan’s likely to come spray you. Or maybe Fiona will scratch her claws up your leg. Or I’ll put a round through your skull. What did you steal from me?”

Roger’s shoulders slumped. He rammed his hand deep in his pocket and brought it out in a fist. He had several gold rings and a white gold pendant, all of which belonged to Grenade. He dumped them onto the end table.

“I thought I bought you more jewelry than this, Renee,” he said.

“Most of it was costume jewelry. I only kept the real pieces, because the price of gold has been too low for them to be worth enough,” Grenade said. “At least I thought so until now. Did you steal Connie’s jewelry, too?”

There was a knock at the door. Tweedledum jumped about six inches, forgetting Grenade’s gun pointed at him.

“Who is it?” Grenade shouted.

“Connie Martin,” said a woman’s voice.

Grenade motioned with the gun for Roger to move away from the door, and she unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door. A blond woman, a few years younger than Grenade and Roger, stood on the doorstep. She had a .45 gun.

“Wow. You don’t mess around, do you?” Grenade said, nodding at the gun.

“What were you planning to do with that pea shooter?” Connie said with a laugh.

“When I hit them right between the eyes, they don’t usually get up again,” Grenade replied.

“Fair enough.”

Roger looked back and forth at the women, then started to sidle off.

*“Wow!”* howled the Banshee.

“Stop, Tweedledum,” said Grenade.

He stopped.

Grenade pointed her gun at him again.

“We were just talking about how he’s been stealing from us,” she said to Connie. “Is that why you’re after him? He spent all afternoon lying to me, then he made the mistake of trying to sneak out in the middle of the night with my jewelry.”

“I knew he’d taken my jewelry, both the stuff he bought me and stuff my first husband gave me,” Connie said. “But what really lit my fuse was when he killed my dog.”

*“Yow!”* howled the Banshee. Fiona squinted her eyes and twitched her tail. Aidan and Dini watched from the bedroom door.

“You said it, sister,” Grenade said. “I never would have figured he had the balls to kill anyone or anything.”

“He didn’t kill Cadbury himself,” Connie said. “He took my senior chocolate lab to a vet that didn’t know him and lied, saying my sweet boy bit some children and needed to be put down. Then he told me Caddie had bolted out of the backyard when a car backfired. But he was stupid enough to keep the vet receipt, which I found. That’s when I bought a gun and took lessons on how to shoot it.”

“Maybe I should let you shoot him,” Grenade said.

“If you shoot me, you’ll never find Connie’s jewelry. I don’t have it on me. It’s in my car,” Roger said.

“I knew you didn’t walk, Tweedledum,” Grenade said.

“Stop calling me that!” Roger shouted.

Grenade and Connie smiled. While they were distracted, Roger reared back and kicked the Banshee across the room. She landed with a thud but without a peep.

“Banshee!” Grenade cried. She dropped her gun and ran to the cat.

Roger grabbed the .32 and darted out the door. Connie took off after him with her .45. Grenade heard a shot. She ran into the bedroom and got her .38 and ran out the door.

Connie was lying in the road, bleeding. Roger had stopped, apparently in shock that he’d hit her. He still held Grenade’s .32 that he’d taken. Grenade,

without thinking, stopped, took aim, and put a bullet right through his heart. He crumpled to the ground.

Grenade turned back to Connie, who was sitting up. She'd been hit in the upper arm, but it was just a flesh wound. Grenade helped her stand up.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Connie nodded. "What about Tweedledum?" she asked.

"I think he's dead. I aimed for the heart." Grenade walked over to him and kicked his side. He didn't move. She felt for his pulse. "Yeah. He's gone."

"What about your cat? Is she all right?"

"Yeah, she'll be okay."

Together they dragged their ex back to Grenade's home and into the backyard and put a tarp over him until they could decide what to do with him. They went back and searched for his SUV, finding it parked in a driveway one street over. They found Connie's jewelry, as well as more jewelry that neither of them recognized. He had his ham radios in the back of the SUV and plenty of tools and canned food—none of it rotten, like the peaches he tried to palm off on her. It took three trips, but they hauled it all back to Grenade's house, then left the keys in the vehicle.

"It'll be gone by dawn," Grenade said. "Speaking of 'gone,' we need to hide the body. If we drag it to the arroyo behind my yard, the coyotes and crows will clean up the mess for us."

Back at the house, Grenade bandaged the wound and found some aquarium antibiotics for Connie to take to avoid infection. The cats checked her out, sniffing her hands and legs, and rubbing their faces against her, marking their territory with cheek gland hormones. Grenade made up the bed in the spare room and let Connie sleep there. Dini and Aidan slept with her. The Banshee—looking much better—and Fiona slept with Grenade.

In the morning, the two women had scrambled eggs in the backyard after feeding more canned food to the cats.

"You seem too strong and independent to ever have been married to Roger," Connie said. "What's your secret?"

"My best friend, Jack. I got suckered into the marriage originally by my own feelings of abandonment, of being afraid to age alone. I'm an Air Force brat, and I never had a stable home. I was attracted to Roger partly because he'd spent his whole life in Fresno. After the divorce, Jack helped me find myself again."

“Where’s he now?”

“He died during the bad times when a sniper targeted an elementary school near Jack’s apartment. Jack managed to kill the sniper, saving the kids, but not before the sniper shot him. Jack died of his wounds. I miss him so much.”

Connie reached across the picnic table to pat Grenade’s hand. “I’m so sorry, Renee,” she said.

Grenade blinked back tears. “I go by Grenade now, ever since the bad times. Jack revived my nickname then. My dad used to call me that.” She cleared her throat. “You need a nickname. Something befitting your personality, post-war and post-Tweedledum.”

Connie smiled. “Do you have any ideas?”

“My nickname comes from my red hair and fiery temper, but also because it sounds a lot like Renee. Because of the way you stormed into my house yesterday with that big gun, ready to righteously shoot down Tweedledum, I’d like to call you Combat.”

Connie smiled. “I like that. You’re good with names. How’d you come up with Tweedledum?”

“I never liked calling him ‘my ex-husband,’ because it made him mine, connected us in a way I didn’t like, and I didn’t want anything to do with him. I tried calling him ‘that person I used to be married to,’ but that was too awkward. Remember Tweedledee and Tweedledum from the Alice in Wonderland books? Fat men, shit-eating grins, with bowl haircuts? Tweedledum suited him.”

The two women cleaned up the cat bowls and their own dishes, then looked at their bounty in the third bedroom. A box of canned goods, a box of basic tools—always handy—and five different radios, as well as a repeater.

“Nice batch of treasure,” Grenade said. “Did you pick up any ham radio skills living with him?”

“Oh, yes. You?”

“Yep. Of course, without a tower and antenna, we can’t do as much, but this will help us communicate pretty well.”

The women walked back outside to drink cool tea in the fresh air. A light knock on the gate signaled Quail, who arrived with goods and gossip. She looked suspiciously at Combat until Grenade introduced them.

“Quail, this is my good friend, Combat. She’ll be living here with me now. She knows how to handle herself. Combat, this is Quail, one of the best

scavengers around.”

Combat shook hands with the young woman. Quail sat down at the picnic table and opened up her large canvas messenger bag. “Here’s what I’ve got for you today,” she said, and began to pull treasures out of her bag.

Quail’s most valuable merchandise was always her gossip. Grenade served her cool tea and homemade fudge in payment for that. Today she had a story about a lucky scavenger who at dawn found an SUV that didn’t seem to belong to anyone in the area. No one recognized it. There was nothing in it, but it had a full tank of gas and was in good working order. Very valuable.

Grenade felt a twinge of regret at letting that go, but she didn’t need a car. And she didn’t want anyone to connect the car with her and Combat. Besides, she had a good life as it was. And now with Combat to help her out with chores, food, and more, Grenade wouldn’t have to worry about the signs of multiple sclerosis that she’d been noticing: the tremors, the blurred vision, the pins, and needles feelings. There was now someone around to make sure the cats would always be taken care of as they deserved.

END

