



After surviving the apocalypse, KJ and the Old Man face a ruthless warlord determined to build an empire from humanity's ruins. Their fight for survival becomes a battle to preserve hope itself.

**After the Apocalypse:
A Post-Apocalyptic Survival Story - Book Two, Killer**
By Chris Russel

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A POST-APOCALYPTIC SURVIVAL STORY

When the last survivors become prey,
someone has to become the hunter.

AFTER THE APOCALYPSE

BOOK TWO — KILLER

CHRIS RUSSELL

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Chapter Five - The Hungry River

KJ glared through the sleet, up the hill searching for the Humvees that she expected to appear over the crest at any moment.

"Persistent bastards..." she swore under her breath as the chainsaw chattered in her hands. She knew if she could slow them down, even for a minute, it might give the bus enough time to escape.

Those Humvees were built like tanks, much more so than her Range Rover had been. But even with their Army-grade equipment, they had to traverse the same bad roads as the bus. They wouldn't be moving that much faster in this rat's nest of fallen trees and abandoned vehicles.

She had a couple of minutes at least.

KJ had jumped out of the bus at a narrow part of the street in an old part of the city near the river. Here, the old wooden telephone poles were already leaning precariously into the roadway. Wires stretched from one pole to sister poles on the other side of the street. That weight and tension pulled the poles toward the

middle of the road. She could use this to her advantage.

There were brick buildings that crowded in on both sides of the street. If she could get a pole down, she thought, she might just be able to block the street. Another tactical delaying action in her long day of tactical delaying actions.

She found that one of the old poles was already cracked and damaged. The storm, and time, had beaten it up. It wouldn't take much more to topple it completely.

This battered, old municipal telephone pole was probably put here a hundred years ago to carry Edison's telegraph messages when this place was a fresh, new boomtown by the river. Now the pole was just an artifact that might help her delay the advance of evil in this dead city of the apocalypse.

She held the saw trigger down fully, reached up, and cut into the splintered pole.

The creosote-soaked old wood resisted, but KJ leaned in hard. Her back and shoulder muscles flexed. She forced the saw to bite. An angry shower of sawdust was thrown back at her in

response. Through the dust, she saw the Humvees emerge at the crest of the hill.

"Come *on!*" she demanded and leaned in harder, forcing the blade into the old wood. Steam and smoke rose from the cut as the saw struggled.

She began to wonder if she'd make it. But with the weight of the wires pulling down, the pole started to give way. She yanked the saw out and watched the old pole crack and slowly crash into the street.

She had guessed right. The pole was still connected to its stump by a splintered shank of tough old wood, and it did a reasonable job of blocking the way. She sprinted across the road and got to work on the next pole.

The Humvees were almost on top of her. They were weaving down through the mess in the road. She was out of time, but she'd see what she could do with the few seconds she had.

"Crap!" she swore and attacked the sister pole with the saw. The saw was slow to bite. The blade had dulled from the petrified, old wood of the first pole. The Humvees were quickly gaining ground even as they threaded through the morass of abandoned vehicles and storm

damage. She knew she was pushing her luck, but she had to at least try.

Through the noise of the chainsaw and the storm, and with the desperate, adrenaline-fueled effort of her work, she never heard the bullets ricocheting off the bricks behind her. But she did hear the loud report of the semi-automatic. She ducked and saw the Humvees, right on top of her. A man stood in the truck with a gun. The barrel flashes told her that it was time to go.

KJ left the idling saw stuck in the pole and scrambled around the corner of a building to make her escape. She hoped her effort would give the others the time they needed. She had done all that she could do, for now.

They were on their own.

Brad squared the shuttlebus with the center of the bridge. Water rushed across the bridge deck about a foot deep on this end, and the road didn't rise clear of water until midway toward the other side. There were large cracks in the road surface as the river tried to push the bridge off its abutment on the near shore.

"You sure about this?" Brad looked up at the old man who was clinging to one of the chrome poles with Bill at his feet.

The old man moved up to grip the back of Brad's seat. It looked bad. But they were trapped anyway, and he didn't see that they had another choice. The old man squinted back out the window through the rain. He didn't see anything. The Humvees weren't there yet.

That goddamn woman must have done something to slow them down, the old man thought.

Of all the scenarios he imagined, she was dead or captured in half of them. Maybe not. Maybe a tough nut like her would find a way. He certainly hoped so. In the few weeks they had been together, whether he was willing to vocalize it or not, she had become a part of his life. In the same way that Bill the dog had become something of a partner since they had found each other at the dead soldier's home.

This nightmare of a world had a habit of taunting you with hope and companionship and then tearing them away. He sure hoped she would be okay. The old man realized Brad was still waiting for an answer.

Am I sure about this? Hell no, but it isn't getting any better, and we're out of options and running out of time. The old man barked, "Punch it, Brad! Get a run on it! Get us through."

"Jesus..." Brad muttered, then shouted over his shoulder, "Everybody hold on tight and be ready to use the emergency exit. It's gonna get bumpy!"

He stepped on the gas. The shuttlebus surged forward and bounced violently across the rutted pavement. Brad gripped the wheel. The old man hung on tight. One of the women screamed. Bill's nails scraped across the floor as he tried to keep his footing.

The old man thought they might just make it. They were in the water now and could hear the roar of the river pushing against the side of the shuttlebus. The engine roared too, and the tires spun as Brad fought the current and willed the bus ahead.

The river fought back. It lifted and pushed the bus into the downstream railing. The back wheels spun free. They searched for traction but found none. There was loud scraping from the side of the bus as it was dragged by the force of the water along the rail.

The back wheels lost purchase entirely. The shuttlebus was lifted and shoved by the torrent. "Oh God!" Brad yelled. "It's got us!" But one of the spinning back tires found the elevated curb along the railing and gained enough traction to push them along.

The bus tilted and haltingly inched through the rushing water toward the center of the bridge as the spinning wheel intermittently caught on the curbing. The women were grim-faced and focused, clutching at the terrified children.

It felt like the bus was inside an angry washing machine set on high and grossly unbalanced. Tools and cans clattered to the ground from the shelves. But they were still, haltingly, making progress. If they could just hang on, they could make it to the shallower water ahead and up onto the dry span on the other side.

It was slow going, but they were making progress and were close to halfway across. Then the back window exploded, and bullets rattled off the chrome pipes.

"Get down!" the old man screamed and threw himself flat on the bus floor. He didn't bother looking back. He knew it was the King's men.

KJ had slowed them down enough for Brad to get the bus to the middle of the bridge. But they were here now. Would they try to follow? Would they ford the river too? *With those tanks, they'll be able to make it easy...* the old man thought. "Drive like your life depends on it, Brad!" he commanded.

Because it did. All their lives. And the odds weren't in their favor.

Two heavily armed, military-grade vehicles on their tail and him with a bus full of kids. This just keeps getting better, the old man thought. *Where was KJ? We could sure use her now. This was her idea. But where was Wonder Woman when he needed her?*

The water was shallower. The bus gained traction, and Brad was able to accelerate. It seemed like they might make it.

Then the whole world lurched sideways.

Or at least that's how it felt.

The front of the bus dropped hard and jammed into a big crack that had opened in the bridge deck. It was a good thing the passengers were holding on or already lying flat, or the jolting stop would have sent them flying. As it was, the old man and Bill slid forward.

Brad had been launched out of the driver's seat and cracked his head on the windshield. There was a trickle of blood running down his forehead between his widely set eyes. He wiped it and looked at his hand. He looked back at the others, dazed.

The kids were screaming, and there was a second lurch sideways as the entire bridge deck was now twisting out into the river.

"What the hell is happening?" the old man yelled as he tried to scramble back to his feet.

He squinted through the back window and saw that the river had finally managed to push the bridge deck off its far abutment. It was swinging like a hinge downstream.

One of the Humvees was still on the other shore, but the other one was gone. Just gone. The river had claimed it.

The old man got to his knees and grabbed Brad's shoulder, shaking him. "We have to get out of here!"

Brad looked confused and in shock. He shook his head and replied, "We're not going anywhere in the bus. We're stuck."

The bridge lurched again, and the bus slid more. The rear of the bus, pushed by the river, jammed into the steel side girders, halting its movement. The front wheels were stuck into the big crack at an angle.

If they didn't get out now, the old man realized, the river would take them and they would all die here.

He shouted, "We're going to have to hoof it! We can't stay here!" And then, to the back of the bus, he yelled, "Mags! Gather up the kids! We have to get out of here! And make it fast!"

Mags got up and went into action, shouting instructions like a sergeant in a firefight. "I'll take Hannah." She turned to the short dark-haired woman, pointing to the three youngest. "Bella, you take Ben, Brandon, and Sarah. Grab those sheets and use them like ropes to hold onto and stay together."

She looked at the other, younger woman and the last boy who was a few years older, maybe twelve. "Liv, you and Tim bring up the rear. Stay close and hold on to each other." And then, to the old man, with grim determination in her voice. "Let's go."

Jeez, she's good, the old man thought. I'll have to ask her about that...if we survive this. She moves and speaks with authority. That's a rare thing in the apocalypse. Everyone is so shell-shocked and unhinged that they're barely human anymore. But this woman shows impressive strength in a crisis.

He made a mental note to learn more about her. If they ever got off this goddamn bridge.

Brad braced himself against a side girder, one foot on the bottom bus step, one jammed against the bridge. The bus was canted out at a slight angle. There was enough space to get out through the door. Water rushed and gurgled up like a geyser from under the bus as the river battled to get through.

The old man stood, braced on the other side of the door, and helped the women and kids move slowly against the current, clawing for purchase on the cold, rusty girders.

He sent Brad ahead to shepherd the first group, with Mags carrying Hannah and Bella towing the three younger kids. He followed Liv and Timmy as best as he could, gripping Bill's collar.

Per Mags' suggestion, the kids lashed themselves to the adults with twisted sheets

and blankets. Everyone held on for dear life, scrambling and pushing their way toward the opposite shore like some bizarre apocalyptic caravan of mangy bridge monkeys.

The bedraggled pods picked their way slowly along. The old man looked back but couldn't see around the bus to gauge what the King's men were doing. One thing was for sure: they weren't getting out onto the bridge. That side of the bridge was gone. That was one threat, at least, they didn't need to worry about.

As they made their way along, the going got easier and the water shallower. They were making progress. The safety of the far shore was almost in reach.

The old man was glad to have Mag's help and glad that Brad seemed to be functional as well. He couldn't have managed on his own. He was beginning to think they were going to make it again.

This time they would make it for sure. As long as the bridge held together. Finally, things were going in their favor!

The water was shallow enough to let Bill go on his own, and he surged ahead, bounding through the frothy storm surge alongside the

others. Mags and the younger kids had made it out of the worst of it and were steadily trudging through the ankle-deep water with Brad in support.

Liv and Timmy were just ahead of the old man, making their own steady progress. The old man, bringing up the rear, saw Timmy trip over something in the water and stumble. Timmy quickly righted himself, pulling up on the blanket that was tied to Liv, but it gave the old man a scare, so he moved up closer to them, yelling at Liv to be careful.

Liv turned to look back at him. She smiled an angelic smile that shone like hope in the chaos of this day.

Time slowed down in that horrible moment. A scarlet hole blossomed in the smiling woman's forehead. Her eyes went blank, as if the lights had been turned off with a switch, and she fell backward, slumping against a girder. The water caught her, pivoting her limp form, and pulled her over the edge.

The old man tried to move, to catch her, but it was all happening too fast, and he moved helplessly forward through the sloshing water. More bullets cracked off the old girders around him. Timmy was frozen in shock.

Mesmerized, Timmy watched as the woman's body cascaded over the side of the bridge. He didn't think about the blanket that was still wound tightly around his arm. It went taut with the weight of the corpse, and he was yanked sideways.

The old man and Bill both lunged forward. Timmy scrabbled awkwardly on the slick girder, clawing with his fingers, but gravity would not release its grip, and the boy was sucked over into the foaming flow.

Bill barked and lunged after them.

"Bill!" the old man shouted. "Hold!"

Time accelerated, and the world was moving again at its normal, frantic pace.

The big dog turned his head to look at the old man. Their eyes met for a moment. The old man screamed frantically, "NO!"

But the dog was gone.

The old man saw the boy's head shooting down the river, his arms flailing for purchase, with the big, shaggy head of the dog a few yards back.

The last thing the old man saw, before they disappeared out of sight, was that silly curled

tail of Bill's sticking up out of the water as they were pulled downriver.

"Goddamn dog!" he swore.

He choked back a furious urge to jump in after them. Then he leaned his head back and let out a howl. An impotent, demented keening that matched the fury of the storm-swollen river. The cry of a wounded beast.

His scream trailed off and left him empty. *Empty*. Nothing left but bones. Bones for the apocalypse. "*Goddamn dog...*" he sobbed. And reached for the next girder.

The others were looking back at him, worried.

"Move it and stay low!" he shouted.



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