

What happens in the next book?

Read on for an exclusive extract  
from Justin Cronin's *The Twelve*



Bernard Kittridge, known to the world as ‘Last Stand in Denver,’ knew it was time to leave the day the power went out.

He wondered what had taken so long. You couldn’t keep a municipal electrical grid running without people to man it, and as far as Kittridge could tell from the 26th floor, not a single soul was left alive in the city of Denver.

Which was not to say he was alone.

He had spent most of that morning – a bright clear morning in the first week of June, temperatures in the mid-seventies with a chance of blood-sucking monsters moving in toward dusk – sunning on the balcony of the penthouse he had occupied since the second week of the crisis. It was a gigantic place, like an airborne palace; the kitchen alone was the size of Kittridge’s whole apartment. The owner’s taste ran in an austere direction: sleek leather seating groups that were better to look at than sit on, gleaming floors of twinkling travertine, small furry rugs, glass tables that appeared to float in space.

Breaking in had been surprisingly easy. By the time Kittridge had made his decision, half the city was dead, or fled, or missing. The cops were long gone. He’d thought about barricading himself into one of the big houses up in Cherry Creek but, based on the things he’d heard, he wanted someplace high. The owner was a man he knew slightly, a regular customer at the store. His name was Warren Filo. As luck would have it, Warren had come in the day before the whole thing broke, gearing up for a trip to Alaska. He was a young guy, too young for how much money he had – hedge fund money, probably. That day, the world still cheerily humming along as usual, Kittridge had helped him

carry his purchases to the car. A Ferrari, of course. Standing beside it, Kittridge thought: Why not just go ahead and get a vanity plate that says 'DOUCHE BAG 1'? A question that must have been plainly written on his face, because no sooner had it crossed his mind than Warren went red with embarrassment. He wasn't wearing his usual suit, just jeans and a tee shirt with SLOAN SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT printed on the front. He'd wanted Kittridge to see the car, that much was obvious; but now that this had happened, he'd realized how dumb this was, showing off a vehicle like that to a floor manager at Outdoor World who probably made less than fifty grand a year. (The number was actually forty-two.) Kittridge allowed himself a silent laugh at that – the things this kid didn't know would fill a book – and he let the moment hang to make the point. *I know, I know*, Warren confessed. *It's a little much. I told myself I'd never be one of those assholes who drove a Ferrari. But honest to god, you should feel the way she handles.*

Kittridge had gotten Warren's address off his invoice. By the time he moved in – Warren presumably snug and safe in Alaska – it was simply a matter of finding the right key in the manager's office, putting it in the slot in the elevator panel, and riding 19 floors to the top. He unloaded his gear. A rolling suitcase of clothes, two lockers of weaponry, a hand-crank radio, night-vision binoculars, flares, a first aid kit, bottles of bleach, an arc welder to seal the doors of the elevator, an assortment of tools, his trusty laptop with its portable satellite dish, a box of books, and enough food and water to last a month.

The view from the balcony, which ran the length of the west side of the building, was a sweeping 180 degrees, looking toward Route 25 and Mile High Stadium. He'd positioned cameras equipped with motion detectors at each end of the balcony, one to cover the street, a second facing the building on the opposite side. He figured he'd get a lot of good footage this way, but the money shots would be actual kills. The weapon he'd selected was a Remington bolt-action 700P, .318 caliber – a nice balance of accuracy and stopping power, zeroing out at 300 yards. To this he'd affixed a digital video riflescope with infra-red. Using the

binoculars, he would isolate his target; the rifle, fixed on a bipod at the edge of the balcony, would do the rest.

On the first night, windless and lit by a waning quarter moon, he'd shot seven: five on the avenue, one on the roof of the building across the street, and one more through the window of a bank at street level. It was the last one that made him famous. The creature, or vampire, or whatever it was – the official term was 'Infected Person' – had looked straight into the scope just before Kittridge put one through the sweet spot. Uploaded to YouTube, the image had traveled around the globe within hours; by morning all the major networks had picked it up. Who is this man? everybody wanted to know. Who is this fearless-crazy-suicidal man, barricaded in a Denver high-rise, making his last stand?

And so was born the sobriquet, Last Stand In Denver.

From the start he'd assumed it was just a matter of time before somebody shut him down, CIA or FBI or Homeland. Working in his favor was the fact that this same somebody would have to come to Denver to do this. Kittridge's i.p address was basically untraceable, backstopped by a daisy-chain of anonymizer servers, the order scrambled every night. Most were overseas: Russia, China, Indonesia, Israel, even Sudan. Places beyond easy reach for any federal agency that might want to pull the plug. His video blog – two million hits the first day – had over three hundred mirror sites, with more added all the time. It didn't take a week before he was a bonafide worldwide phenomenon. Twitter, Facebook, Headshot, Sphere: the images found their way without his lifting a finger. One of his fan sites alone had over fourteen million subscribers; on Ebay, tee-shirts that read, 'I AM LAST STAND IN DENVER' were selling for three hundred bucks.

His father had always said, son, the most important thing in life is to make a contribution. Who would have thought Kittridge's contribution would be video-blogging from ground-zero of the apocalypse?

And yet the world went on. The sun still shone. To the west, the mountains shrugged their indifferent shoulders at man's departure. For a while, there had been a lot of smoke in the air – whole blocks had burned to the ground – but now this, too,

had dissipated, revealing the desolation with an eerie clarity. At night, regions of blackness draped the city, but elsewhere, lights still glittered in the gloom – flickering street lamps, filling station and convenience stores with their distinctive neon glow, porch lights left burning for their owners' return. While Kittridge maintained his vigil on the balcony, a traffic signal at the corner of the street still dutifully turned from green to orange to red and then to green again.

He wasn't lonely. Loneliness had left him, long ago. He was thirty-seven years old. A little heavier than he'd like – with his leg, it was hard to keep the weight off – but still strong. He'd been married once, though not for years. He remembered that period of his life as 18 months of oversexed, connubial bliss, followed by an equal number of months of yelling and screaming, accusations and counter-accusations, until the whole thing sank like a rock, and he was content, on the whole, that this union had produced no children. His connection to Denver was neither sentimental nor personal; after he'd gotten out of the VA, it was simply the first place he'd landed. Everyone said that a decorated veteran should have little trouble finding work. And maybe this was true. But Kittridge had been in no hurry. He'd spent the better part of a year just reading – the usual trash at first, cop novels and thrillers – but eventually he had found his way into more substantial books: *As I Lay Dying*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*. He'd spent a whole month on Melville, pouring his way through *Moby Dick*. Most were books he felt he ought to read, the ones he'd somehow missed in high school, but he found himself genuinely liking most of them. Sitting in the quiet of his apartment, his mind lost in tales of other lives and times – it felt like taking a long drink after years of thirst. He'd even enrolled in a few classes at the community college, working at Outdoor World during the day, reading and writing his papers at nights and on his lunch hour. He could see himself going on this way for some time. A small but happy life.

And then, of course, the end of the world had happened.

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The morning the electricity failed, Kittridge had finished uploading the previous night's footage and was sitting on the patio, making his way through Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* – Sydney Carton, the English barrister, had just declared his everlasting love for Lucie Manette, fiancé of the haplessly idealistic Charles Darnay – when the thought touched him that the morning could only be improved by a dish of ice cream. Warren's enormous kitchen – you could run a five-star restaurant out of the thing – had been, unsurprisingly, almost completely bereft of food, and Kittridge had long since thrown away the moldy take-out containers that had constituted the meager contents of the fridge. But the guy obviously had a weakness for Ben and Jerry's Chocolate Fudge Brownie, because the freezer was crammed with the stuff. Not Chunky Monkey or Cherry Garcia or Phish Food or even plain old Vanilla. Just Chocolate Fudge Brownie. Kittridge would have liked a little variety, considering there was going to be no more ice cream for a while, but with nothing else to eat besides canned soup and crackers, he was hardly one to complain. Balancing his book on the arm of his chair, he stepped through the sliding glass door into the penthouse.

By the time he reached the kitchen, he had begun to sense that something was wrong, although this impression had yet to coalesce around anything specific. Somehow he failed to notice that the light in the freezer had burned out, so it wasn't until he actually opened the carton and sunk his spoon into a sloppy mush of melted Chocolate Fudge Brownie that he understood.

He tried a lightswitch. Nothing. He moved through the apartment, testing lamps and switches. All were the same.

He paused in the middle of the living room and took a deep breath. Okay, he thought. Okay. This was to be expected. If anything, it was long overdue. He checked his watch. 11:32 a.m. Sunset was a little after eight. Nine and a half hours to get his ass gone.

He quickly packed a rucksack with what supplies he needed: energy bars, water, clean socks and underwear, a first aid kit, a warm jacket, a bottle of Zyrtec (his allergies had been playing hell with him all spring), a toothbrush, and a razor. For a

moment he considered bringing *Tale of Two Cities* along, but this seemed impractical, and with a twinge of regret he put it aside, thinking, well, I guess I'll never know how that ends. In the bedroom he dressed himself in a wicking tee-shirt and cargo pants, topping this off with a hunting vest and a pair of light hikers. For a few minutes he considered which weapons to take, finally settling on a Bowie knife, a pair of Glock 19s, and the retro-fitted Polish AK with the folding stock – useless at any kind of range, but reliable close in, which was where he expected to be. The Glocks fit snugly in a cross holster, one beneath each arm. He filled the pockets of his vest with loaded magazines, clipped the AK to its shoulder sling, hoisted the backpack over his shoulders, and returned to the patio.

That was when he noticed the traffic signal on the avenue. Green, yellow, red. Green, yellow, red. It could have been a fluke, but somehow he doubted it.

They'd found him.

The rope, which he'd fixed in place the morning of his arrival, was anchored to a drainage stack on the roof. He stepped into his rappelling harness, clipped in, and swung first his good leg and then his bad one over the railing. Heights were no problem for him, and yet he did not look down. He was perched on the edge of the balcony, facing the windows of the penthouse. In the distance, he heard the sound of a helicopter.

Last Stand In Denver, signing off.

With a push he was aloft, his body lobbing like a softball away from the face of the building. One story, two stories, three, the rope smoothly sliding through his hands: he landed on the balcony of the apartment four floors below. A familiar twang of pain shot upward from his left knee; he gritted his teeth to force it away. The helicopter was closer now, the sound of its blades volleying off the tall buildings of downtown and the empty streets below. He peeled off his harness, drew one of the Glocks, and fired a single shot to shatter the glass of the balcony door.

The air of the apartment was stale, like the inside of a cabin sealed for winter. Heavy furniture, gilt mirrors, an oil painting of a horse hung over the fireplace; from somewhere came a smell



of decay. He moved through the becalmed space with barely a glance. At the front door he paused to attach a spotlight to the rail of the AK and stepped out into the hall, headed for the stairs.

In his pocket were the keys to the Ferrari, parked in the building's underground garage, twenty-three floors below. Kittridge shouldered open the door of the stairwell, quickly sweeping the space with the beam from the AK, up and down. Clear. He withdrew a flare from his vest and used his teeth to unscrew the plastic top, exposing the igniter button. With a combusive pop, the flare commenced its rain of sparks. Kittridge held it over the side, taking aim, and let go; if there was anything down there, he'd know it soon. His eyes followed the flare as it made its decent, dragging a contrail of smoke. Somewhere below it caught the rail and bounced out of sight. Kittridge counted to ten. Nothing, no movement at all.

He began to descend. His heart was beating in his throat. Three flares later he reached the bottom; a heavy steel door with a bar and a small square of reinforced glass led to the garage. The floor of the stairwell was littered with trash: pop cans, candy bar wrappers, tins of food. A rumpled bedroll and a pile of musty clothing showed where someone had been sleeping – hiding, as he had.

Kittridge had scouted out the parking garage the day of his arrival. The Ferrari was parked near the southwest corner, a distance of approximately two-hundred feet. He probably should have moved it closer to the door, but it had taken him three days to locate Warren's keys – who keeps his car keys in a bathroom drawer? – by which time Kittridge had already barricaded himself inside the penthouse.

The fob had three buttons: one for the doors, one for the alarm, and one which, he hoped, was a remote starter. He pressed this one first.

From deep within the garage came a tart, single-noted bleep, the sound ricocheting like a bee-bee through the sealed space, followed by the throaty roar of the Ferrari's engine. Another mistake: the Ferrari was parked nose to the wall. He should have thought of that. Not only would this slow his escape; if the car

had been facing the opposite way, its headlights would have afforded him a better look at the room. As it was, all he could make out through the window was a distant, glowing region where the car awaited, a cat purring in the dark. The rest of the garage was veiled in blackness. The infected liked to hang from things, Kittridge knew. Ceiling struts, pipes, anything with a tactile surface. The tiniest crack would suffice. When they came, they came from above.

The moment of decision was upon him. Toss more flares and see what happened? Move stealthily through the darkness, seeking cover? Throw open the door and run like hell?

From high overhead came the creak of a stairwell door opening, followed by a sound of voices, murmuring. Kittridge held his breath and listened. There were two of them. Though he knew he shouldn't, he stepped back from the door and craned his neck upward, angling his eyes up the stairwell. Ten stories up, two red dots were dancing off the walls.

He ran like hell.

He had made it halfway to the Ferrari when he heard the first viral drop behind him. There was no time to turn and fire, Kittridge kept on going. The pain in his knee felt like a wick of fire, an ice-pick buried to the bone. At the periphery of his senses he felt a tingling awareness of beings awakening, the garage coming to life. He threw open the door and wedged himself inside, tossing the AK and rucksack onto the passenger seat, slamming the door behind him. The vehicle was so low-slung he felt like he was sitting on the ground. The dashboard, full of mysterious gauges and switches, glowed like a spacecraft's. Something was missing. Where was the gearshift?

A *wang* of metal, and in the next instant, Kittridge's vision was filled with the sight of it. The viral had leapt onto the hood, assuming a reptilian crouch. For a frozen moment, it regarded him coolly, a predator contemplating his prey. He was naked except for his wristwatch, a Rolex fat as an icecube. *Warren?* he thought, for the man had been wearing one like it the day he had taken Kittridge to see the car. *Warren, old buddy, is that you? Because if it is, I wouldn't mind a word of advice on how to get this thing in gear.*

He discovered, then, with the tips of his fingertips, a pair of levers positioned on the undersides of the steering wheel, left and right. Paddle shifters. He should have thought of that. Up on the right, down on the left, like a motorcycle. Reverse would be a button somewhere, on the dash. *The one with the R, genius. That one.*

He pushed the button and hit the gas. Too fast: with a squeal of rubber the Ferrari shot backward. Kittridge knew what was about to happen before it did. As the viral tumbled away, the right rear quarter panel of the car clipped a concrete post; Kittridge's head was slammed into the driver's-side window. His brain chimed like a tuning fork; glittering motes danced in his eyes. But to contemplate this fact, even for a moment, was to die. The viral was rising from off the floor now, preparing to leap. No doubt it would try to take him straight through the windshield.

But something else seemed to catch its attention. With a bird-like darting quickness, it swiveled its head toward the stairwell door.

Fresh meat.

As the viral jumped away, Kittridge swung the wheel to the left and gripped the right paddle, engaging the transmission as he pressed the accelerator. A lurch and then a leap of speed: Kittridge was thrust back into his seat. Just when he thought he'd lose control of the car again he found the straightway, the walls of the garage and its parked vehicles streaming past; allowing himself a quick glimpse in the rearview, he saw the viral tearing into the body of one of the soldiers. The second was nowhere visible, though if Kittridge had to bet, the man was surely dead already, torn to bloody hunks. In school, Kittridge had learned that you couldn't catch a fly with your hand because time was different to a fly: in a fly's miniscule brain, a second was an hour, an hour was a year. That's what the virals were like. Like beings outside of time.

The ramp to the street was at the far end of the lot, which was laid out like a maze; there was no direct route. The soldiers had bought him a moment but that was all: the only safety was

daylight. As Kittridge downshifted into the first corner, engine roaring, tires shrieking, two more virals dropped from the ceiling directly in his path. One fell under his wheel with a damp crunch – he almost lost control of the car again – but the other leapt over the roof of the Ferrari, striding it like a hurdler.

He didn't look back.

They were everywhere now, emerging from all the hidden places. They flung themselves at the car like suicides, driven by the madness of their hunger. He barreled through them, bodies flying, their monstrous, distorted faces colliding with the windshield before being hurled up and over, away. Two more turns and he'd be free, but one was clinging to the roof now. He braked around the corner, fishtailing on the slick cement, the force of his deceleration sending the viral rolling onto the hood. A woman: she appeared to be wearing, of all things, a wedding gown. Gouging her fingers into the gap at the base of the windshield, she had drawn herself onto all fours. Her mouth, a bear-trap of bloody teeth, was open very wide; a tiny golden crucifix dangled at the base of her throat. *I'm sorry about your wedding*, Kittridge thought as he drew one of the pistols, steadying it over the wheel to fire through the windshield, point-blank into her face.

He turned the final corner; ahead, a golden shaft of daylight falling down. Kittridge hit the ramp doing seventy miles an hour, still accelerating. The grate was sealed, but this fact seemed meager, no obstacle at all. Kittridge took aim, plunging the pedal to the floor, and ducked his head beneath the shattered windshield.

A furious crash; for two full seconds, an eternity in miniature, the Ferrari went airborne. It rocketed into the sunshine, concussing the pavement with a bone-jarring bang, sparks flying. There was nothing to stop him, he realized; he was going to careen into the lobby of the bank across the street. As he bounced across the median, Kittridge stamped the brakes and swerved to the right, bracing himself for the impact. But there was no need. With a screech of smoking rubber, the tires bit and held, and the next thing Kittridge knew, he was flying down the avenue, into the summer morning.

He had to admit it. What were Warren's exact words? *You should feel the way she handles.*

It was true. Kittridge had never driven anything like it in his life.