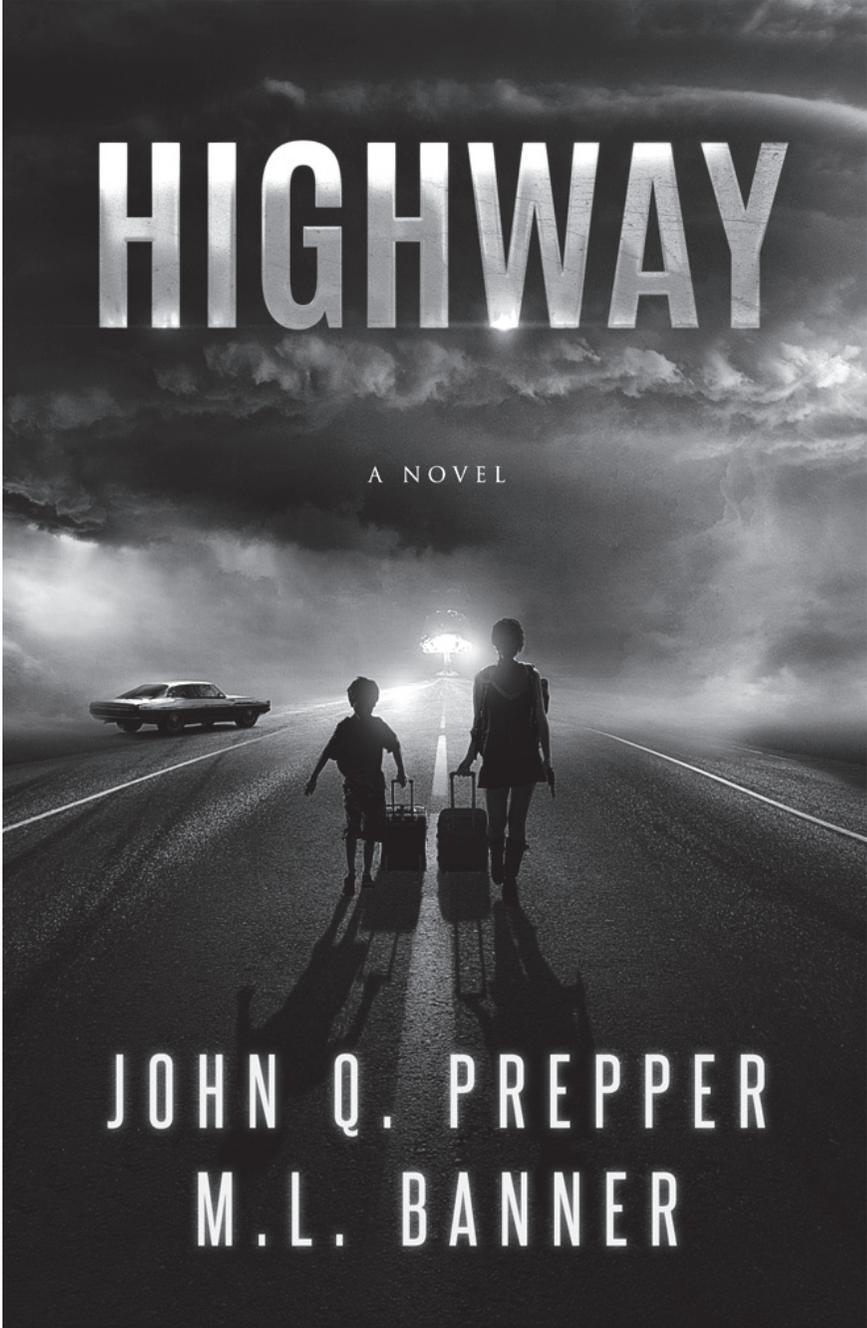


HIGHWAY



A NOVEL

JOHN Q. PREPPER
M. L. BANNER

Highway
A Post-Apocalyptic Tale of Survival

By
John Q. Prepper
&
M.L. Banner

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Highway is an original work of fiction.
The characters, dialogs, and many of the places mentioned are purely the products
of this author's imagination.

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A Quick Note about *Highway*

This novel is set in a contemporary America of the very near future. As we've mentioned on the disclaimer page, this is a work of fiction. However, the particular set of circumstances covered in this book is absolutely possible. Yes, it's fiction, but the threats covered in this book are as real as they can be.

In other words, consider this a warning to prepare yourself and your family, because this fiction could become reality.

Chapter 1

July 4th

Lexi and Travis

A flash of light changed all American life in an instant.

Their father overcorrected and they swerved so hard, Lexi rolled over on top of her brother in the back seat. Then they veered the other way and she was planted back in her place, face pushed against the door by their car's inertia, Travis now on top of her.

Shattering glass and sparkles of light filled her senses.

The stop was sudden and—for a moment—completely silent, as if the air had been sucked out of the car's interior.

Travis came to rest on her lap, face upturned, eyes fluttering, lips slowly moving as if they were trying to form random words. He looked like a dazed turtle, with legs limply hanging out of its shell, covered in a blanket of pea-gravel-sized fragments of glass that glittered like diamonds.

Crickets called to her out the window's ragged opening.

Her brother's weight squeezed down and something else was pressing against her right side, painfully pinning her in place. That something glistened in a crimson morning hue.

As she lifted her free hand to touch the post pushing against her, tiny sparkles of glass fell off her arm, more additions to the many

already covering the bench seat.

It was metal and looked to her as if it came from inside her back seat and ran to the inside of the front seat, like some poorly constructed strut that had been there all along but she had just never noticed before. Her mind couldn't decipher its meaning, only that it was because of the accident.

She shuddered, just realizing this strut had pierced her seat right where she was sleeping just before they crashed. She could have been like this seat, a Lexi shish kebab skewered by this post.

Her hand slid forward across the smooth metal, coated with splotches of liquid and glass, following it to its end, inside the flaps of the broken canvas.

Studying the red smears covering her fingers, the wheels of her mind were locked in place. It was a jigsaw puzzle where someone purposely mixed in pieces from another box.

Rubbing her fingers together, smudging the redness further; a crucial piece of the puzzle finally clicked in.

Blood!

She jerked her head back toward the front seat. "Daddy!" she yelled.

A fire hydrant of knowledge burst open; the most important pieces of this jigsaw connected all at once, and with that knowledge came a flood of terror, revulsion, and panic.

Lexi reached over with her bloodied hand, her other pinned underneath her, and pulled open the door.

They both tumbled out hard onto the ground, the impact taking her breath away.

"Dad," Travis croaked right next to her.

She pushed herself up from the dirt and gravel and stood somewhat wobbly, like she had just come out of some possessed carnival fun-ride.

They were on the side of the highway, no one else around. Her gaze

followed their car's tracks along the side of the road, where a jagged point stuck out of the ground several car lengths away, then back onto the road, where their black tread marks showed where they had swerved violently.

But from what? She wondered. There were no other cars and they hadn't smashed into anything.

She turned, not wanting to face what came next, momentarily regarding her brother's movements. He was lifting himself up off the ground, still groggy, but otherwise uninjured.

Then she tentatively glanced at the driver's side of the car. The harsh pinpricks of sunrise made it that much more painful for her to face the reality in front of her: her father, no matter how much she hated him, was probably dead.

But, from where she stood, she couldn't see her father. Her mind immediately shouted that it was still an unknown; there was a possibility he rolled around like her and didn't suffer the fate she knew he must have. She didn't want to make it real, not yet.

Then reality gave a weak moan.

She dragged one lead-weighted foot forward, still not seeing him. His side window was also gone.

Another step, his face...

He was breathing!

He turned to look at her, little red pieces of glass clinging to his cheeks and forehead, and he smiled. "Oh, good, you're all right." Each word seemed a struggle.

"Daddy, you're hurt." Her voice quivered.

"I'm afraid," he paused and took a breath, "it's a lot worse than it looks." Another breath. "You need to not freak out, Lex." His eyes flickered as he licked his upper lip, dislodging a small piece of glass stuck there.

Lexi's eyes fell, for just a moment, and then snapped back to hold his gaze again.

"Honey, don't look yet."

Other than his short breaths, his voice was steadier and more certain. As if he was gaining strength, not losing it with the precious life that must be leaking out with every beat of his heart.

"There are things you need to do, and I need you to pay attention." Another breath. "First, come around to the passenger seat." He turned his head in that direction and waited for her to appear there.

Her feet moved more fluidly now, fueled by fear and adrenaline. Gliding around the car's front, she glanced back at the windshield. The driver's side was pulled inward, and a hole shaped like the rough silhouette of an airplane provided the last piece she didn't need of this puzzle.

She continued around the car, although everything inside of her told her to run away. It's what she usually did.

Crawling onto the seat beside him—she had been unwilling to do this before the accident, but her protests now seemed silly—she couldn't help but glimpse again at his mortal injury. A post was sticking out of his gut. On the end of it, a highway sign of mocking irony read "Pass with Care." She looked away, her gaze attracted to the rabbit's foot connected to the ignition key, still swaying—it was the rabbit's foot she had given him when she was a little girl, just before he left them eight years ago. He still had it, all this time.

"Open the front pocket of my bug-out bag," he commanded, "pull out the flip pad and pen."

She did as he asked, her gaze now more comfortably on his backpack and not him. Her probing fingers found the items, pausing over the smooth surfaces of a revolver. She shuddered from its coolness.

"Pay attention, Lex." He jolted her back, causing her to almost drop

the pad. “You’re going to take my bug-out bag and empty most of yours. Carry only one change of clothes; you don’t need more.” He took several deep breaths and continued. “Take this highway, west. Get to a store, smaller is better, immediately. My bag will have most of what you need, but you’ll also need to buy the following ...”

She waited for her shopping list, but he was quiet. She looked up, pen poised over the pad, making sure he was still conscious. He had his eyes upturned, thinking, just like she remembered him doing when he would tell her stories as a child.

“Write,” he demanded.

He proceeded to give her a list of items they would need to buy at a store. He said they would need to prepare themselves for a long journey. They would stop at friends’ houses along the way, but ultimately they needed to get back to their home in Tucson, where they would be safe with their aunt and uncle.

She wrote down everything he told her, and listened to the other things as well, paying attention as if she were receiving a vital homework assignment. With a near-photographic memory, she knew she wouldn’t forget any of it. Yet, none of what he told her clicked, as her mind wandered, running away from this. It was like an HD movie playing before her while she was recording it in her mind, so she didn’t have to really pay attention as she could always hit “rewind” and watch the important parts again.

She couldn’t accept what she was seeing and what he was telling her. None of it made sense, especially when her eyes fell from his and caught the surreal image of the sign sticking out of him, the red stain on his shirt a little larger every time she looked.

“Lexi!” he croaked. “Look at me. This is important ...” He paused, and took several more breaths before continuing. His color had been slowly slipping from his face and now he looked terribly pale, even with

the bright splashes of sunlight angling through the freckled windshield.

“I don’t have long now and you two need to get going. Remember, first get the food and supplies and get back to the highway. Stop at Abe’s place. You have the address and inside my bag is a map if you need it. Read it and the other things later when you’re safe. Then get back to the highway.” His voice, normally booming like a radio commercial, was weak, barely above a whisper. “The highway will take you home.”

He paused for a long moment.

“I’m sorr ...”

His lip drooped, mouth holding onto his last word, but would never let it go.

He was gone.

She peered at his blanched face, and then out his door, her vision blurry from her silent tears, her face streaked with black and made more macabre by her runny Goth makeup. Only just then did she notice her brother standing there, head bobbing up and down as he sobbed, eyes just peeking above the door. His hands like hooks, clutching so hard over the opening his knuckles were white. He looked like some morbid bobble-head doll.

Run away, Lex!

This was the only action she could fathom right now.

She reached behind her dead father and pulled out his wallet, just as he had instructed, along with his cell phone firmly held by the ashtray door. These, with the pen and paper, went in the open front pocket of his bag, where they were zippered shut.

She looked once more at this man she had hated for so long, who sired and then abandoned her and her brother, unsure what emotions she was supposed to feel or not feel.

Swiping the car keys out of the ignition, she burst out of the front

seat, the bug-out bag already making its way onto her shoulders. Over the roof she barked, “Come on Travis, we’re leaving,” her voice raw and penetrating.

Lexi threw open the creaky trunk of her father’s beloved Plymouth Duster—*perhaps it was the only thing he loved*.

She rummaged through her rolling Hello Kitty bag—an absentee present from him when she was a kid, resurrected from storage for their meeting, as a reminder that she’d grown up without him. She did exactly what he said and removed all its contents but one change of clothes. He hadn’t said, but she went for comfort as opposed to the ultra-short black dress, punctuated with Goth boots that she currently wore.

Hurriedly, she closed her bag and withdrew it and her brother’s plain rolling black bag and slammed the trunk shut, shoving the rabbit’s foot and keys into her father’s pack.

They were the keys to my father’s coffin flashed momentarily in her head.

“Travis, I’m going to leave you if you don’t come.” She bellowed in a voice stripped of emotion.

Ripped from his mounting, Travis shuffled over to his sister, stepping beside her, while wiping his eyes and nose with the back of his hands.

“Daddy told us to get moving. Take your bag.” She had already set their bags down and extended their handles. She thrust his to him and then turned and walked west, not even looking to see if he would follow.

But he did, silently except for his sniffles and his bag’s rollers protesting on the warm asphalt.

She stopped for a moment, Travis in lockstep, and risked a glance. Her father’s prized car—*it seemed fitting he would die in it*—

shimmered, like some mirage that never really existed and would float away into the growing heat.

She didn't even notice, and would only later remember the orange billowing cloud in the distance, shaped like a mushroom.

Chapter 2

Frank

Frank Cartwright sprang upright, sending his Prepper Brothers book tumbling into the predawn darkness, clanging off the unseen metal staircase in front of him. First stumbling over the coffee table, he bounded to the living room window, his bum knee warning him not to push it any further than he was. As he peered out into the night, his sluggish mind continually replayed the bomb-sound that woke him, trying to determine if it was real or part of an interrupted nightmare. He'd fallen asleep after a full day working on his land, rebuilding the back drainage area in preparation for the seasonal rains and spraying his crops against those damned locusts eating up his corn. The Michelob Light he'd opened just before falling asleep was pouring onto his tile floor.

A distant red glow illuminated soft billowing smoke, which seemed to come from the area where his gate would be, and this confirmed that it was not a nightmare. This was real.

Without thinking (the advantage of years of planning and repetition), Frank slipped on his drop-leg—Beretta M9 already holstered—and then hoisted on his hefty vest, sporting four preloaded thirty-round mags for his AK, and snapped it snugly around his slightly bulging midriff. Finally, he dropped his AK and homemade sling over

his head and right shoulder, and mounted the metal stairwell to a portico above. This gave him the visibility he needed to see which assholes were out there intending to kill him.

Three older-model civilian trucks, headlights blazing, bounced along his long washboard-riddled driveway, racing toward his house. This was further confirmation of their intentions. It wasn't a stealth operation, but one of braggadocio. They were coming to kill him and take his stuff. They obviously didn't know him or his unwillingness to go down without taking everyone with him.

He lifted his pre-positioned 7mm Remington Magnum, fitted with a new Armasight Vampire night-vision scope, and the world instantly burst into a hazy green-gray light. He watched the trucks approaching fast and focused on the driver of the second one, figuring he could then immediately fire upon the first truck before its driver would have reacted. At the last moment, he turned on the IR illuminator, making his target clear, and squeezed the trigger. The glorious sound of the seven-millimeter's boom and the truck's instant swerve established he'd struck pay dirt.

In a smooth and effortless motion, he cycled another round, painted the first truck's driver, and fired again. But this time, he couldn't confirm a hit as the three trucks' headlights flashed out the night vision. He laid his rifle down, pulled back the charging handle on his AK, and flipped the selector to *Auto*—perhaps this was not the smartest move tactically, but he was pissed at this point. Standing up tall and exposed, but still unseen, he flicked on the spotlights. As if lit by the midday sun exploding from a passing flotilla of clouds, the front of his house and driveway were instantly bathed in bright light. There was no hesitation as he let loose a full burst on the first truck. Its brakes locked and it veered hard right, directly into the path of the second truck, which coasted right into it. Now, both the first and second trucks appeared

lifeless. Frank knew the occupants were soon to follow.

Swapping magazines, he turned his AK's attention to the third vehicle, already pulling a U-turn twenty yards behind the two dead trucks, and just out of the spotlight's cone of light. The door of the second truck popped open and a passenger bolted out and ran to the third pickup, turning back to glare indignantly in Frank's direction.

Now it was fun.

Frank flipped the selector to *Semi-Auto* and aimed at the running man, squeezing off a couple of shots at a time. But the darkness and the distance assisted the target, making it too hard to get a good site picture. With the magazine emptied in the running man's direction, Frank knew he had missed as the man leapt without effort into the bed of the third truck, which was already bounding back down the drive, and to safety.

Frank slid down the staircase's handrails, having practiced this move several hundred times. But this time he hit the floor hard and icepicks of pain detonated in his unprotected knee—he'd be hobbling for a week or two, for sure.

Limping to his kitchen counter, where he'd left his damned brace, he cursed with every step. Barely stopping, he latched it over his pants and shuffled to his gunroom, where he switched magazines. He threw open the front door and paused.

But for a lingering cloud of dust and a ringing in his ears, it seemed quiet. In the distance, the third truck's engine and bouncing undercarriage were the only sounds. He was sure he had won this battle, yet he couldn't help but feel this war was just starting.

He had been prepping for a moment like this for most of his life, especially the last twelve years. He was sure that American society would come crashing down upon itself at some point, and when it did, he was just as sure that bad guys would show up on his doorstep and

try to take what he had. But as far as he knew, nothing had happened. Of course, he'd been working outside most of the day. He hadn't bothered to turn on the TV or glance at his phone for news. So, maybe the world had ended and he was just the last to find out.

He risked a straight run—or rather stumble—from his front door. Normally he would have gone out the back, enjoying the safety of the diminishing darkness, waiting for movement from anything before striking. But he needed to find out who these men were and what was coming next.

With his AK leading the way, he slowed his approach to the first truck, an old Chevy from the late 50s. It was classic, but now filled with punctures all exactly 23.9 millimeters around.

The passenger side creaked open and an unarmed man flopped onto the ground with a grunt, his rapid but shallow breaths his only movement. Frank pulled a Maglite from his vest and illuminated the second truck and then the first to confirm what he saw in his scope; both drivers were dead. Using the bright beam of light, he searched around both trucks, confirming there were no other signs of life.

He slung the AK to his back and drew his Beretta while focusing the flashlight's beam on the only living assailant. He was a well-groomed man in his 20s, wearing paramilitary pants and a T-shirt, with several new holes courtesy of Frank. The man was bleeding from his chest, cheek, and mouth. He didn't have long before he'd be experiencing Hell's fiery grip.

"Who are you?" Frank bellowed at the man.

Gurgle-gurgle was his only reply.

Frank moved closer, his flashlight inches away from the dying man's face. He let the barrel of his Beretta ask the question again, pushing it hard into one of the man's chest wounds.

The man groaned in pain and then said something in a foreign tongue.

Was that Arabic?

“Who are you?” Frank asked once more, thinking the ringing in his ears prevented him from hearing properly. “This is the last time I’ll ask.” He punctuated this statement by clunking his Beretta against the man’s temple, and then shoving it against his forehead.

The man’s throaty protest was weak. But then he started whispering something.

Frank put his ear near the man’s mouth. And this time, he heard it very clearly. He just didn’t want to believe it.

“Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar... Allahu Ak ...”

About the Authors

Who is John Q. Prepper?



John Q. Prepper isn't just an author who enjoys writing and reading sci-fi books. John Q. Prepper represents the typical American (man or woman) who has become aware of some of the serious systemic problems facing our country, which if not fixed may lead to an economic or societal collapse, especially if an apocalyptic event like the one described in this book were to occur.

John Q. Prepper is an American patriot who believes in the values that made this country great, a strong supporter of our military, a believer in the right to bear arms granted by the Second Amendment of the Constitution, and a person of faith.

In other words, JQP might be you!

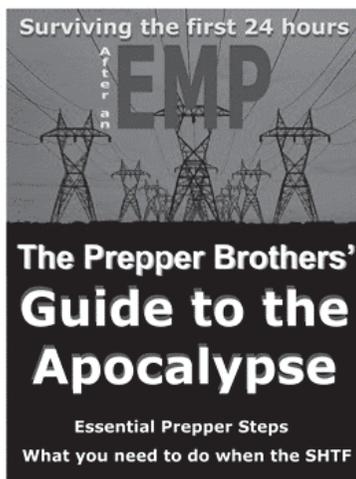
John Q. Prepper is preparing for the worst, but above all, holds out hope and prays for the best.

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Who is M.L. Banner?



M.L. Banner is the best-selling author of the *Stone Age Series*. His debut novel, *Stone Age* became a #1 Amazon Best-Sellers in Post-Apocalyptic & Dystopian Fiction. Follow-ups, *DESOLATION* and *CICADA* were also best-sellers in both genres.

In addition to writing science-based novels and short stories, Michael has founded more than a dozen companies over the past thirty years. Then he found his passion for writing.

He and his wife split their time between Tucson, Arizona and the beaches of Mexico. If he's not penning his next novel or short story in apocalyptic fiction, you might find him on the beach reading a Kindle, with his *toes in the water* (the name of his publishing company).

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