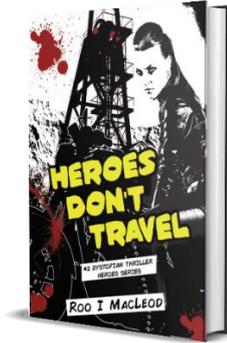


# Heroes Don't Travel

#2 Dystopian Thriller Heroes Story

Roo I MacLeod



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# **Heroes Don't Travel**

#2 Dystopian Thriller Heroes Series

**Roo I MacLeod**

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# **Heroes Don't Travel**

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The spidery script of his mother's damning words had long blurred in Ben Jackman's gaze. *Confess, Guilt* and *Honor* conspired behind a curl of cigarette smoke. Ben dropped the letter on top of a large glass ashtray, the red tip of the cigarette coloring the thin parchment and focused his attention on the two police officers standing at the front door of the Old Poet public house. The first copper's utility belt sat high and jingled as he approached the bar. His boots reflected the yellow flames crackling in the hearth to his left. A police cap covered a head of ginger hair, buzz cut short. A stale aroma of beer and cigarettes caused his pointed nose to twitch.

Coincidence or what?

A plea from his mother, urging him to do his Christian duty by confessing his sins to the law, and the law stood in his pub, manacles jangling, waiting for his surrender.

Ben turned to the back door, measuring the distance, accepting he might have to run.

Again.

'But not yet,' he muttered.

Ben's gaze returned to his mother's letter, Admit and Duty and Father slapping his face. The signature sat crooked at the bottom, the final flourish slipping off the page. He pushed the letter out of sight and pulled his hood over his head, hunkering low in the gloom.

The blue of the law clashed with the nicotine-stained walls and low, black-beamed ceiling. Remnants from the night before sat draped in corners and hugged flat pints. Drams of whiskey nuzzled unsteady hands. Stomachs roiled, and hangovers weighed heavy.

An old bird danced with a mop. She wore an apron over a hooded top and joggers. A dirty cloth hung from her pocket and a cigarette clung to her lip, a croak-like hum accompanying the sad tune playing on the jukebox.

The second officer paced the length of the bar, kicking at the loose muddy slates. The scuffed boots trailed a broken lace through the puddle outside the men's toilet. Her cap sat askew on a thick head of hair tied back in a ponytail. The cluttered utility belt hung low, and the truncheon tangled with the handcuffs. She stopped at the entrance to the Ladies' Lounge, surveying the dark interior, her attention centered on the hooded figure bunkered in the gloom.

‘Ben Jackman,’ the first officer called. His nasal voice rasped, and folk roused from their ethereal state. ‘I’m looking for a lad by the name of Ben Jackman.’ He slapped his truncheon against his palm. ‘AKA Ben the Butcher, aka Street Boy, aka his arse is mine.’

‘Time at the bar.’

The call came from Ivan the Landlord. His head rose from the table situated right of the front door and focused on the intrusion to his slumber. ‘Let’s be having your mugs.’ And his head rested back on the table, the disturbance forgotten.

Ivan called the front table his office. He shared the table with two dear companions: Whisky and Cigar. On a good day, he invited Glass Tumbler and Ashtray. Ivan filled the Old Poet with drunks, deadbeats, and oafs, and offered an old-fashioned attitude in his role as the Publican. ‘Service is for the birds,’ Ivan used to say. He had a big, flat face slapped ugly often, and a massive frame drowning in the flabby flesh. Ivan drank excessive amounts and felt no compunction to graft: Never.

His best friend Charlie sat slumped at the bar. A crown of thick black hair rested against the pillar separating the front room from the Ladies’ Lounge. Bloodshot eyes hung half open and stared at the slumbering landlord. ‘I wasn’t there,’ he called out. ‘It wasn’t me.’

The policeman rapped on the bar with his truncheon. Ivan grunted and turned his head away from the noise. Charlie coughed and spluttered but settled with his toothless mouth agape. Loubie, the girl tending bar, turned from the copper and found a glass to polish.

The policeman cleared his throat and leaned across the bar, slapping her arse with his truncheon.

She scowled, snarled and scratched at her dirty blonde dreadlocks. The ribbon came loose and she shook the braids before tying them back in a thick tail. Loubie leaned against the back counter, rammed her hands deep into the front pockets of khaki combats and raised an eyebrow.

‘What?’ she spat.

‘Looking for Ben Jackman,’ the copper said. ‘So, can you help, or do I need to arrest you?’

The copper noted the anime tattoos on the underside of her arms and the mesh of small white scars. She crossed her purple boots and pouted, waiting for him to lift his gaze.

‘No. Don’t know him. I’ve got a Charlie.’ She looked at the drunk leaning against the post. ‘You can have him, for sure, but be careful coz he’s wet himself.’

Deep in the gloom, Ben took a sip of his whiskey, raising the glass to Loubie’s loyalty.

The copper’s partner entered the Ladies’ Lounge. The scuffed boots kicked at the uneven tiles and patches of earth. Ben watched her approach, puffing a vibrant cloud of smoke into the narrow space above his head. He remembered Christmas when he shared a moment with the copper. It was a single kiss, a peck on the cheek, but the memory still made him smile. And they’d embraced, holding each other tight, watching flakes of snow flutter in the chill wind. She’d smelled good—a curious mixture of moss and burned ash—and she’d been hot to hold.

‘Hello, PSO Webster,’ he said. He kept his voice low, the deep tone whispered. ‘How’s Wolf?’

She removed her cap and pointed at the wall between the two frosted windows. ‘Wolf is well, now stand.’

‘You going hard cop on me? You getting the beast inside you to growl, eh, Wolf Girl?’

‘Ben, please stand.’

She placed the cap on her head, pulled her ponytail through the back and made sure the peak pointed off-center. Ben stood and faced the wall with his hands flat to the whitewashed brick. She patted his clothing, ignoring his suggestions where best she might find contraband.

‘Who’s the hero?’ Ben asked.

‘That’s Barney,’ she said. ‘He’s the new beat copper. I’m showing him about town. He’s employed to find a sucker to wear the Mayor’s lynching last Christmas. His remit also requires him to fit the murder of the two coppers in your girlfriend’s house to a sucker called Ben Jackman.’

‘Ex-girlfriend,’ he said. ‘She doesn’t think I’m a good role model for her child.’

He giggled as she patted his legs. ‘You’ve missed me, right?’

‘Shut up and listen. He wants your neck in the noose.’

‘Jesus, him too? Me bloody mother writes me a letter suggesting I should give myself up. Who writes letters, and why is everyone putting this shit on my head?’ He pointed at the letter on the table. ‘Read it.’

PSO Webster, aka Wolf Girl, turned the letter and read the scrawling script. ‘I think she cares,’ she said. ‘And she’s worried because the evidence is strong against you. She doesn’t want to read the bad stuff being reported in the papers and she wants your name cleared.’

‘My mother cares. Yeah, right. I was thinking about my caring mother just now and I was struggling to remember the good times.’

‘My mother was tough right. Spanking and army style discipline. We had this Summer on an army base when we were kids. It was by the sea and there were big old sand dunes and miles of shore line. Cool summer ahead, you think, but it wasn’t. There were planes and bombs, minefields and shooting. A regular bloody carnival it was, and no other fucker there except soldiers. Zero.’

‘There were these humongous waves that beat the crap out of you. The water was cold enough to stop the penguins wanting to fish and the undertow could suck your toenails off your feet, eh? And it was home to these big arsed flies that stung. I mean they landed with a thud and unleashed a spear-like sting into your skin. These were scary flies, but not as scary as my mother. She’d stake us to a pole, tethered goat style, and wait until one landed and then smack, a dead fly squashed into your skin.’

‘So, she cared, right? She didn’t want you stung.’

‘No, we got a smack.’

‘Don’t see the relevance. Listen, I can’t speak for your mother, but you got other problems. The bullets removed from one copper, killed in your ex-girlfriend’s house, match the gun you fired in the police station.’

‘I took that gun from the Black Hat who killed the coppers. Everyone had a gun, and I wanted one too.’

‘That was your first mistake.’

‘Oh yeah, people are shooting at me and I’m supposed to ignore a gun when it’s offered, eh? It made sense to take the gun.’

‘Barney thinks you look good for the crime,’ she said. ‘Once he finds you, you will hang. Just like the Mayor did before Christmas. The Man wants this to happen, so it will. You need to leave Ostere.’

‘Why can’t you fit up a Black Hat for the murders?’

‘Because they’re all dead.’

She stepped back but left Ben with his palms to the wall. ‘The bodies weren’t just shot but mauled like a pack of wolves had been feeding on them. The joker then deposited the carcasses outside the morgue in a bloody dumpster.

‘And they were missing their hearts. The arse cut their hearts out of their chests, so someone has to swing for this. The Man can’t let it go. He believes the people want justice. The Man wants to see you swing, and he’s convinced Barney that you’re our murderer.’

‘So, why’s he talking to Loubie?’

Wynona turned to the bar and smiled. ‘Barney doesn’t know what you look like.’

‘No pictures.’

‘Just that crappy shot the tabloids took at Marvin’s funeral.’

PSO Webster grabbed Ben’s pouch of tobacco and constructed a cigarette. She puffed at the flame Ben offered over his shoulder. ‘But someone will talk soon enough,’ she said blowing the smoke at Ben. ‘He’ll find you and he’ll tie the noose and drop the trap. He’ll have you swinging for the coppers, the Black Hats, and for the death of your childhood friend.’

Ben shook his head and kicked at the wall. ‘Even with the Man in charge you still need evidence, eh? It’s not like he can fit me up.’

Wynona adjusted the cap on her head and hitched the heavy-looking utility belt high, before easing it back onto her hips. She tugged her trousers lower before giving the peak of her cap another tweak, so it sat just off-center.

‘I told you he’s got the gun you left in the station. That was your second mistake. Jesus, Ben, you pulled a gun in a police station. You tried to shoot my sergeant. Cool move, not, but leaving it behind was stupid plus-plus.’

‘The Police Station was on fire, if I remember right, eh? I didn’t have time to be packing stuff.’

‘Shit Ben, they don’t need evidence when you’re hiding and putting up no defense.’

‘But it wasn’t my gun. You know it wasn’t my gun.’

‘No one listens to the office girl.’ She picked up Ben’s whiskey and tipped it down her throat. ‘You don’t want to be play with Barney.’ She dropped the glass on the table. ‘He’s ex-military, and he likes to kill. He’s gung-ho and can smell blood, so take a vacation, do what you like, but get out of Ostere.’

PSO Webster patted Ben on the backside, sizing up his arse before whacking him hard with her truncheon.

‘Fuck,’ he cried.

‘Realism,’ she said. ‘Sarge wants us to come down hard and get this case sorted.’ She tapped the truncheon on the back of his head and smiled as he flinched. ‘It was just a slap, you mouse. I got to go. Barney gets excited with the interrogation and I’ve heard he likes to shoot stuff when his blood’s up.’

Ben turned, grabbed his tobacco pouch and stuck a paper to his lip. He fell back in his chair, grimacing at the spasm of pain in his buttocks. He shook his head. *Bloody women. One day kissing you, the next day whacking you with their truncheon.* He reached for the bottle and poured a healthy measure into his glass. He sat back with the hood low, the whiskey in hand, a fresh cigarette burning and watched the world hassle Loubie.

Barney’s cap sat on the beer pump. He’d thrown his jacket over the back of a chair and was pacing the floor, his sleeves rolled to his elbows and the truncheon slapping at his palm.

‘I’m not leaving until someone answers me.’

His tone expected folk to obey his orders, but the drink-deadened patrons couldn’t hear.

Two lads, both baring prosthetic arms, played with the balls on the pool table to the left side of the pub. They’d returned from a tour of duty in the Man’s war on terror. They ignored the copper because they weren’t talking, not to nobody, not until the Man found the bastard who stole their limbs.

Charlie offered subtle snores. His tongue kept licking his lips as he dreamed of beer. He wasn’t due to wake for another hour. Ivan had turned his head away from the noise, his left arm cuddling his glass tumbler to his nose, the fumes helping deepen his slumber.

The front door slapped against the foyer entrance. A chill wind dashed inside with a spray of rain, and the punters stirred and grumbled. A tall, thin man stepped into the pub and stared at the flash of blue treading the muddy floor. He thought of turning and leaving, but Loubie smiled. Loubie never smiled. Pushing his straw Stetson back on his head, he stepped up to the bar and placed a worn boot on the footrest. He pulled his long-worn coat aside, dug out a handful of pennies and tossed them on the bar. With a solemn attention to detail, he stacked the pennies in groups of five before pulling his cigars from the inside pocket of his coat.

‘You all right, Tommy?’ Loubie said.

‘Sure am, ma’am.’

‘What you having?’

‘A long, tall, ice-cold milk.’

‘No, Tommy, no milk; for real, there’s no milk. Even if we had milk, I wouldn’t serve it to you. That’s for sure. Not just because it would be off, but because no one drinks milk in a pub. Why don’t you have a diet cola, like you always do?’

‘Okay. I am driving.’

The copper turned to Tommy. His gaze stared at the muddy moleskins and worn boots. It hovered on the denim shirt and finished on the straw Stetson. He locked eyes with Tommy.

‘You know Ben Jackman?’

Tommy’s gaze faltered. He turned to Loubie, but she ignored him. Tommy shook his head in reply to the copper’s question, picked up his drink and sat with Ivan at the front table. Loubie stepped to the hatch and dropped the lid with a bang.

The truncheon whacked the bar. Bodies jumped at the sound and a low murmur grumbled at the noise. ‘I don’t like being *dicked* around,’ he said. ‘You’ll all get to know that pretty soon. You there, little girl,’ the copper said. He lifted the hatch and stepped behind the bar. ‘I know he’s back in town and we’ve got good Intel on this shithole being his current address.’

His eyes rested on her breasts, nodding with a wry smile before tilting his head to the side and sighing. The copper liked what he saw. Loubie’s skin was a rich brown color and her clothes had a loose battered style. Her small elfin face scowled as she placed both hands on her hips.

‘You want I should take them out, so you can take a picture? Me puppies, they’re a bit shy, but if you whistle, they might sit up and beg.’

He stepped forward, his eyes meeting Loubie’s, and placed a hand either side of the back bar. She retreated until her arse rested against the ice machine. The copper had entered the bar person’s sacred space and Loubie believed she had a right to defend herself. She reached for the small bat beneath the Black Rat beer keg, but Barney grabbed her arms and held her tight against his body.

‘Just answer my question,’ he said. He pushed her backward, his truncheon tapping at her sternum. Tommy jumped from his seat, but Officer Webster stepped to the bar and shook her head. She turned to Barney and tapped once on the warped wood of the bar with her truncheon. PC Barney Baker turned ready to rebuke the intruder until he saw Wynona threatening him with her weapon.

‘Problem?’ he said.

‘Have you asked her if she knows Ben Jackman?’

‘Yes.’

‘And? Does she?’

‘She says she doesn’t. But she’s *dicking* me about.’

‘And are you? Its Loubie isn’t it? Do you know where Ben Jackman is?’ She shook her head. ‘So let her go. Let’s move on. We’re wasting time here. He could have switched drinking holes, so we need to check the Drunken Duck. Then we’ll pay a visit to the riverside bars.’

Barney stepped back, letting go of Loubie’s singlet. ‘She tried to hit me with a bat,’ he said. He reached forward to straighten out her top, but Loubie slapped his hand away.

‘Watch it, girl. You don’t go assaulting this member of Ostere’s law. He don’t like it.’

‘Get out, Barney,’ Wynona said. He turned on his heel, pacing like a soldier on parade, grabbed his hat and jacket, and marched out of the pub. Wynona smiled at Loubie. ‘You all right?’

Loubie nodded. ‘What you want with Ben?’

‘The Man wants to see someone swinging, and he’s volunteered Ben for the role.’

The two girls turned to face the back of the pub. Ben raised his glass. ‘But he’s okay here, for sure. No way we’ll be telling on him.’

‘No, he needs to get out of town and I will need your help to convince him to go.’

‘He won’t leave Ivan. You can’t leave Ivan, coz the man’s incapable of... anything.’

The girls looked at the lump of lard asleep on the table beneath the front window. His red bloated face lay flat on the wood with a lifeless, bloodshot eye watching the bar.

‘Ivan will survive. Ben won’t. Barney will realize he’s living here soon enough. Besides, I might have a job for Ben that will take him out of Barney’s clutches. I need your help pushing him to take the work.’

‘Why me?’

‘Because I said so. Because I need more time to gather evidence and find witnesses willing to stand up and defend him. And because you’re a right old thief, and I’ll tell Ivan why his till is always down if you don’t help me out.’

Loubie opened her mouth to protest, but Wynona raised her truncheon, ready to strike. ‘Because you’ll get a cut of the money if you go with him. Just make him go, Loubie.’

Loubie rubbed at the red welts Barney had left on her arm. ‘What’s Ben supposed to have done? What if I vouch for him, like, if he needs an alibi?’

‘He’s wanted for killing two coppers just before Christmas. The men who did the killing are dead. Good thing for the world at large, but no help for Ben. He’s wanted because the Man wants to replace the image of the Mayor’s lynching by the Christian Clan. You can join him, for sure. My guess is the Man won’t mind hanging two folk.’

The television above the bar crossed to a live news report. The girls watched the muted images. Children, faces blackened, led a donkey pulling a cart. Two taller children held picks over their shoulders. One child stared with a vacant expression at the camera. Mucus smeared his face and gunk leaked from his right eye. A child dressed in a thin shirt drank from an oily water bucket. Smog smeared the scene beneath black clouds. Monks in cassocks and armed soldiers ensured the children didn’t dawdle before the camera.

‘Terrible. Just awful,’ Wynona said. She placed her truncheon back in her belt, touched her cap to the lads by the pool table and took her leave.

Loubie rubbed at the tiny white marks scarring her arms and shook her head in horror. ‘You wouldn’t wish that on anyone’s life. We got to be grateful, us? Whatever you say about the Man, he don’t let that stuff go on.’

‘That’s the Lowlands,’ Tommy said. He sipped at his cola. ‘That’s happening in this country. The Man sucks.’