

# **CYBER Count**

**A Kat Munro thriller**

**By SL Beaumont**

## Chapter 1

Marshall Tyler stamped his feet to keep warm and tossed his blond curls out of his eyes. It was supposed to be spring in London, but there wasn't much evidence of that yet. He couldn't wait for summer when school would finally be done. He would decamp to his parents' holiday home on the French Riviera for the holidays, where he'd spend each day working out at the gym, working on his tan, and chasing any number of beautiful girls who flocked to the region.

He took another look at his watch, a gift from his mother, an expensive Girard-Perregaux timepiece similar to the one footballer Cristiano Ronaldo favoured. They were late. He'd give them another five minutes, and then he'd return to school and apologise to his mate Harry. Maybe he shouldn't have gone behind his back to arrange this meeting, but Marshall loved the thrill of what they'd done. Harry wanted to take it slow, but Marshall had seen the opportunity when it presented itself. Despite Harry's objections, he'd gone ahead and submitted the proposal anyway. Perhaps he was going to be a shrewd businessman like his father after all.

There was a rustle in the weeds near the abandoned building where he'd been instructed to wait. He spun around and caught a glimpse of the mangy red tail of an urban fox disappearing into the undergrowth. The single-level brick structure and surrounding security fence were marked with 'Keep Out' signs, overlaid with meaningless graffiti. Plastic bags, food containers and all manner of rubbish had blown into a pile against the wire fence at one end of the site. The lights on the estate lining the streets leading to the old substation had flickered on during the time he'd been waiting, and dusk now blanketed the city.

He looked around at the growing shadows, and a shiver ran down his spine. He couldn't wait to leave this dodgy part of London behind him. He couldn't believe, out of all the places where he could have completed his schooling, that his parents had sent him to a boarding school in the East End. It had been his father's way of providing some counterbalance to the opulent lifestyle Marshall had been born into.

They weren't coming. Marshall felt the emptiness of disappointment twist his stomach. He took one more look about him, turned his collar up and ducked back through a hole in the broken fence. When he straightened, two men were standing in front of him.

He jumped and took a step back, crashing into the fence. One of the men laughed, a harsh chesty sound. Marshall couldn't make out much of their features in the gloom, except that they were both broad-shouldered, with knitted beanies pulled down over their ears.

"Tyler?" the first one asked.

"You're just a kid." The second man sounded surprised.

Marshall nodded and swallowed, feeling a sudden dryness in his throat.

“Let’s talk around the back, where we won’t be overheard,” the first man said.

Marshall hesitated, unsure whether he wanted to be out of sight of the flats. Still, it didn’t seem to be a suggestion, so he ducked back through the hole in the fence and waited while the two men followed. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that he was the one in charge; he had the thing they wanted. Squaring his shoulders, he led them around the edge of the substation into an overgrown yard that led down to the railway siding.

“Do you have it?”

The two men stood blocking his exit.

“Has the money been transferred?” Marshall asked. He heard the slight tremor in his voice and hoped that the men didn’t.

“Yeah.”

Marshall took out his phone and tapped on the app for the bank account. The balance was unchanged from when he’d looked earlier. “It’s not there,” he said. “I can’t give it to you until I’ve been paid.”

The second man stepped forward and knocked the phone from Marshall’s hand. The screen shattered as it landed at his feet.

“You didn’t really think we’d pay your blackmail, did you?” the first man sneered. “Now give it here.”

Marshall felt a frisson of fear. He opened his mouth to call for help, but the men laughed.

“No one will hear you, and if they do, no one will come to your aid, not around these parts.”

Marshall took a step backwards, but the first man grabbed him while the second man landed a solid punch to his abdomen, followed by one to his jaw. Marshall’s head dropped to one side, and he struggled to draw in a breath.

“Stop, I don’t have it on me,” he rasped. “But I can get it for you.”

The man hit him once more, and Marshall felt pain radiate from the centre of his face. Blood gushed from his nose, spilling down the front of his jacket.

“We’ll wait here, and you go and get it,” the first man said, releasing him and pushing him towards the building. “You have thirty minutes.”

“And we’ll keep that fancy watch as collateral to make sure you come back.” The second man reached for his arm, releasing the clasp on the strap and slipping the watch from Marshall’s wrist. He held it up to his face for a closer look. “Very nice.”

“No,” Marshall said, making a grab for the watch. The man pulled away as Marshall’s fingers grazed the back of his hand. “That was a present from my mother.”

“You know what you need to do if you want it and your phone back.”

## Chapter 2

Kat Munro draped the towel over her shoulder and strolled towards the door behind the last member of her fitness class. She flicked off the light switch, throwing the small mirror-lined studio into darkness.

“See you next week, Kat,” called a young woman in sweatpants and a singlet walking with a pronounced limp, as she crossed the foyer to the changing rooms.

“Bye.” Kat stepped into the corridor, pulling the door closed behind her. The sound of laughter caught her attention, and she saw a trio of men deep in conversation in the centre of the gym’s spacious reception area. Marco, the gym’s super-fit owner, was talking with a young man leaning on crutches. A wide grin spread across Marco’s handsome face at something that the younger man said.

Marco slapped a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll have you fighting fit in no time with that attitude, Tommy,” he said.

Marco’s dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail held in place by a thin leather strip. He was an excellent advertisement for the benefits of looking after oneself. He didn’t look anywhere close to his almost forty years of age. His smooth, olive, southern European complexion probably added to the illusion, Kat thought. It was really a shame she could only think of him as a friend now.

The group’s third member looked a little out of place in street clothes and shiny black shoes. He asked a question that Kat missed, and the mood turned sombre, causing her to hesitate as she approached the group, but Marco had seen her. “Kat, *bella*, join us,” he called in accented English. “I was explaining that rehab for injuries like Tommy’s usually takes many months. But I’ve thrown out the usual recovery timeline since he’s exceeding all expectations.”

Tommy turned in her direction, and Kat once again saw the evidence of his injuries. One side of his body had suffered severe burns. The skin on the left side of his jaw and neck was smooth and shiny from multiple skin grafts, and one hand was red and angry looking. His left leg was missing below the knee. Despite the pain that he must have been enduring, Tommy gave her a cheerful grin.

“Hey, Kat.”

“Hey, Tommy. Sounds like you’ve been showing off again.”

Tommy laughed. “Give me an audience, and I’ll perform. This is Connor; he’s a journalist doing an article on me for *The Times*.”

“Ooh, *The Times*, Tommy, you’ll be famous,” Kat said. She turned to the reporter and held out her right hand. “Kat Munro,” she said.

“Connor O’Malley,” the journalist replied in a lilting Irish accent as he shook her hand. He was of slight build with short reddish-blond hair. He glanced at Kat’s other hand. “If you don’t mind me asking, were you injured in combat too?”

Kat raised her life-like hi-tech prosthetic left hand. “Nothing as brave, just a car accident,” she said.

“Marco?” a man’s voice called from across the lobby.

“Excuse me,” Marco said. “Looks like I’m needed. Give me a call if you need anything else, Connor. I’ll leave your name at reception for that free trial.”

“Thanks,” Connor said as Marco strode away. “Kat, you and Tommy obviously know each other. Do you work here?”

Kat shook her head. “Not really; I run a couple of classes as part of a charity that I’m involved with, that’s all. I’m actually a forensic accountant in my day job.”

Connor cocked his head to one side. “Now that sounds interesting.”

“Yeah, it can be.”

The automatic glass doors at the entrance to the gym swished open, and a man in a leather jacket entered. “Hey, Tommy, your chariot awaits,” he said.

Kat recognised the voice and snapped her head around, feeling a nervous tangle of emotions knot in her stomach. She forced a smile.

“Hi, Adam,” she said, unable to keep the surprise from her voice. “I, ah, didn’t realise you knew Tommy.”

DS Adam Jackson looked as uncomfortable as Kat felt. He ran a hand through his thick dark hair and cleared his throat. “Kat.” He gave her a single nod of greeting.

Tommy’s gaze swung from Adam to Kat. “Before he became a cop, Adam was my captain on my very first tour, Kat. He’s been one of my taxi drivers since I got out of the hospital.”

Kat understood. In fact, she knew very well how members of the military, ex and current, looked out for one another, having had two brothers in the services.

“Connor, how’s the article coming along?” Adam turned his attention to the journalist, shaking his hand.

“Good, I just about have everything I need.” Connor too looked from Adam to Kat, picking up the unspoken tension.

“How have you been, Adam?” Kat said.

“Good,” he said. “You?”

“Fine.” Kat glanced into his eyes. He looked tired and distracted. There was a moment of awkward silence.

“You seem to know everyone, Kat,” Connor said, filling the quiet.

“Adam and I worked together on a case a few months ago,” Kat said.

“Adam and Kat were held hostage,” Tommy added.

Connor’s eyebrows rose. “Would I know the case?” he asked.

“It’s still going through the courts, so we can’t say too much,” Adam said, recognising the journalistic interest in Connor’s otherwise innocent question.

“Sounds like there’s a story there,” Connor said. He handed Adam a business card.

“Call me when you can talk about it, detective.”

“Sure,” Adam said. “Ready to go, Tommy?”

Tommy started moving towards the main doors, his crutches tapping on the wooden floor. Adam gave Kat a quick glance before following.

“I hope you didn’t overdo it, mate,” he said to Tommy before they were swallowed by the darkness and the doors swished shut.

Kat watched them depart.

“Well, good to meet you, Connor,” she said, turning back towards the changing rooms.

“Kat, would you like to get a drink? I’d love to pick the brain of a forensic accountant.”

Kat paused and looked at him for a long moment. He was a good-looking guy, with sharp, intelligent eyes looking out from behind small oval-shaped glasses. He gave her an encouraging lopsided grin. Even though she had sworn off men again, after the disastrous encounter with Adam, one drink couldn’t hurt.

“I really can’t talk about that case,” she said.

“I’m sure that we can find plenty of other things to talk about,” he said.

Kat let the flirtatious comment pass. “When?”

“Now?”

“I can’t now; I have to go and kick the crap out of Marco,” she said, as the door to the main workout studio opened, and Marco stuck his head out looking for her. Spotting her, he tossed a roll of hand wrap, which Kat caught with ease in her prosthetic hand and began wrapping it around her right hand.

“Excuse me?” Connor said.

Kat laughed at his expression. “I kickbox. I train with Marco a couple of times a week.”

“Now that, I’d like to see,” Connor said.

“We’ve only just met, don’t go getting ahead of yourself,” she said.

Connor laughed. “In that case, give me your number, and I’ll call you to arrange that drink.” He pulled his phone from his pocket.

Kat reeled off her mobile number before she could second-guess herself.

“I’ll be in touch,” Connor said.

Kat smiled before walking to join Marco, who threw his arm around her shoulder and led her into the studio. Six men and two women were going through a warm-up routine of

squats, mountain climbers and burpees. A row of six boxing bags hung from metal brackets attached to the walls on either side of the room.

“Really, *Katerina*, that skinny white boy?” he teased. “You know you only have to ask.”

Kat ducked out from under his arm. “Are you trying to give me a reason to hit you?”

Marco laughed and clapped his hands. “Okay, everyone, let’s get started. We’ll begin with a jab, cross, round kick drill before moving on to jab, cross, jab, push kick.”

Kat adjusted her dark auburn hair in its high ponytail, pulled on her boxing gloves and joined them. The class members moved in front of a bag each and went through the drills. Marco walked up and down behind them, offering advice on technique, and shouting encouragement before calling the class to the centre of the room.

“Okay, partner up,” he said. “Half of you put on the arm and thigh guards. We’ll swap halfway through. I want you working on your round kicks. Remember to step out, not towards your opponent. Kat, you’re with me.” Kat pulled on her protective headgear.

The class set to work, working in pairs. Whenever someone lost their balance and tumbled to the mat, there was laughter.

“Kat, I want you to work on your defence. The update to your prosthesis is making you pull back your left hand a fraction slower than your right arm, and it’s affecting your balance.”

“Yeah, but it spirals much better,” Kat said, punching out to show him.

“You’re right, it does,” Marco said. “It’s so amazing what those scientists of yours can do.”

Kat bounced on her toes before stepping closer, firing a jab with her left hand, a cross with her right before shifting her bodyweight and landing a round kick with her shin on his thigh pad, with a satisfying thud. Kat hopped back, took a deep breath, and reset.

“Good,” Marco encouraged as her next kick landed, and she dodged out of the way of his counterstrike.

“Was that your detective I saw arriving to pick up young Tommy?” he asked as she came at him again.

“He’s not my detective,” Kat said through gritted teeth.

Marco laughed, and Kat added an extra jab which caught him off guard and grazed his jaw.

“Touched a nerve, have we?”

“Nah, stop trying to distract me,” she said, kicking out again.

The next thing she knew, she was sitting on the mat. She glared at Marco’s outstretched hand, ignored it and leapt to her feet.

“Remember, channel your anger. You stepped towards me in your haste, you need to step out, or your opponent will land something to your head,” he said.

“I’ll land something to your head in a moment if you don’t shut it,” Kat muttered, resetting her stance before coming at him again.



## Chapter 3

Adam had left his car parked by the kerb outside the entrance to the gym.

“Perk of the job, being able to park wherever you want,” Tommy said, shaking his head at the police parking permit displayed on the dash of Adam’s car. The gold paintwork of the restored 1976 Ford Capri gleamed under the streetlights. “Are you trying to be Bodie or Doyle?”

Tommy eased himself into the front, holding on to the door surround and lowering his body in. Adam took his crutches and tilted the driver’s seat forward, laying them in the back before resetting the seat and climbing in.

“Well, I have to say that was a little awkward,” Tommy said.

Adam tugged at his ear. “Awkward?”

“Come on, mate,” Tommy said with a laugh. “You and Kat. Don’t tell me that’s the first time you’ve seen her since...” he trailed off.

“It wasn’t like that,” Adam said.

“It wasn’t like what? She’s gorgeous, and she clearly likes you; God knows why.” Tommy pulled his seatbelt on as Adam started the car and eased into the traffic. “I’ll lay money on the fact that Connor will already have her phone number and be booking a fancy restaurant, as we speak.”

Adam gripped the steering wheel before speaking in a low voice. “Enough, or you can walk.”

Tommy held his hands up. “Okay, man, just sayin’.”

“Well, don’t.”

They drove in silence for a couple of blocks.

“So, Nancy must be due soon,” Tommy said.

“About six weeks,” Adam said.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you don’t seem overjoyed,” Tommy said.

“It’s complicated, Tommy, you know that.”

“Are you two back together?”

Adam shook his head. “We’ll co-parent; however that’s supposed to work.”

“Then, what’s the issue with Kat?”

“I can’t be running around with her when Nancy is about to give birth to my child.”

“But...”

“Tommy, I’m trying to do the right thing for everyone here,” Adam said.

“Doesn’t seem to me that you’re doing the right thing for you or Kat.”

Adam fell silent again for a moment. “Enough about me,” he said. “Tell me how you’re doing?”

“Great, never been better. You’ve heard the term ‘babe magnet’, well that’s me now. I always thought the uniform helped,” Tommy said. “But hey, I should’ve got some hideous scars and lost a leg sooner.”

“At least your gallows humour is still intact,” Adam said, glancing across at him.

“It’s hanging on by a thread, mate.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“I might as well be invisible as far as the opposite sex is concerned,” Tommy said.

“Why do you think I’m so invested in your love life?”

“Mine is a mess, you should look elsewhere for inspiration.”

“Yeah, but seeing that yours is a mess doesn’t make me feel quite so bad about mine,” Tommy said.

“You’ve just got to give it time,” Adam said. “Get yourself properly healed, get fit again and have your new leg fitted.”

“Time,” Tommy said, turning to stare out the window. “That’s what the psycho-babblers keep telling me.”

“Well, you know you’re getting the best rehab in London, working with Marco,” Adam said.

“I thought you didn’t like him.” Tommy gave Adam a sly look. “Or was it his relationship with Kat that you didn’t like?”

“And just like that, you’ve pulled the conversation back to her,” Adam said.

Tommy laughed. “Any word on Jake?” he asked. The car pulled out from the side road and joined the North Circular.

Adam shook his head. “Nah, but I’m convinced Webster knows more than he’s letting on. He’s up on so many charges that I keep hoping he’ll be ready to trade some information for a reduced sentence at some point, but nothing yet.”

“It’s just so strange that he disappeared off the face of the earth,” Tommy said. “How long has it been?”

“Almost three years.”

“It would be good for Jake’s family to know what happened to him, get some closure.”

“Yeah, I’m certain he’s dead, but there’s always that glimmer of hope until there’s a body.”

Tommy nodded and stared out at the traffic. “That there is,” he agreed.