

# **Death Count**

**A Kat Munro thriller**

**By SL Beaumont**

# Chapter 1

Kat Munro twisted in her seat and looked behind. A dark shape took form as it approached from the gloom at speed, its headlights bearing down on them. She sensed Gabe ease their car towards the edge of the bitumen to allow the other vehicle to pass. A frown creased the skin between his eyes for a moment, and his long slender hands gripped the wheel. The breeze tossed his hair as he turned his head to look at Kat, and a warm smile lit up his handsome face. But instead of passing, the engine of the car behind them roared, and it closed the distance like a lion tracking its prey. Kat felt fear clutch at her throat. Had she been seen? The drive into town for extra supplies in Gabe's convertible now seemed fraught with danger.

"What the..." Gabe began, glancing in the rear vision mirror.

Kat looked across at him as she felt the car accelerate and gather speed.

From the back seat, Felicity hiccupped and giggled, twin dimples forming in her cheeks. She toed off her shoes and kicked her long legs up onto the seat.

Kat peered behind once more; her heart was thudding fast in her chest. The other car was keeping pace with them and was so close that she could make out the outlines of those in the front seat.

The light breeze, scented with the aroma of the wild honeysuckle growing at the side of the road, whipped her hair around her face.

"Gabe, slow down," Kat said, pushing the strands aside.

A bend in the road was fast approaching. Gabe changed gears, slowing the car as they entered the corner, but then sped up as they exited the turn. Their pursuers fell back for a moment before catching up to them again. Kat gripped the edge of her seat, terrified. A second tighter bend loomed in front of them when the other vehicle made a sudden move to pass and clipped the back of their car. The convertible shuddered from the impact and hit the loose gravel at the side of the road. It began to spin, with Gabe fighting to control it.

"Hey," Felicity shouted as she was tossed around on the back seat, too drunk to comprehend the danger they were facing.

The next images came into Kat's mind in a series of flashes.

The slide into the low stone wall, the car sailing through the air before hitting the ground in a field and rolling twice... Felicity's cries of pain... men approaching the vehicle and pulling a dazed Gabe away from the wreckage... thick and cloying smoke, blood, and flames.

Kat's screams rang out as she looked at her arm, draped over the side door of the car, and saw her bloodied hand hanging on to her wrist by a flap of skin and tissue.

Kat bolted upright. The room was dark, the bedsheets twisted. Her breathing was coming in uneven gulps, and her heart was racing. She glanced at the bedside clock, 4:30 a.m.; there would be no more sleep for her tonight.

## Chapter 2

The rain which had been threatening as Kat hurried from her flat to the tube station had started falling while she was underground. As she rode the escalator up from the platform to the entrance hall, she could see that the road outside was slick with rainwater. Kat paused at the small hole-in-the-wall coffee shop at the station entrance. After a night of broken sleep, she'd need all the help she could get to make it through the day without dozing off at her desk. The barista began to prepare her usual coffee, a small skinny cappuccino when he saw her approach.

"Better make it a double," she said.

"Sure thing. I thought we'd seen the last of the rain, Kat," he said in his soft Irish accent, tossing his head to flick his long hair out of his eyes.

"Yeah, me too. Isn't it still supposed to be summer?" Kat replied, tapping her bank card against the payment reader and marking one square on her frequent coffee card with the stamp sitting on the counter. She slipped the cards back into a side pocket on her cross-body bag and loosened the tie holding her umbrella, dangling it at her side as she reached for her coffee with her free hand.

"All set?" the barista asked.

Kat nodded. "Thanks." She took a sip of the hot liquid and sighed. "That's just what I needed."

She joined the crowds heading out onto the street and braced for the rain. Fortunately, it had eased to a sprinkle, but at the entrance, she pressed the button on her umbrella's handle, watching as it unfurled over her head. She hesitated for a moment, making sure she had everything balanced before joining the groups of office workers waiting for the walk light to turn green.

At the signal, Kat crossed the busy road before hurrying along the block to her office. To her left, the River Thames was flowing dark and fast. A commuter ferry crawled along the water towards Westminster, its windows steamed up from the passengers crowded inside out of the rain. Even with an increasing proportion of the population working remotely, thousands of people still commuted into the city each day by road, rail, and ferry.

Kat rounded the corner leading to her office building's main entrance on a quieter side street. The lower levels had a red brick façade, retained from the days when the building had been a grain store. Sprouting from behind the walls, four stories up, was a modern steel and glass structure.

A dark grey Audi sedan pulled up on the pavement opposite the entrance to the building. Two men alighted from the back seat. One, dressed in a dark suit, bent his head and spoke with the driver, while the other, dressed in jeans and black leather jacket, leaned against the car, his eyes sweeping the surroundings. He had a half-smile on his face listening to the banter between the driver and the other passenger, but he didn't participate. He glanced up and caught Kat's eye at the same moment a bicycle courier veered onto the footpath. The cyclist headed straight towards Kat but swerved at the last moment and only just avoided hitting her. He thrust an envelope at her as he passed.

Kat leapt sideways, knocking her left elbow hard against the brick wall of the building. The envelope floated to the ground, and her coffee cup went flying from her grasp, hitting the footpath with a liquidy thud as the lid popped off, splashing coffee on the cuffs of her trousers and shoes. She watched as the brown liquid ran across the gently sloping footpath and into the gutter.

“Watch where you’re going, you arse,” she called to the lycra-clad rear end.

“Sorry,” he called over his shoulder as he continued down the street.

Kat crouched down to pick up the now empty cup and continued to curse the reckless cyclist. A large pair of feet clad in shiny polished boots stepped in front of her. She looked up to see that the guy who’d been leaning against the car had crossed the road and had his hand out, offering to help her up. Kat ignored his hand and stood. Somehow she was still holding the umbrella above her head, and he had to take a step backwards to avoid being hit. Kat felt a sharp stinging sensation above her left elbow.

“Are you okay? Can I get you another coffee?” the man asked.

She glanced at him for a moment, registering the steely blue of his eyes. His hair, damp from the rain, looked as though it was overdue a cut, and he had several days of stubble across his jaw. She was aware that her left hand looked awkward, but his gaze didn’t leave her face, for which she was grateful.

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

“You dropped this,” the man said, bending and retrieving the envelope from where it had landed on the footpath.

“Thanks.” Kat snatched the paper and shoved it into the side pocket of her bag. She stepped around him and retracted the umbrella before pushing through the revolving door into the building. The last thing she wanted was some stranger feeling sorry for her.

Kat dumped the empty cup into a rubbish bin in the foyer and fumbled in her pocket for her pass. The strap of her bag pulled on her neck, sending shooting pains down her arm. She winced, and retrieving her pass, held it against the electronic reader at one side of the entry barrier. The low gates opened with a quiet swish. She walked through and across the marble floor to the stairwell. She climbed the single flight of stairs to the first floor and entered an ample open plan office space. There were clusters of desks grouped in pods of four. The brick walls of the converted warehouse were reinforced with steel beams, and polished wooden floors gleamed. Glass-fronted meeting rooms ran the length of the back wall, and the senior partner occupied a magnificent corner office with a view across the river. Kat wove her way among the desks. Two of her team were already seated behind their computer screens and glanced up to greet her. Nathan, an Australian accountant, who looked more like a surfer with his messy blond hair than a number cruncher, saluted her with one finger to his temple.

“What happened to you?” asked Shamira, a petite dark-haired woman sitting next to him.

“Bloody cycle courier. I dropped my coffee and banged my arm,” Kat said.

She let the umbrella drop to the floor beside her desk and pulled the bag’s strap over her head with extreme care, before dumping it on her chair.

Shamira jumped to her feet. “Are you okay?” she said, concern showing in her deep brown eyes.

“Yeah, I just need to fix my hand.”

“Do you need me to help?” Shamira asked, glancing at Kat’s left hand and frowning.

Kat shook her head. “Nah, I’m all good.”

Kat grabbed her bag and headed back towards the stairwell, where the bathrooms were located. She closed the door and placed her purse on the counter, wincing as she removed her jacket, pulling her right arm out first and easing the fabric over her left. Kat hung it on a hook by the door. She felt a trickle down the

back of her arm and twisted in front of the mirror to look. Sure enough, there was a tear in the thin fabric of her shirt sleeve, and a bloody graze ran down her arm to just above her elbow where she'd hit the wall. Cursing and letting out a shaky breath, she undid the buttons on the chiffon blouse before releasing the suction that held her left hand in place, eased it off and laid it on the counter. The door burst open, and Shamira entered the bathroom as Kat pulled her arm out of the torn sleeve.

"Oh, Kat, please let me help," she said, reaching for the box of tissues on the counter.

Kat relented as Shamira pressed a wad of tissue to the graze with one hand and pulled open a drawer under the counter. She removed antiseptic cream and several large Band-Aids. She worked quickly, cleaning and covering the graze.

"Thank you," Kat murmured, stepping forward and picking up the prosthesis and turning it over. Fortunately, the attachment didn't appear damaged. The hand was very lifelike, with a soft texture resembling skin made from a sturdy silicone material.

"It looks so real," Shamira said.

"It should look close to the real thing for the amount it cost," Kat said, putting it down again and easing her arm back into the shirt sleeve, fastening the buttons using one hand, with practised ease. She ran her hand over the stump of her wrist, feeling for any pain or sensitivity. Finding none, Kat reattached the hand, sensing the silicone pads suction onto the end of her arm, and eased the flesh-coloured stretchy sock into place over her forearm. She flexed the fingers of the prosthesis as the synapses fired.

Shamira held out her jacket. "You have a tear in the sleeve of your top," she said.

"I'll just keep my jacket on, I have a meeting shortly anyway," Kat replied. She met Shamira's eyes in the mirror. "Thank you. I hate this."

"I know, sweetie, but it's okay to let someone help you from time to time," Shamira replied, helping her on with the jacket and giving her a quick hug. "On the bright side, it looks like we have to go shopping at lunchtime."

Kat smiled, and together they walked back to their desks.

"You've gotta see this," Nathan called in his broad Australian accent as they rounded the corner. He was leaning his wiry frame against the windowsill and peering through the window.

"What is it?" Shamira asked, rushing to join him.

"Looks like Stephenson got lucky," Nathan replied with a grimace.

Shamira hit him lightly on the arm. "Nate."

"You have to agree it's gross. He's so old."

"He's not that old," Kat said, joining them at the window. "Although it's the first time since he moved back from the States that I've seen him with anyone."

Together they looked down to the street below and watched as their manager, Charles Stephenson, gave the woman in his arms a long deep kiss.

"I think I might lose my breakfast," Nathan added, holding a hand to his stomach and performing a fake heave.

Charles Stephenson was a solid middle-aged man with thick cropped sandy hair and a severe side parting. They watched as the woman reached up and rested her hand on his cheek for a moment before turning and walking away. She looked younger than him from a distance, dressed casually with her dark hair pulled into a high ponytail.

"There's no way a man closing in on fifty could pull a woman like that," Nathan said.

They continued looking until Kat saw Stephenson smile as he glanced up and spotted the three of them watching through the window. With a final glance at the woman's retreating figure, he turned, and whistling made his way into the building.

"Well I think it's sweet, just shows that there is someone for everyone," Shamira said.

Kat and Nathan snorted with derision.

"Are you sure you're an accountant? I could've sworn I heard a romance novelist speaking for a moment," Nathan teased as Stephenson strode onto the floor thirty seconds later.

Shamira shook her head at Nathan and sat down at her desk.

"Morning all," Stevenson called as he walked across the room to his office. "Kat, I see our clients have arrived. Can you organise coffee and show them to the meeting room? I'll join you in a moment."

"Sure, boss," Kat said before looking across at Shamira and Nate. "I'm so glad I spent all those years studying just to arrange coffee for our clients," she said, rolling her eyes. She went to grab a notebook and spied the envelope that the courier had dropped lying on the floor by her desk. She scooped it up and turned it over. It was addressed to her. Kat frowned, opened it, and eased out a single sheet of paper that contained a typed message.

*'Stop whatever it is that you think you're doing, or you'll be sorry.'*

Kat dropped the page onto her desk as though it were poisonous and took a quick step backwards.

"What's up, mate?" Nathan asked, leaning over and reading the note.

Kat grimaced.

"Are you still looking into..." he began before Kat interrupted him.

"Of course not."

"Really?" He didn't sound convinced. "I thought you'd let all that go."

Kat shrugged.

"Kat, don't just shrug this off, this is serious," he said. "Someone has just threatened you."

"I know, which just makes me think that I'm onto something."

"You need to be careful," Nate said.

Kat nodded and headed out to the reception area.

The two men from the Audi were standing to one side of the reception desk. They hadn't seen her yet. Kat realised that she didn't know their names or even why they were there. She ran her hand through her long mane of dark auburn hair.

"Good morning. I'm Kat Munro," she said, approaching them with her right hand outstretched, wishing she hadn't been quite so short earlier.

"Detective Inspector Hugo Greenwood," the man in the suit replied with a warm smile, accepting her handshake.

The second man nodded. "DS Adam Jackson."

"Can we get coffee in meeting room one please?" she asked the receptionist, who smiled and nodded. "Cappuccinos?" she asked the two men.

"Please," Greenwood replied. He had a wise, weathered face and reminded Kat of a school headmaster.

"Detectives, this way," she said, holding out her arm to indicate the meeting room's direction.

"Do we get to see you perform your coffee juggling trick again?" DS Jackson murmured as he walked past her.

Kat rolled her eyes at his back. "Everyone's a comedian," she muttered and thought she heard him give a low chuckle.

She followed the visitors through into the meeting room where Stephenson was waiting. The spacious room contained a long wooden conference table and eight chairs. At the centre of the table sat a tray with a pitcher of water and several glasses. A wall-mounted screen dominated one end of the room above a long, low cabinet. The windows on the far side of the room commanded a picturesque view along the river towards Tower Bridge.

"Gentlemen, good morning," Stephenson said, stepping forward and shaking their hands.

"Charles," DI Greenwood said. "It's been a while. How's business?"

"Very good. Yourself?"

"Busy, which sadly doesn't say a lot about the state of business in this country," DI Greenwood said.

"Indeed."

"In fact, we're completely backed up investigating other financial crime cases at present, but fortunately I'm able to engage independent experts, such as you, to help fill the gap," Greenwood continued.

They all sat down at one end of the long boardroom table.

"Kat, I should explain, DI Greenwood is head of the Met's new Financial Crimes Unit. Hugo, Kat Munro is one of my best analysts."

Kat smiled. Stephenson had managed to get the firm registered on the police database of forensic experts and had been touting their expertise to the country's various police forces and the Serious Fraud Office. Hence, she wasn't surprised that the two men sitting opposite her were police officers. She hadn't realised that their firm's services had actually been engaged to work with the new Financial Crimes Unit. No wonder Stephenson was looking so smug; this was something of a coup. Many of the larger accounting firms with specialist forensic units had been chasing the business. It was interesting that Stephenson had succeeded as a relative newcomer. She wondered how he'd pulled it off.

"Let me introduce DS Adam Jackson. Adam is heading up the homicide investigation." DI Greenwood's smile was warm as his eyes flicked across the table to Kat, resting momentarily on her left hand before looking away. DS Jackson's stare was assessing, but once again, his gaze never left her face. Kat moved her left hand to rest in her lap and sat forward, picking up her pen with her right.

"Homicide?" Stephenson's smug expression was replaced with one of concern.

"You may have seen in the news a few days ago that a security guard was found dead at the offices of Capital Investment Partners and one of the directors was missing," DI Greenwood began. "We've had our eye on CIP for a while, nothing major, just a couple of anomalies that the firm easily clarified. But when the missing director, Henry Smyth, also turned up dead yesterday, we decided to reopen our case and look deeper into the company. One death is tragic, but two unexplained deaths related to a firm that has been on our watch list warrants further examination, which is where Adam's investigation and mine intersect."

"The security guard's death is being treated as suspicious. He was found in the lobby atrium of the CIP office, having fallen from the second floor. We know Smyth accessed the building that same evening before he disappeared. And now he's been found dead at his apartment in central London," Adam explained. "An apparent suicide."

"Ah," Stephenson said.

“So how can we help? We don’t usually work on murder cases. I’m assuming that you would like us to look into the firm’s business affairs or those of Henry Smyth?” Kat asked.

“Both,” Greenwood replied. “We would like a high-level independent review of CIP’s business, using only publicly available information. We need a legitimate reason to take another look at them, but we don’t want to show our hand at this stage. I’m not convinced that the directors have been completely forthcoming with everything that they’ve told us to date.”

Adam cleared his throat. “For the record, I’m not sure what bean-counters can tell us that I couldn’t find out from half an hour in an interrogation room with each of them.”

Kat raised her eyebrows at the remark.

Greenwood laughed. “You’ll have to excuse Adam. CID detectives don’t usually have the pleasure of working with specialists in forensic accounting. Charles, I thought you could explain what it is that you do better than me.”

Stephenson beamed. “Of course.” The door opened, and the receptionist, a plump middle-aged woman, entered carrying a tray of coffee, which she rested on a side table before placing a cup in front of each person. Kat let her pen drop and sat back. This would take a while, especially once Charles warmed up. She murmured her thanks for the coffee and took a sip, savouring the caffeine hit that she’d missed out on earlier.

Stephenson looked thoughtful and stroked his chin for a moment before speaking. “Forensic accountants are the detectives of the financial world, DS Jackson. The word ‘forensic’ means being suitable for use in a court of law, so we apply rigorous processes to gather and analyse data. We are highly skilled in the areas of information technology and computer analysis. We have a deep understanding of accounting, tax, banking, and financial systems. We are familiar with legal concepts and proceedings, as we are often called upon to give evidence in court as expert witnesses.

“Our job is to sift through company records, business financials, and supplier relationships, looking for anomalies that investigators like you can examine and use to provide prosecutors with ample information to build a strong case. A forensic accountant is a chess player in this business; it’s all about attention to detail and thinking several moves ahead of the criminals.

“Let me give you an example, DS Jackson. You may recall the case of City Build Construction last year. The Board of Directors engaged us after they became suspicious of the activities of the Chief Financial Officer. We did a deep dive into their records going back five years and discovered a number of fraudulent transactions. A case was built on the information in conjunction with the Serious Fraud Office, and we provided the expert witness testimony to the court. The CFO was ultimately convicted of embezzling £1.5 million from the company.”

Kat smirked as DS Jackson held his hands up. “Okay, you’ve convinced me. I appreciate as well as anyone that you need properly gathered evidence to make any charges stick,” he said.

DI Greenwood nodded. “Thanks, Charles. Now, Kat, if you can begin your analysis of the firm using any information that’s in the public domain. And then look into the financials of Henry Smyth.”

“Okay,” she said, scribbling a couple of notes on the pad in front of her.

“We’ll get Smyth’s bank accounts to you once we have access to them,” DS Jackson said, looking across the table at Kat. He glanced at his watch. “I’m meeting



the deceased's parents at his apartment in half an hour. They have something they'd like to discuss. Would you like to come? It might give you a better feel for the type of people we're dealing with."

Kat looked at Stephenson, who was already nodding, eager to do whatever was necessary to secure the business.

DI Greenwood stood and extended his hand to Stephenson. "Great to be working with you again, Charles."

"Likewise," Stephenson replied, pushing back his chair and rising. He accepted Greenwood's handshake. "We must have lunch soon."

"I'll just grab my bag and meet you in the foyer," Kat said to DS Jackson as they filed from the meeting room. He nodded and followed DI Greenwood through the reception area and down the stairs.

Stephenson couldn't keep the grin off his face as they walked back into the office. "I don't need to explain to you what an enormous opportunity this is for our firm," he said. "Do whatever they ask. You can have Nathan and Shamira, but let me know if you need more resources." Kat nodded. "Well then, get to work." Stephenson strode towards his corner office, bouncing on his toes as he walked.

"He is such a buffoon," Shamira said, watching as Stephenson passed while Kat dropped her notepad on the desk. "But those two in your meeting weren't. Nate wants to know who the guy in the leather jacket is." She fanned herself with several sheets of paper.

"Nate wants to know, or you do?"

"Both, I think he and I just might come to blows," Shamira replied, pulling a face at Nathan.

"Bring it on, girl," Nathan said.

"I don't think he's your type," Kat said with a smirk.

"Someone's called dibs already," Nathan stage-whispered to Shamira.

Kat laughed. "Those two are police detectives. We've got a new assignment, with none other than the Financial Crimes Unit."

"Ooh," Shamira said. "No wonder Stevenson is looking so pleased with himself."

Kat scooped up her bag and threw the long strap over her head and across her body. "I'm heading out with them now. I'll fill you in on the details later. In the meantime, pull up what you can on Capital Investment Partners."