

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant, cursive script font, positioned on a solid black rectangular background. A thin white horizontal line is drawn beneath the letters.

# Spring Offensive

EDWARD MARSTON

# CHAPTER ONE

March, 1918

Summoned to the commissioner's office, Superintendent Claude Chatfield knew that something serious had happened. After hurrying along the corridor, he knocked on the door and opened it to find that Sir Edward Henry was looking at some notes he had jotted down on a pad. His face was ashen.

'Bad news, Sir Edward?' he asked.

'No,' replied the other. 'It's disastrous news. I've just spoken to someone at the War Office. The German offensive has finally happened.'

'It has been expected.'

'Yes, but not on this scale.' He read from his notepad. 'A million shells have been fired at British lines on the Western Front. The Fifth Army has sustained horrendous losses. Thousands of British soldiers have been killed or wounded and, humiliatingly, twenty thousand have been taken prisoner.'

'How on earth has that happened?' asked Chatfield in alarm.

'German stormtrooper units have moved at speed and made significant advances. General Ludendorff must be rubbing his hands with glee.'

'This is grim news indeed.'

'He's a cunning old devil,' said the commissioner, putting the

notepad down on his desk. 'Instead of one attack, he launched four.'

Sir Edward was a slim, wiry man in his sixties with a small moustache. As usual, he was wearing an impeccably tailored three-piece suit. Chatfield, by contrast, was younger, clean-shaven and hollow-cheeked. His neatly barbered hair sported a centre parting.

'They've changed their tactics,' Chatfield observed. 'Until now, trench warfare has been the order of the day. Armies have been largely stationary – not any more. The Germans have obviously deployed their stormtroopers with deadly effect. The units move quickly and strike when least expected.'

'If only our reinforcements had arrived from America!'

'They may come too late, Sir Edward.'

'Don't let us be pessimistic,' said the other, pulling himself up to his full height. 'Remember that we have a brave army with equally brave Allies. I still believe in ultimate victory.'

'And so do I.'

'Let's put the war to one side for a moment, shall we?' suggested the commissioner. 'Let's consider our own situation. We, too, have suffered losses, albeit on a much smaller scale. Thousands of our officers have resigned to join the army, so we have a depleted force left behind. Every man we have is vital.' He remembered someone. 'What's the news about Detective Sergeant Keedy? Has he been released from hospital yet?'

'He's due to leave any day – once the problem has been resolved.'

'Problem?'

'It's not clear where he should go, Sir Edward. If it was up to Keedy, he would come straight back to Scotland Yard to resume his duties. But that is impossible. He needs a period of rest.'

During the siege in which we were involved, he was shot in the stomach from short range. The damage was extensive. The wounds will take time to heal. He must be cared for.'

'That shouldn't be problematic, should it?'

'It shouldn't,' said Chatfield, wearily, 'but it is.'

'Really?'

'There's been an unholy row about where he will convalesce.'

'That's the last thing he needs.'

'I agree, Sir Edward.'

'Then why are they wasting time arguing about it?'

'I've no idea,' said Chatfield. 'For some reason, the bickering goes on. They are still unable to reach a decision acceptable to all parties.'

There were three of them in the room at the hospital. Joe Keedy, wearing pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers, was sitting in a chair. Alice Marmion, his fiancée, was seated beside him, one hand on his arm. Having come straight from work, she was wearing the uniform of the Women's Police Force. Standing in front of them was Keedy's elder brother, Dennis, a tall, well-built, impressive man in a thick black overcoat. He spoke quietly but firmly.

'We must bring this argument to an end,' he declared. 'There is only one option open to you, Joe, and that is to return to the family home to be looked after by Mother and Father.'

'That's out of the question,' said Keedy, dismissively.

'Our parents would take good care of you.'

'It's kind of them to offer, Dennis, but I'm staying here in London.'

'Did Mother's entreaties mean nothing to you?'

'Of course, they did,' replied Keedy. 'I was touched that they

made the effort to come and see me. But I could never go back home. Apart from anything else, they'd try to persuade me to leave a job that I love.'

'Joe is very proud to be part of the Metropolitan Police Force,' said Alice.

'He should be equally proud of working with me in the family business,' argued Dennis. 'Being a funeral director is a responsible job. I still don't understand why you turned your back on a career alongside me, Joe.'

'I wanted excitement, Dennis,' said Keedy.

'Getting yourself shot is not my idea of excitement.'

'That's unfair,' said Alice, hotly. 'It was brave of Joe to go into that house during the siege.'

'Brave but foolish.'

'I'm not complaining about what happened,' said Keedy, stoutly.

'Well, I am,' said Dennis, raising his voice. 'I'd prefer a live brother to a dead hero.'

Before he could speak, Keedy felt a warning squeeze on his arm. Alice was trying to calm him down because she believed that nothing could be achieved by a pointless argument with his brother. Eager to be involved in Keedy's convalescence, she could not do that if he went back to the family home in Nottingham. His injury had reminded them of the dangers he faced, and it had persuaded them to bring the date of their wedding forward. It was now a matter of weeks away rather than months before they were married. Alice was keen to nurse him in readiness for the event.

'There is simply no alternative,' said Dennis, reasonably.

'Yes, there is,' she claimed. 'Joe could move in with my parents. My mother would be there to look after him during

the day and I would pop in regularly when I was not on duty.'

'Think of how it would look, Alice.'

'I don't give a damn how it looks,' said Keedy. 'People should mind their own business.'

'What about the vicar?'

'It's nothing to do with him, Dennis.'

'Have you told him that you'd be under the same roof as Alice?'

'Well, no . . .'

'I live on the other side of London,' she pointed out, 'and I'll be spending most nights at my flat. I'd only sleep at home now and then.'

'I still think it would be unwise,' said Dennis. 'And I know that our vicar in Nottingham would disapprove strongly.'

'Thank God he's not going to marry us then!' retorted Keedy.

'It's your duty to come back home, Joe.'

'I'm staying here in London.'

'Try it for a week. That's all I ask.'

'I've made my decision, Dennis, and I'm sticking to it.'

'Can't we at least find a compromise?' asked his brother. 'I came all this way to plead with you, Joe. Don't send me back home with upsetting news for our parents. It will hurt them terribly.'

'I'm sorry but it can't be helped. I need to stay here.'

'I agree,' said Alice.

After glaring at each of them in turn, Dennis grabbed his hat off the table and stalked out of the room, leaving the door wide open. Alice got up to close the door.

Keedy grinned. 'I think we deserve a kiss.'