

# MORTIS

by

DAMOND FUDGE

The man dressed in all black popped a cigarette into his mouth then leaned back against the trunk of his car. He watched as a plane took off, its body not much more than a shadowed tube sprinkled with lights in the surrounding darkness. He fished his lighter out of his pocket. He flicked his thumb over the wheel, but was only greeted with a burst of sparks. He tried again and got the same result. He was never one to give up easily, though. Flick. Sparks. Flick. Sparks. Flicksparksflicksparksflicksparksflicksparksflicksparks. He brought the lighter close to his ear and shook it. Hearing nothing, he threw it across the lot.

The approaching figure ducked the tiny projectile. "Jesus, Mortis. I'm only five minutes late."

Mortis glanced at his watch and replied, "Fifteen, Zippo. Your watch is slow." He removed the cigarette from his lips. "Got a light?"

“Nah, Man. I don’t smoke. Those things’ll kill ya.”

Mortis smiled at the irony. “If my job doesn’t first,” he said as he slid the cigarette back into its pack. He nodded down at the briefcase in Zippo’s left hand. “That it?”

“Yeah,” he said as he set the small, silver case down on the trunk. “Let me tell you, Mortis, you sure hired the right guy for this job.”

“I always hire the right person.”

“No. I know. I mean, their security was tighter than I’ve ever seen. I can get into most places but, this time, it’s a good thing I know one of their IT guys, or we would’ve been screwed.” Mortis knew how much Zippo liked to brag, so he just let him talk. “Just the levels of security on the employee key cards alone made me brain-gasm. Not to mention the biometrics I had to circumvent. If I was greedier I’d demand more green.”

From his back pocket, Mortis pulled a manila envelope that had been folded in half and handed it to Zippo. “Do you think I don’t do my research? I knew you had connections there, and I knew how tough it would be. There’s a little extra for your efforts.”

Zippo opened the envelope and gasped. Mortis noted this: The man audibly gasped. “A *little* extra? Dude, there’s like...wait.” He reached inside and removed a passport. Tucked in its cover were a ticket and a list of countries and names. “What’s this for?”

“Do you think a company like this is going to let you get away with stealing from them? You need to get scarce for a bit, at least a year. There’s a ticket to Montreal in there, flight leaves in the morning. From there head anywhere on the list. The names are people who will help you

get set up. You're booked into the Hilton under the name in the passport. Room's been taken care of for tonight only."

Mortis noticed the fear in Zippo's eyes as he stared at the passport.

"Listen, do *not* stay more than tonight. I've calculated the amount of time you have once business opens tomorrow. Montreal is the first flight out. Any longer and they will be on top of you, and I can do nothing at that point. Got it?"

Zippo swallowed hard and squeaked, "Got it." Mortis nodded and turned to the silver briefcase. "What about you, Man?" Zippo inquired.

Mortis gave Zippo his patented 'You must be joking' look before he triggered the latches on the case and opened it. Inside, tucked carefully into form-fitted foam, were five unlabeled vials filled with liquid. Mortis removed one of them and held it up toward the nearest streetlight. The liquid inside was thick and brown.

Zippo squinted at the vial. "So, what is it? What am I uprooting my life for?"

Mortis shook his head and said, "I have no idea."

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Mortis pulled into the parking lot of his building. If there was one aspect of his life that screamed 'Private Dick Stereotype' it was that his apartment doubled as his office. Or vice versa.

He never could nail down the correct concept: Did he do business from home, or did he live at work?

He punched the button and stepped over to the lobby's bulletin board to wait out the excruciatingly slow elevator. Nothing new. Same lost pets, same furniture for sale, same fast food deals. This was starting to become a habit for him, and habits in his line of work were just another thing for someone to exploit. He made a mental note to stop doing this when he heard the half-hearted ding of the aging lift's arrival.

He only took two steps before he was grabbed from behind and thrown back against the bulletin board. Notices scattered and pins poked his back. Right as gravity took control again and he started to slide down the board, his attacker was upon him. Hands wrapped around Mortis' throat and he was lifted high enough that his feet dangled. His hands instinctively grabbed the wrists that were under his chin. Once his eyes were able to refocus, he was not surprised to find himself staring into the face of a vampire. However, he *was* surprised to find it to be a woman.

Fangs bared, the bloodsucker hissed at Mortis, "Where is the package?"

Mortis slid his arms over the top of the vampire's as he choked out, "What...pack...age?"

"Don't fuck with me. I know you have it."

Mortis only needed a couple more centimeters of reach. "Don't...know...what..." His fingers connected and he twisted the dial of his watch. A flash of ultraviolet light burst from it. Flames erupted from the vampire's eye sockets. She screamed and dropped Mortis.

Mortis scrambled to his feet and plowed through the door leading to the stairs. The vampire held her hands over her eyes and extinguished the fires. In a brief moment, the cavities filled with ocular fluid and the eyeballs began to grow back. She could feel each molecule knit together, causing a shudder deep in her loins as the pain grew. Being so in tune with her body, the vampire was able to make a feeling that lasted mere seconds in real time stretch out to almost tantric proportions. She used this pleasure of pain to fuel her momentum as she pursued her prey into the stairway.

By the time she entered the stairwell Mortis was six flights above her. She leaped into the air, her claw-like fingernails digging into the side of the stairs just above the door to the third floor. Without a floor to push off from, she skittered up the rest of the way using the sides and handrails. She was upon him in no time, soaring over the rail so she could land in front of him.

Mortis had glanced down at the sound of the door below and saw the vampire's impressive three floor vertical leap. He knew he had little to no time before she would reach his position. He stopped running, ready to stand his ground. He was right. No sooner had he halted than she was flying toward him over the railing.

The vampire expected to land a step or two above Mortis, and she planned to use this extra height to aid her intimidation of this mortal. She did not plan to be stopped in mid-leap by a wooden stake to the heart.

Mortis had long ago outfitted the stairwell for just this occasion, which came up at least once a year if not more. The fire extinguisher boxes outside the doors on each floor were outfitted with a wooden and a silver stake, and the sheer weight of the extinguishers made them a proper bludgeon for any creature that neither wood nor silver harmed. Plus, if there was one

constant among vampires, it was how they lunged at a victim: Arms stretched wide, pointed forward and slightly upraised, opening their chests into an easy target. Seeing her face, Mortis realized the look of shock at being bested was a second near-constant. How could you be so surprised that someone stabbed you when you offer up your most vulnerable spot like that?

The wood pierced her chest, working more with her forward momentum than his thrusting. Her blood touched the wood and a reaction almost as old as time was triggered. Her heart split open and the rest of her insides began to dissolve. Mortis had planted his feet, ready for the weight of her body, and he shoved back, forcing her back over the railing. Her weakened molecular structure caused her to explode in a shower of viscera when she smacked into the floor.

Mortis was prepared for this, too. He trudged back down to the second floor entrance. His office was on this floor, but he never wanted anything to pursue him there. This was more out of selfishness than anything else, since it really was no secret to anyone who could read an ancient sandwich board. Over the years he had found that the lobby had a lot of dark corners that the supernatural favored, so it was rare that anything wishing to ambush him would take the time to travel further than the ground floor. Besides, the elevator took forever.

He retrieved the mop, bucket and bleach from his utility closet and returned to the stairwell. Another reason he loved this building, decrepit as it was, had to do with the inexplicable drain in the floor of the stairwell. He could already hear the creature's blood dripping down into the sewer system as he descended the steps.

Every swipe of the mop convinced him that dropping off the case at his safe house on the way here was the best move he had made all week.

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“Honestly, I expected to hear from you last night.”

“Something came up,” Mortis told the voice on the other end of the phone. It belonged to Richard Leighton. Philanthropist. Author. Scientist. CEO of the Leighton Corporation. Guy who hired Mortis. He was one of those take-your-pick people: The kind who list their professions when they introduce themselves, then shrug and flash a jackass smile while saying, “Take your pick.”

Mortis craned his head from left to right, trying to get the crick out of his neck. “You wouldn’t deprive me of my beauty sleep, would you?” He glanced at the clock. 5:37pm. Early for him. Working nights was an occupational hazard.

“Wouldn’t hear of it,” Leighton replied. “I understand you were successful.”

“And you heard that from...”

“Grapevine.”

*Of course*, Mortis thought. “Then, yes, I have it. Shall I come by your office?” he asked, full well knowing the answer.

“No. I’ll be dining at The Chophouse tonight. Bring it by there any time after eight.”

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Mortis showed at nine forty-five.

Leighton was enjoying an after-dinner scotch. “You missed an incredible steak, Mr. Mortis.”

“That’s OK,” Mortis said, nodding to the glass. “I’ll just take one of those.”

Leighton held up the glass to the bartender and pointed to Mortis. “I guess we can get down to brass tacks, as they say. My package, please.”

Mortis reached into his back pocket and removed a padded manila envelope. He passed it to Leighton as his drink arrived. Leighton waited for the waitress to depart before he opened it and removed the single vial. He frowned and Mortis could see the steam rise behind his eyes. Leighton kept his composure, though, as he spoke. “This is not all of it.”

“I’m not going to walk into a fine restaurant like this carrying an incriminating looking metal case. The rest is in the car.” Leighton held the vial up to the dim bulb above their table. “Is it what you expected?”

Leighton returned it to the envelope. “We won’t know for certain until I have my lab techs look at it.” He tucked the envelope into his suit jacket. “You will get the first half of your money when we’re at your car, if that’s all right with you?”



Mortis raised his glass and replied, “Fine by me.” He took a sip. He let the brown liquid linger on his tongue, savoring the smoky essence. After he swallowed he asked, “If you don’t mind, what exactly did I risk my neck for?”

Leighton smiled that jackass grin of his. “I’m sure you realize that I hired you, Mr. Mortis, due to the nature of your business. We in the scientific community have been aware of the true existence of the supernatural for a long time. While they still remain hidden in the shadows, those shadows are becoming increasingly smaller. It won’t be long before these unsavory fringe elements make themselves known to the world at large. We have to be ready for this eventuality.”

“And this will help?”

“Indeed it will. Those geniuses at Saxon Industries were able to isolate the molecule within wood that causes the violent reaction it has with vampire blood. They beat us to the punch on this one. We’re close, but nowhere close enough. This will turn the tide. We might even be able to bring them to near extinction before they reveal themselves, maybe even discourage any other creatures from coming out. Show them we humans shouldn’t be fucked with.”

Leighton had become more and more animated as he spoke. Mortis was surprised to see this fire come from inside the man. He had been so reserved during their other interactions.

“Sounds like I may soon be out of a job.”

“On the contrary, I believe it will make your job easier. Plus, as a thank you for your assistance, I will give you a lifetime agreement to offer it to you for wholesale.”

“You put that in writing, I’ll knock off a grand from my fee.”

“Then it’s a deal.” Leighton finished the last of his drink and nodded to the door. “Shall we?”

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They entered the moderately full parking garage connected to the restaurant’s building.

“Where did you park,” Leighton asked.

“Just up the next level, right on the other side there. The black one,” he replied, pointing.

The duo got halfway up the level when Mortis grabbed Leighton by the arm and stopped him.

“What?”

Mortis shushed him. He cocked his head and listened to the night’s sounds, amplified by the acoustics of cement. Dripping water. Chunky pipes. Nearby traffic. Rustling trees. Nothing out of the ordinary, but still...

“Hide,” he said, giving the rich man a shove. Leighton quickly scurried to the next level and crouched behind a car.

Mortis stepped into the middle of the lanes. He began to slowly turn, keeping his eyes on every dark corner and shadow. He held his arms out wide in an inviting pose.

“I know you’re there. Come on out and face me.”

He completed two more turns before they appeared. Four of them, fangs bared. Mortis lowered his arms and put his hands in his pockets. He stood his ground while the vampires advanced, occasionally hissing at him, a sound that has always been more annoying than frightening to the detective, as if all vamps have a respiratory disorder.

“I’d seriously rethink this decision, if I were you guys.” The vampires answered with a collective hiss. “Have it your way, then.”

Mortis removed his hands from his pockets. His thumbs had already pressed the buttons on top of the cylinders he held. He dropped the custom-made grenades with a flourish, swinging his arms up to cover his eyes in the same motion. The sound of metal bouncing on cement echoed around them for only a moment before the two high intensity bursts of ultraviolet light engulfed Mortis and his attackers. One would have been enough in this confined space, but why chance it? Despite the cover provided by his eyelids and arms, he could feel the heat deep in his retinas.

The burst only lasted seconds. Still, Mortis lowered his arms slowly. He was greeted by three piles consisting of greasy ashes and the odd lump of something fleshy. The fourth vampire had obviously tried to get to cover. His legs were eaten away up to mid-thigh. His left arm, shoulder and a goodly portion of his torso on that side were blowing away in the light breeze. The creature’s mouth was working hard, but only emitting a hideous pained sound.

Mortis cautiously approached the vampire the way a hunter would a wounded man-eater. The vamp flopped around and tried to grab Mortis with its working arm. When he was close enough, Mortis held down the flailing appendage with his left boot. He placed his right one on

the creature's neck and slowly pressed. With a sickening squish-pop the neck snapped and all was silent.

"Are you OK back there?" he called out to the hiding billionaire.

"I'm perfectly fine," was the reply, much closer than Mortis expected. He spun around to find Leighton standing mere feet from him. He backed away from the man, more out of shock. Leighton smiled, his usually toothy grin now a touch sharper. "Especially now that you've depleted your arsenal." He extended his hand toward the detective. "Your keys, if you will be so kind."

Mortis raised his hands to a defensive posture and said, "They won't do you any good. I lied. The rest of the vials are at a safe location."

"Then you get to live all that much longer. Let's go." Leighton turned to leave.

"Wait," Mortis implored.

Leighton kept walking.

"Just one question," Mortis tried again.

Leighton stopped and turned back to Mortis.

"Do you think I don't do my research?"

"What," Leighton asked, confused by the question.

Mortis flicked his right arm. The small, concealed gun slid out of his sleeve and into his hand. With little aiming, he fired. Leighton's head snapped backward when the hole appeared

just to the right of center on his forehead, the .22 deliberately chosen so it would not exit its target.

Leighton grimaced and touched his new wound. “Seriously?” He paused as his body examined the bullet. “It’s not even silver.”

It was Mortis’ turn to smile. “Wait for it.”

Three seconds later, Leighton grabbed his forehead and fell to his knees. “What the...FUCK!”

“I coated my bullets with the formula. After the visit from your little friend last night, I figured it had something to do with vampires.”

Leighton gasped and grunted and clawed at his head. Mortis leaned in and saw a thin trail of smoke escaping from the hole. “Nice,” he said in response.

Mortis straightened up and stepped back from the billionaire vampire. “You’ve done a really good job hiding what you are from the general public. A *really* good job. But I’m not the general public. Things like not being available in the mornings because you are, quote, ‘in meetings.’ Always wanting to do business in the late afternoon, usually someplace dimly lit. Stop me if I’m off base.” Leighton continued to groan. Blood had begun to seep from his nose and ears.

“There’s no way you could’ve kept up this façade all this time, so I’m guessing you’re a fairly new vamp. Two, three years tops, given you still enjoy normal human food. Wow, that looks painful. Is it?”

Leighton had his head in his hands. He looked up at Mortis. Looked is a strong word, since his eyes had boiled and the bubbling fluid was running down his face. It mixed with the blood and melted grey matter that was pouring from his ears and nose.

Mortis watched the deterioration with fascination and said, “What do you know? You were right. It did make my job easier.”

The vampire keeled over onto his back and his face dissolved, collapsing in on itself. In a matter of minutes he became Richard Leighton, philanthropist, author, scientist, steaming pile of glop. Take your pick.

Mortis reached into the inner pocket of Leighton’s suit jacket and retrieved the padded envelope. He checked the other pockets. Of course. No money, half-payment or otherwise. He hopped into his car, reached under the passenger seat and removed the metal case. He took the vial out of the envelope and placed it back home next to the other four.

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The man dressed in all black entered the lobby of Saxon Industries the next morning, carrying a metal case. He may have looked all cool and collected on the outside, but inside he was a bundle of nerves. It was one of the few times in his life where Mortis was unclear on the potential outcome of his actions. The case felt extra heavy.

He had spent most of the night debating what to do with the formula, sitting on his couch and staring at the vials for hours. He could've kept it, but despite the advantage it would give him

in his job, he didn't have any connections who are chemistry inclined in order to produce more and he preferred to work with people he knew he could trust, which was something built through history. Besides, there was no way of knowing who else, besides Saxon Industries and some vampires, knew about the formula. Mortis never did like working with a target on his back, if he could help it.

*Oh well, he eventually decided, better to return it to the devil you know.*

He approached the front desk, fully aware that every security eye, human and electronic, was on him. The young woman smiled at him and asked, “May I help you, Sir?”

Mortis placed the case on the desk and said, “I need to see Bartleby Saxon. I have something that belongs to him.”

The End