THE WORLD

DIGITAL SINS

A Novel

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CHAPTER

01

FREDERICK MARTIN HUNCHED over his desk in the dark office, the screen's light on his spectacles. He didn't need the glasses. He didn't even need the screen, if he was honest. But he'd done the job this way most of his life, and he didn't see why he should change now.

He straightened, took the glasses off long enough to rub his eyes, and leaned back in the black leather chair. A lone lamp sat on the mahogany desk, throwing shadows around the corner office. He turned and looked out the two tall windows behind him, down at New York City the way it had looked in 2025, back when you kept your technology in your pocket and only took it out when you needed it. He watched the city for a minute, then swung the chair back around to the keyboard.

The hands that pounded away at the keys, entering numbers into spreadsheets, were young and strong, and still, after all this time, they didn't feel quite like his. At home, his real hands lay stiff and arthritic at his sides. His sixty-seven-year-old body reclined in a plush induction chair, wrinkled skin and aching joints, a thin metal band wrapped around his mostly bald, age-spotted head. The gel contacts pressed cold against his temples. This was the daily norm now, for most of the planet. Logging into The World—the Worldwide Optional Reality and Lifestyle Dimension—was simply how people lived. How they worked, spent time with family, went to church, watched ball games.

Nobody expected it to take off the way it did when it launched in 2030. It seemed like overnight the whole world had gone digital.

Frederick had been middle-aged when it happened, and he'd fought against being sucked into that particular wormhole with everything he had. He liked a real desk. Real people. Real numbers, thank you very much.

But the day had come when it was transition or lose the job. A good job, one he'd worked years for, one that had put his kids through private school and given his wife the house of her dreams. He wasn't about to throw that away because some fool thought it'd be clever to strap a chrome halo on the whole human race and play God with a new reality. It'd be a fad, he'd told himself. He'd be back at the same desk, the same water cooler, listening to Doug and Jim butcher the same crude jokes.

Twenty years later, he had to admit he'd been wrong.

This virtual lifestyle had found its way into everything. His children and grandchildren spent ninety percent of their waking hours in The World. His wife was about the only holdout he knew. She still kept the family pictures on paper, in real frames down the hallway, and she had never sat in his chair.

Truth was, the older he got, the more it appealed to him, the same as it had to the kids.

He stopped typing and stood up to his full six-foot-five, rolling his shoulders and feeling the virtual muscle move under his white collared shirt. He'd been five-foot-eight his whole life, and skinny as a rail besides. But here, he was young. Strong. Objectively handsome, with wavy brown hair, a square jaw, and eyes so blue they almost didn't look real.

He enjoyed who he could be in The World, and the things he could do here that the real world would never have allowed him.

He sat back down. There was still work to finish before he logged off for the night. Seemed like every night was a late one lately, chasing down the money through revenue reports and spending sheets. The coffee at his elbow had gone cold a while ago, and he drank some of it anyway. He glanced out at the office beyond his door, at rows of cubicles nobody actually sat in anymore. Every employee could customize their own space now, so the cubicle was really just a gate to somewhere else, some office

built exactly the way its owner wanted it. Didn't matter tonight. The room sat dark and quiet except for the exit signs at the far end.

He went back to the spreadsheet and found where he'd left off. He was a few rows further into it when something moved at the door.

He looked up. A woman stood in the doorway. Her blonde hair fell just past her shoulders, and she wore a short red silk dress. Her lipstick matched it, and her dark eyes were lined heavy with makeup.

"Can I help you?" he asked. His voice came out low.

He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

She came a few feet into the office, her heels quiet on the carpet, and looked him up and down.

"Mr. Martin?" She said it slowly, like she wanted to be sure.

"Uh—yes. That's me. What can I do for you?"

She ignored the question. Took another step. "Mr. Frederick Martin?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's my name." He pushed his chair back and got to his feet beside the desk. You never knew who you'd run into these days, or what might come of it. There were always rumors: bugs, glitches, avatars left permanently damaged. Permabans that came out of nowhere.

"I have something for you," she said. She slid the thin straps of her dress off her shoulders, and the silk fell and pooled at her ankles. She stepped out of it and kicked off her heels.

He grinned as she came toward him.

CHAPTER

02

THE FIRST BUZZ dragged Cliff out of sleep, a hook in the gut. He didn't move. He just lay there, listening to the wristband vibrate against the nightstand, the last pieces of some dream slipping away before he could catch what it had been.

He turned his head. Hannah slept beside him, breathing slow and even. In the dim green wash of the holoclock, her face looked younger—peaceful in a way she only seemed to manage when she wasn't looking at him. Three in the morning.

Hannah. They'd been friends since they were kids, sweethearts in high school, married not long out of college. He could still picture her coming down the aisle, that white dress trailing, a thin veil covering everything but the smile underneath it.

The band buzzed again, sharper.

MOD ALERT—PRIORITY RESPONSE—CHICAGO PRECINCT.

He sat up, the old mattress groaning under him, and reached for the chrome band on the nightstand. It lit at his touch and he slid it onto his wrist. The thin segments clicked shut one after another and tightened until they sat snug.

He ran a hand down his face. Calls this early were never good.

Hannah stirred, her brow creasing and then smoothing again. She didn't wake.

The band was a lot more than a watch. Standard-issue SCI, the Security Console Interface. Every Mod got sworn in with one. Comms, database access, the full toolkit, real world and Worldside both.

The Mods were the closest thing The World had to a police force. Moderators, keeping the peace in the virtual world, running down whatever crimes came with it. The World kept growing, the criminals kept getting more creative, and the job got harder right along with it. Cliff worked investigations out of the Chicago branch. Being a detective had been the dream since he was a kid, so when he graduated the academy and the placement AI told him investigator was his best fit, he'd about come out of his skin.

Things got better still on orientation day, when they handed him his partner assignment.

Dante Harrison. His childhood hero.

He crossed to the closet and pulled his uniform off the hanger. Dressed fast.

Hannah shifted behind him. He went to her side of the bed and kissed her cheek.

"Sorry, baby. They're calling me."

"Okay. Be safe," she murmured, half asleep already.

"Always. Love you."

Her breathing had deepened back into sleep before he made it to the door. He slipped out anyway, quiet, and headed for the garage.

His aging Toyota waited in the bay. Self-driving, like every car now, ever since the law caught up to the technology. The seats had cracked along the seams and one corner of the dash display had gone dead years ago, but it still got him where he was going.

Cliff climbed in, and the door sealed shut with a pressurized hiss. The dash lit up, dim and blue.

"Good morning, Cliff," the car said. "Where are we headed so early?"

"Mod precinct. Emergency protocol. Lights on. Get me there fast."

"Acknowledged. Estimated arrival, nineteen minutes."

The garage door lifted, and they backed out into the dark. Every house on the street was shut up for the night.

This early, the roads were empty.

The car swerved around a pothole that had been sitting in the same spot for six months, maybe longer. Nobody paved roads now if the navigation software could just route around the damage. Block after block slid past the window and none of it moved. Nobody was out on the sidewalks. The diners that used to spill light onto the corners at this hour were shuttered, and there weren't any drunks arguing outside the bars. Once in a while a drone went over, low and fast, and then the street was quiet again.

They passed a Tier-Three housing block, a windowless concrete cube under power lines thick enough to light a stadium. Thousands of bodies lay stacked inside in induction rows, fed through tubes while their minds wandered the Wealth sectors and the Lust sectors and whatever else The World had built to keep them from asking what waited outside when they logged off.

Most of them probably hadn't logged off in years.

No lights showed on the outside of the building.

Overhead, relay towers rose off the rooftops in clusters, blinking amber against the dark. They carried more traffic now than the old airports ever had. Delivery drones threaded the skyrails below them.

Cliff watched it pass, elbow against the door. He'd stopped noticing most of it years ago. Hannah still pointed out the new towers whenever they drove anywhere together.

The car curved off the highway, past the dead pylons of a power plant nobody had bothered tearing down, just switched off and left standing. Ahead, the Mod precinct waited on the corner of 87th and Cottage Grove: concrete, dark glass, steel, antennae rising off the roof in a bare cluster. No sign out front.

The car rolled to a stop. Cliff didn't get out right away. He sat staring at the doors while his wristband buzzed once—a message. Dante.

He left it unopened and stepped out into the cold. He could see his breath under the streetlight. He looked up at the relay towers. There were more of them than there'd been last month.

Inside, the lobby was dim, half the ceiling panels switched off for the night. One officer stood behind the desk, drinking from a chipped mug.

"Early shift, Daniels?"

"Something like that."

Cliff scanned his wrist at the gate. The door clicked and swung open, and he stepped through.

As he went deeper into the building, all he could hear was the servers and the climate control. They ran all night whether anybody was on shift or not.

The halls were too clean, and the light came down so evenly from overhead that not even the door handles cast a shadow. Every door had a nameplate. A few were lit red for active dives. The rest were dark.

He passed one marked HARRISON, DANTE. The light burned solid.

Cliff slowed half a step. All this time, and Dante still seemed like he'd been in this precinct longer than the walls. He was gruff and he was sharp, and you could go a whole shift with him and never know what he was thinking. Cliff had never fully trusted him.

He kept walking.

His own room sat near the end of the hall, same as it always had. Farther from the cooling systems, quieter than the rooms up front.

The door unlocked. Inside: four metal walls, one induction lounger, one small standing tray. He'd never hung a photo in here. Some of the other Mods kept pictures taped up by the lounger, but Cliff liked the room bare.

Cliff opened Dante's message.

Already on scene. When you get up here, keep your hands in your pockets. Don't touch anything.

Dante didn't usually tell him how to work a scene. Cliff figured he'd find out why soon enough.

He crossed to the lounger and lifted the neural band off its mount.

Cold. Always colder than he expected, no matter how many times he did this.

He lay back, and the lounger shifted under him, adjusting to his weight. He slid the band over his head. The gel pads touched his temples, and that first contact still bothered him. The machine always seemed to know exactly where to press.

The first time he'd used a full immersion rig, he'd thrown up in his own lap before the insertion sequence even finished. Years later, his body took it without complaint. Now he could go under three times in a shift and keep his lunch down.

"Active insertion," he said.

The band vibrated, low at first, then deeper, crawling up from his teeth into the base of his skull.

"Vocal passphrase required."

"Cliff Daniels."

"Confirmed. Override route authorized. Target destination uploaded by Mod Harrison."

Cliff frowned. Dante hadn't said anything about that in his message.

"Confirmed," he said. "Begin insertion."

The vibration deepened until it felt like the lounger was tipping him over sideways, though he knew it hadn't moved. A hard pressure built behind his eyes and held there. Then it let go all at once.

The lounger was gone.

He stood in an elevator. Chrome walls, frosted glass, the floor pressing up under his boots. Through the side panels, a digital skyline slid past on the way up—New York, or a version of it expensive enough to pass for the real thing.

Ian's voice came through his ear. "Morning, Cliff. Before you ask, it's my fourth coffee and it isn't helping."

"Morning."

"You're headed to Michaels and Shriever. Digital asset firm. Big footprint, lot of movement this morning."

"Dante says he's already there."

"He is," Ian said. "Talbot's up there with him."

Cliff hadn't expected that. The head of Mod investigations didn't usually come out to a scene himself, least of all at three in the morning. He

watched the rooftops drop away below him while the floor numbers on the panel climbed into the thirties.

The elevator stopped at thirty-three, and the doors opened. Every light on the floor was turned all the way up.

Cliff stepped onto an open office floor boxed in by translucent glass. Avatars hurried through it in every direction: Mods in uniform, contractors wearing HUD overlays across their eyes. Voices overlapped.

He stopped for a second and looked the place over.

On the surface, it looked like any other polished corporate grid. But the air felt tight. Nobody was laughing, and nobody stood still.

His eyes found Dante near a glass-walled office. Brown trench coat, fedora, one arm resting on a terminal like he had all the time in the world.

He was standing next to David Talbot, a broad-shouldered, hard-faced man Cliff had only ever seen from the back of the room at department briefings.

Dante saw him and lifted two fingers off the terminal to wave him over.

Cliff crossed the floor. Nobody looked at him. Everybody was walking fast with their heads down and a datapad in hand, working through whatever list they'd been given.

By the time he reached them, he'd counted three uniforms, two corporate legal avatars, and one upper-management type doing his best not to sweat.

"Mornin'," Dante said, his eyes already back on the glass office.

"Nice to see you too, partner."

Dante had a cigarette going and the look he always wore, like a man who'd stepped in from another era and decided not to explain himself.

Cliff had never been sure how much of that was an act.

The upper-management type was the one standing next to Talbot: sharp suit, mid-fifties, nobody Cliff had seen before.

"Cliff," Talbot said. "This is Mr. Michaels, co-owner. He found the scene this morning."

Michaels nodded. His avatar was clean-cut, but the edges of his movement lagged a fraction behind him. That could have been a bad connection. Cliff had also seen it on people whose real hands were shaking back home in their loungers.

Talbot leaned in. "What you're about to see doesn't leave this room. Clear?"

Cliff nodded. Dante did the same.

Michaels turned and led them toward the office.

Cliff noticed the distortion before they reached the door: a ripple in the glass, like something underneath the surface of the room was bending the render around it.

Michaels opened the door and stood back to let them in.

Cliff stepped through first. It was like walking into an apartment after a domestic call, when everybody's quit yelling but the room hasn't caught up yet.

At first glance, it was still an office. Desk. Chairs. Windows. Corporate layout.

Then the details started to separate.

A pen hung in midair near the desk, twitching. A paperclip bobbed up and down near the glass wall, a few inches at a time. The shadows didn't agree on where to fall.

And the desk.

Cliff stopped at the sight of it.

It had folded inward on itself, like something enormous had gripped the code and crushed it in one hand, then stopped halfway through and left the ruin hanging there.

Every few seconds raw code showed through the surface in exposed veins, strings of broken instruction coming and going.

Nobody spoke.

Cliff stepped farther in. A scrap of paper hovered near his face. He reached for it, and the moment his fingers brushed the edge, it jerked away and shot across the room into the collapsed desk.

Cliff pulled his hand back. Dante had told him not to touch anything.

The scrap had gone somewhere into the folds of the desk, and he couldn't find it again.

Talbot spoke behind him, voice lower now. "We swept the space for exploits and loop errors. It came back clean."

Ian's voice came into Cliff's ear, clipped and tight. "I've been monitoring since insertion. There's nothing here."

Cliff kept his eyes on the wreckage. "Nothing?"

"There's no log, no shell code." Ian paused. "I can't see what's holding it up."

Dante crouched beside the desk, coat hem brushing the warped floor. He didn't touch anything. Just watched.

"This isn't an exploit," he said.

Talbot's jaw tightened. "No."

Michaels cleared his throat. "This was Frederick Martin's office."

Cliff turned. "Who?"

"Head accountant. Thirty years with the company. Clean record. Reliable." Michaels swallowed. "I couldn't sleep, so I logged in to get some work done, and I found this."

Talbot folded his arms. "An hour later they found his body in the real world. Still in the lounger. There's no trauma, and nothing in his medical history that would explain it. His rig logged a neural spike, and then everything shut down."

"Dead?" Cliff said.

"Dead," Talbot said. "Like his brain just stopped."

Ian came back on the line. "Still no trace of his avatar."

Dante rose slowly. The ash on his cigarette had grown long but still hadn't fallen.

Cliff looked back at the ruined desk. Bits of the room still trembled where they hung.

Dante looked at Michaels. "You keep security logs?"

Michaels blinked. "Yes. Local backups. Basement terminal."

"Show us."

They took the lift down. As the levels dropped, the upper floors of The World fell away with them: the glass, the chrome, the soft lighting.

By the time the doors opened again, that polish was gone, replaced by raw steel and exposed concrete, with conduit bolted along the ceiling.

The security room was a square box with no windows and no comfort in it. A wide holodisplay hung over a black wall panel, throwing cold blue light across the room. Below it sat a tactile keyboard, real keys set into expensive legacy hardware. The only sounds were the climate control and the faint electrical whisper behind the walls.

Michaels opened an access menu and pulled out a small green drive.

"You'll need this," he said. "Encryption key."

Cliff took it and slotted it into the console. A soft chime answered him.

"Requesting footage," he said. "Thirty-third floor. Midnight to present."

The display came alive.

At first, nothing strange about it. Frederick Martin sat at his desk, typing, the screen lit up in front of him. A cup of coffee beside him, half gone and probably cold. Lights low.

Then the door opened.

She stepped into frame. Blonde hair. Red dress. Bare shoulders.

She started toward the desk without hesitation, every step a little too exact, one heel set down right in front of the other.

Her mouth moved. No sound.

"Do we have audio?" Dante asked.

Cliff leaned over the console and ran a quick check across the feed. "Should be."

The image tore sideways for a second, a violent horizontal glitch that snapped across the screen and vanished.

Ian's voice came through the comms. "I'm looking at it now. Audio layer's gone."

"Muted?" Cliff asked.

"No. Removed." Ian paused. "Somebody pulled the whole layer out. There's nothing left to recover."

Onscreen, the woman stepped closer to Martin. She slipped the straps from her shoulders. The dress fell in silence.

Martin was out of his chair by then, standing by the desk, and even from the security angle, Cliff could see how bad he wanted her. He was grinning.

"I've seen enough," Dante muttered.

Cliff scrubbed the timeline forward anyway.

The woman reached Martin. Her hand lifted toward his face.

The instant her fingers touched him, the feed collapsed. The screen went black. Then white static filled it, jagged and hissing.

Cliff scrubbed backward. Forward. Back again.

Nothing.

Every pass stopped dead on the same frame, her fingertips just touching his cheek, and after that there was only static. Even the timestamp in the corner glitched and failed.

"What happened?" Cliff said.

Ian was the one who answered. "That section was erased at the physical storage layer."

Cliff looked up. "Meaning?"

"Meaning someone cut through it underneath the operating system. Straight into the hardware."

Cliff looked back at the static. It hissed across the screen in dirty waves.

"Can we run immersive playback?"

Silence.

Then Ian said, "Yeah. I can patch what's left together. It won't be stable."

"Do it."

A white flash rolled through the room. The walls vanished.

They were in the office again. Playback mode.

Martin sat at his desk, unaware, working. The same low lights. The same quiet posture. Then the door opened.

She came in without a sound.

Even knowing he was standing inside damaged footage, Cliff caught himself watching her and nothing else. He had to make himself look over at Martin.

She walked toward Martin.

She reached him. Touched his cheek.

And the world blinked.

The office was gone. The security room slammed back into place around them in a rush of blue light and machine noise. Cliff grabbed the console to steady himself. Dante hadn't moved. The cigarette rested between his fingers, still lit.

Cliff stared at the blank display. "That didn't feel like an exploit."

"No," Dante said.

His voice had gone flatter.

Ian broke in. "I'm running a biometric trace on the avatar. Whoever she is, she's buried behind serious protection. High-end encryption. Could be military grade. Could be custom."

"And Martin?" Cliff asked.

"Still nothing. His dive session ends before it starts. There's no entry trail and no exit. His digital footprint's been wiped clean."

Cliff let that sit.

They had Martin on camera at his own desk, and as far as the system knew, he'd never logged in at all.

Dante turned and looked at him.

"Talk to the wife," he said. "I want habits, routines, recent changes. Anything real-world that might tell us what he was chasing. Find out if he went looking for the woman."

Cliff nodded. "And you?"

"I've got people who know how to find things NODE likes to lose." Dante glanced toward the dead screen. "If this came out of the Red Zones, I'll catch the scent."

He shifted his attention to Ian. "Start with the avatar. Seduction loops. Mimic shells. AI overlays. Anything built to pass for human."

"I'm on it," Ian said.

Dante stepped toward the door. The edge of his coat blurred, and then he was gone.

That's the end of Chapter Two.

The World: Digital Sins comes out on Amazon on November 17, 2026, in Kindle and paperback.

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