

Synopsis: The Cusp of Dreams

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This novel is a dark saga of modern business and the lives of people who struggle in its pursuit. It is the story of the men and women in the trenches who do what they can to close thousand-dollar contracts and who wonder how they are going to pay next-month's rent. They lie, cheat, steal, and, when necessary, attack their co-workers at **Amtech**. However, their schemes don't work, and their jobs and personal relationships disintegrate. For the men and women living on the cusp, the outcomes are bad or, at best, ambiguous. Perhaps nobody cares, but we should because as the road-warriors' lives collapse our whole society crumbles.

The narrator, **Sue Maitland**, is a sales manager for a large, mid-western company. She's trying to build a sales team in metropolitan New York. Determined to succeed on only a barebones budget, Sue hires **Bill**, despite his troubling background. Bill never performs. He's about to lose his job when, suddenly, he dies. Sue attends his funeral only to learn that his death was needless and, perhaps, intentional. She is shocked to discover that his family has been subsisting in a cramped, two-bedroom apartment dependent on four minimum-wage incomes and one old car. Despite her intention to fire him, Sue is the only one of Bill's acquaintances to attend his funeral.

Meet **Tina**, another of Sue's recent hires. She's tough and funny, although clueless. Tina's sales plummet. She resigns. Months later, Sue learns that Tina was a "bigamist," illegally holding two jobs in her quest to marry and buy a home. Tina loses her man, but makes a down payment on a house. Though furious, Sue takes no legal action against Tina.

Mer is different from the other reps. She is cultured and principled, ideally suited to reversing the team's death spiral. Though married, both women are drawn to one another. The two couples spend a weekend at Mer's remote cabin on an island off the coast of Maine. Sexual tensions build and later dissipate when Mer discovers Sue has paid other reps higher compensation. She quits. Sue is devastated.

Skip's Southern manners are endearing. If only, he could perform his job. He charms his way into management, though it is Sue who helps him survive. After a business trip to New Orleans, Skip and Sue travel to Memphis where they meet Skip's mother, who is the cause of so many ruined lives. Finally, Sue understands the social dynamics underlying Skip's dysfunctional behavior. Despite his failings—and they're significant—she is saddened when Skip is dismissed. Sue realizes that his Southern grace and dignity are no masquerade. Though deeply flawed, he is a gentleman.

The stories contained within *The Cusp of Dreams* interweave as time and memories are reshaped and reinterpreted. The stakes mount. The tempo builds. Life is treacherous. We meet Sue's entire team. We watch as they attend a meeting and gamble in Atlantic City. **Rita** and **Laurie** win big, but only because Sue has stashed away most of their winnings before they can lose it all. Rita's infant daughter is forgotten in the excitement. Gambling, the reader discovers, is better than shopping, better than sex, better than marriage, better than children, better than friendship, better than wisdom, better than life itself.

An adventure story follows in which we meet all the regional sales managers and see them interact. Later, Sue and her femme fatal colleague, **Candy**, join Sue's husband, **Tom**, to go sailing. There's danger, as well as thrills and knockdowns. Sailing resembles the workplace.

More gambling. **Richard**, a card shark, entices the team to play high-stakes poker. Again, we witness the passion of Sue and Mer. Money is lost and won. Richard tries to oust Sue from her job, but her manager, **Tal**, intervenes. Months later, Richard quits.

Rita and Laurie's story is about shopping and gambling and violence and child abuse and forged contracts. Rita resigns; Laurie is fired. There is collateral damage: Skip is falsely accused of sexual harassment, and he struggles to keep his job.

The penultimate chapter, *Circling de Drain*, tells the story of the downsizing of Amtech. Sue and the other managers are summoned to Dayton. They are given unobtainable financial goals that must be met. Sue and her colleagues rally their teams. The objectives are within their sights. Everyone is hopeful of the outcome. Suddenly, the operation is shut down. Ninety days later, only a small group survives in the Midwest. Business is war. Carnage is everywhere. Readers of this chapter complain of shell-shock.

The epilogue, *Ashes Out of Phoenix*, takes us to the new millennium. The former sales managers of Amtech have reconvened in Phoenix. Their lives are a sham that they're determined to conceal. Sue works for an Internet company in Silicon Valley. Her marriage to Tom is over. She owns nothing and dreams of millions. Everyone gambles in the local casinos. Sue has tawdry sex with one of her former co-workers. Sunday morning, everyone gathers to sprinkle the ashes of a departed colleague in the Sonoran Desert. The mood is subdued. They return to their broken lives and their frenzied pursuit of the American Dream, desperate to remain on the cusp.