

A CAREER AT ANY COST

by

Lilian White

It seemed as if it were just yesterday since she arrived in Gstaad. Life was like the sea, she mused, trying desperately to take her mind off her battered and aching limbs. The sea was often moody and unpredictable. Yet, it could be calm and gentle. Life was not always tranquil. *Rather like the quivering snow before me*, she thought as she limped in the falling snowflakes.

Julius's announcement had been a surprise, one that rapidly jolted her back into reality.

"I'm returning to Ireland soon, as you know. I'll be gone in a week's time," he said. "Will you come with me?"

As she stared, almost entranced, she felt confused and nervous at the suddenness of his proposal. They had met only three weeks ago. Although there was an attraction between them, she could not help feeling a sadness creeping through her. She liked him but not enough to participate in free love. She had to become a general surgeon.

He looked charmingly into her hazel, almond-shaped eyes and must have noticed her apprehension. His own determination never wavered and she wondered why. "I want you to come with me, not to live in free love, for judging by the look on your face that's what you're thinking."

Opening her mouth to speak, she could not find the words to reply. Then, she said, "Oh Julius! Although I enjoy your company and we've had so much fun together, I can't accept your proposal. In the future, I hope to. . . ." Before she could say another word, his lips were brushing against hers. She was taken completely by surprise and was incapable of fully comprehending what was occurring as his hand moved from her slim waistline to her breast.

In a panic, thoughts of Uncle James entered her mind and suddenly it was he who was before her. It was he that was touching her. Incest had often happened within families but it was frequently hidden and generally not discussed. No one ever mentioned it, and her fear of men had steadily grown. Now, she felt pain and isolation in the realization that she could never be the woman that Julius wanted her to be. But, she could be a general surgeon.

In her anxiety, she bit Julius's lip and unexpectedly tasted the salty blood that had coursed on to her own outer bottom lip. Only then did she realize what she had done, but it was too late.

"You bitch!" he snapped. "Why I ought to..." He raised his fingers to his mouth and wiped away the blood that was flowing from the cut. "Spare yourself the agony, then. I doubt whether you could even please a man, let alone marry one."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and was gone, as Maureen felt herself sinking down upon the snow.

It damaged his ego that was obvious by his cold words. With his dashing looks, he was unaccustomed to being rebuffed by many women. She realized it was more than a question of his ego being hurt. She had hurt his pride as well. She had not anticipated seeing James's face before her instead of Julius's.

She wished she had not bitten him. It was an accident, but he had no way of knowing that. Now, he probably never would know.

Still he had called a doctor to attend to her. Deep in her heart she knew that he could not desert her now, not in this crisis. The doctor had left strict instructions for her to rest. The first few days she lapsed in and out of consciousness, but she was aware that someone was always pacing up and down her room. Yet, try as she might, she could never penetrate the blurriness.

Maureen remembered calling Julius's name repeatedly in her state of delirium, and she always felt a hand close by her side. Was it his?

Slowly with each passing day she began to see more clearly. When at last she regained consciousness it was to find Margot Rothmere, her most trustful friend whom she had met while at the

Tropez Girls' Finishing School, and not Julius, as she had previously thought.

One night, she dreamt that she was back in Australia. She was in her home state of Queensland. It felt good to be in Brisbane again, not halfway around the world at La Belles Skiing Resort in the centre of the Swiss Alps.

Whenever Maureen thought of Queensland, she smiled. For Queenslanders were called banana benders. She also realized just how much she had missed the Sunshine State, as Queensland was named. Queensland differed from the other states because of its frequent sunshine.

She often daydreamed about the sleepy suburbs where eucalyptus grew wild and flourished. Nearby, chimneys spat sulphur fumes into the air. Factories lined the streets, so did shops and restaurants and skyscrapers. The city itself was surrounded by undulating hills.

During her childhood she had acquired a love for nature and an appreciation of the undisturbed quiet of the bush because of her summer vacations at the Atherton Tableland. She had only to close her eyes and a picture of the sweeping mist and the vastness of rainforests appeared before her.

So it was that Maureen Leichester would gaze through her bedroom window of the Victorian mansion situated across the river at the elite suburb of St. Lucia. From the south-western wing, the outline of the University of Queensland was visible. So she would find herself standing on the balcony, daydreaming about her hopes for a suitable entrance score to study medicine at the university. That was before she had left Brisbane to live on the other side of the world.

How well, too, she remembered her father and all the happy moments they had shared when he was alive. Her father, an Earl, had immigrated to Australia. He had been en route to Sydney to investigate one of his investments when the airplane he had chartered crashed into the side of a mountain. She consoled herself by knowing he had not lingered in agony.

Her mother had married at the age of seventeen, after she had met the Earl at Fortrose in the Scottish highlands. Lady Leichester had a fair complexion with long auburn tresses that engulfed her sharp features.

Locals said Maureen was the duplicate of her mother. Maureen took comfort in knowing she was attractive and not still a plump teenager. As a child, she had become self-conscious and feared that she would carry the obesity with her throughout her life.

If only I had those loving days back once more, she thought. But, they were gone and so was the peace she had once known. Now, there were other thoughts clouding her already-troubled mind. Because her father was Irish and had the temperament to go with it, she accepted her own determination and strong self-discipline.

Did she really want a career in medicine that much? No one could possibly know how much she had agonized over this decision since she had met Julius.

Her parents believed that she should be sent to a Catholic girls' school in Brisbane. Later, her mother decided to send her to Europe to learn etiquette. Lady L., as her mother was called, wanted her to become a lady. She wanted to have a daughter whom she could guide through the milestones of life, although that was not the principal reason.

It was all Uncle James's fault. Why did he have to interfere in her life in the first place?

“Oh! Be honest with yourself,” she said aloud. “Mum had no choice but to send you away.”

Brisbane was kilometres from here, and perhaps that was fortunate. Even though she suffered from homesickness periodically, it was nothing in comparison to the disgust she felt toward James.

“Better to keep some distance between him and me,” she whispered to herself.

Maureen's mother had opened a bank account in Maureen's name, so she had no financial problems. Maureen was grateful for that.

Her father had also owned thousands of hectares on the Atherton Tableland. The property produced peanuts, and maize, and dairy cattle. He also had beef cattle that he sold. He had milk cows as well. Her father often said that it was wise not to gamble all your income on one game. With his investments, he had done whatever he had said.

During the summer vacations, her family stayed in the homestead that was situated on the undulating hillside among the evergreen hillocks. These slopes were tucked into the side of never-ending knolls. In all directions were avocado trees and crops of maize and peanuts. Farmlands surrounded the property.

Maureen recalled seeing the Millstream Falls on the family's last visit to the area. When the falls were flowing at their fullest, they were said to be the widest falls in the country. The fragrance of rainforest and the delicate orchids were timeless roots.

Perhaps, the abundance of the virgin rainforests was what she remembered as well as the lorikeets and sky-blue butterflies. She could continue, but she knew there were few words that would describe the serenity of Atherton and the majesty of its outer farmlands and scenery. She often thought this was where she could retire if ever hardship weighted her. And she promised herself that one day she would return and visit the family's housekeeper and loyal friend, Mrs. Potter.

"Yeah," she said, jolting her thoughts back into reality. So much had changed now, and there was her poor mother stuck with her horrid uncle. Why? She kept asking herself. Why us? Why me?

Suddenly, Margot was snapping her fingers in front of Maureen's face.

"Maureen, Maureen, wake up! Snap out of it!"

"Where's Julius? Where is he?"

"He's gone, Maureen," Margot whispered as she gently sat on the side of the bed.

"He came to say good-bye, but you were still unconscious." Maureen could hear the anxiety in Margot's voice as she listened. "You were in another world when I came in, and unfortunately he

couldn't stay. Besides, what do you expect when you were the one that sent him away?"

A frown creased her forehead as she tried to sort out her jumbled recollections.

"Oh, yeah, I remember," shaking her head in acknowledgment now, "it wasn't that I didn't like him immensely. I did like him, but . . . but I want my career. You know that, don't you?"

"Does Julius?" Margot interrupted.

"No! No! I tried to explain, but he wouldn't give me a chance. And I did something else. I accidentally mistook him for my uncle. It just happened that way. Then, I fainted and it . . . it, that is, everything became too much and . . . well, you know the rest, don't you?"

"Umm." By this time Margot was off the bed, striding up and down the room. Then, after some thought, she walked back over and took Maureen's hand. "I'm sorry. Forgive me! It's just that he seemed such a babe. And you got on so well together and I thought, I thought. . . . Oh, never mind what I thought. If it wasn't for that uncle of yours, you probably wouldn't be so stubborn. But, how could you mistake Julius for your uncle? What happened?" Margot raised her eyebrows in an arc.

"Leave my uncle out of it," Maureen snapped nervously. Stretching her free arm out unsteadily, she winced as her unused muscles became taut. "Sorry. I'm sorry. It's just that I'm tired, and I'd like to get some sleep if you don't mind. Did he . . . did he say anything to you before he left?" Maureen watched Margot wearily, not wanting to explain her actions.

As if not quite knowing whether or not to answer, and after some deliberation, Margot replied, "Well, yeah, in fact he did. He said he'd see you again in Australia. Guess he's curious about the country or he's interested in expanding his business. I don't know what he meant, but he appeared to be pleased with himself. And he said to apologize for his behaviour. It was bad timing, which it was, considering you had a broken leg. You must have been in a lot of pain."

“To say the least. So that's what he said, hey? Well, that's interesting, isn't it?”

Margot smiled knowingly. “Now, you get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning.”

“Oops. Before you go, would ya pass me the brush and hand mirror?”

“All right, but are you ready for this?”

“Of course I am,” Maureen said and poked out her tongue.

Taking the mirror, she gazed at the ghostly face that stared back at her. Her eyes widened as she noticed dark bruises around her eyes. Her skin was pale. Even her hair was dry and coarse and dishevelled.

“There's nothing there that a good wash and a little make-up couldn't fix,” Margot said. With that, she departed to her own room in preparation for the forthcoming dance that evening.

Maureen decided to take her advice, even if she did wake early in the afternoon. She had a lot of books to read and other things to amuse her.

Yet, as she tried to go to sleep something stirred inside her when she thought of Julius's absence. Closing her eyelids, she recalled the first time she saw him. It had been when Margot and she had entered the ballroom.

Maureen did not want to be left standing alone, and she knew Margot would not be short of a male for company, not with her stunning looks. It was during the completion of finishing school when it had all begun.

That Friday afternoon in mid-December was chaotic. They had their hair done at the La Belle's hair salon that was on the ground floor. Then it was time to choose their dresses.

Because the resort had central heating, they could take their time choosing their dresses. The boutique opposite the hair salon had offered a wide range of garments that neither Margot nor Maureen could resist. Revelling in their mounting excitement, they wandered through the array of elegant clothes.

Maureen was entranced by the John Mate range, while Margot chose Amy Shore's classic cut. It had taken them a total of two hours to try on the variety of clothes. Finally, they made their choices. They were both pleased that they had made these arrangements a month ago, so there was no chance that the shop would have sold all its stock.

Margot chose a silk organza dress of silver and grey. It had brocades of layered net that covered her shoulders. Her silky skin and blonde hair were accentuated by the style she had chosen, as it hugged her curves.

Maureen chose a gown made of pure silk with red roses etched in sleeves shaped like bells. The gown had a ruffle on the hemline. The waistline of the dress had a row of pearls that contrasted with a deep emerald green. Not only did it capture her model-like figure but it also brought out the highlights of her auburn hair and the depths in her hazel eyes.

This was also the opinion of the young girl in the shop when she said, "You look exactly like that famous beauty. What's her name, now? Yes, the likeness is uncanny. I've got it! She was in a movie about a famous painter. Oh! Wasn't she beautiful, miss? Don't you agree?"

She directed her question at Margot, who replied, "Now that I think about it, yes, there's a familiarity to some star in the United States. Yes, there is. Isn't there? Maureen, you do look a picture in that dress."

"Oh, thanks."

Delighted with their choices, they agreed to return to their respective rooms to prepare for the evening.

Once dressed, Maureen heard Margot's faint knock. Upon entering, Margot whistled at Maureen in appreciation and vice versa.

Looking in the mirror, Margot rolled her head and wrinkled her nose mischievously as she said, "Is this really happening? Are we actually going to the Ball at last? Wow! Hope the guys there like style."

“What man doesn’t like beautiful women?” Maureen said, as she picked up her fur piece from the bed and ushered Margot toward the door.

Together, they entered the ballroom. Soon, they were escorted to the waiting queue. They had to admit that Mrs. Lane, the head mistress, was as prompt and as observant as ever. All the girls were being given their last-minute instructions. They were told that they were each to be escorted in the first waltz after the presentations by the boys from St. Martin's Boys' Grammar School. After that, they were free to dance or to socialize.

Maureen looked on as Margot preceded her. Her eyes strayed to a brilliant crystal chandelier that hovered above the polished floor.

White lace tablecloths were petals among yellow roses and candelabrum that lighted the tables.

The band stopped playing, and Maureen caught her breath for a moment. Now, it was her turn. Gently lifting her dress, she swept to the floor in a curtsy and walked forward. Escorted by her partner, she waited for the music to begin. Turning to face him, she stood in position as the band played “Stairs to my Heart”.

He was not like most young men his age. Maureen was surprised but grateful that he could lead, and so she let her body feel the rhythm of the music as her ears caught every note of the rhapsody. David has quite a nice personality, she thought to herself. He spun her around in time to his light-footed steps. She felt as if she were dancing on air and could not help wondering where he learned to dance in this way.

Then as if he had read her mind, he said, “My parents won the grand championships here in Europe, last year.”

“I should have guessed,” came her reply.

Gradually, she turned her attention away from David. The uneasiness she felt earlier began to recede, and she smiled as she saw a handsome stranger walk among the guests.

Maureen felt an odd, fleeting sensation of excitement at the moment when she exchanged glances with the stranger. Self-

consciously aware of his penetrating gaze, she forced herself to look away.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the stranger approached her from the crowd and asked her to dance. She had been so engrossed with her dancing as she took the last few steps of the dance that she did not realize that he was more handsome than she first thought. After introducing himself as Julius McIntyre, he asked her name.

He resembled her father. Perhaps, this explained her attraction to him. Looking up into his face, she began to recall her father's features.

He too had an olive complexion that gave his skin an appearance of being tanned. Probably, the most explicable likenesses were those captivating, almost tawny-coloured eyes. His oval face had only a few lines that etched their way across his forehead, and a couple of lines ran more noticeably in a parallel just above his cheekbones. His eyelashes would have been the envy of any woman.

He was clearly the most handsome man she had ever met, so much so that it almost left her speechless. She scolded herself for being ridiculous, realizing it was only because he looked so much like her father. They could easily have been mistaken for brothers, had her father still been alive.

She was disturbed, but this was because she missed her father so much. Why else would she be experiencing these unusual feelings? "Why is my heart pounding twenty-to-the-dozen?" she asked herself.

He took her hand and led her on to the floor. Then he swept her swiftly into his muscular arms and they were gliding among the other couples in perfect rhythm to the melody of the "Stars Tonight". As he stared into her eyes, she felt a tingling sensation sweep through her body.

When he held her more closely, their bodies became almost inseparable. As he rested his cheek upon hers, she felt excitably nervous. She could feel his warm breath rushing over her face like a caressing breeze on a midsummer night.

Then, feeling the intimate proximity of his body, she could not help giving in to the subtle simplicity of her emotions. She could feel herself becoming rigid as she felt every movement of his body. Inwardly, she hoped that he was not aware of any of these emotions that were penetrating her body and mind. She prayed he did not notice the tension that she was enduring.

Although Maureen enjoyed the dancing, she was aware that he was watching her every move. This was different from anything she had ever experienced. It was unsettling, a strange sensation, and yet it was delectably intoxicating to be so close to someone and not utter a word. Somehow, their telepathic messages crossed and intermingled and ignited through the dance.

Now, in recollection, it was painfully obvious that something had occurred during their first meeting. Into her soul, he had crept.

Still confused, she pondered those elusive happy memories. She half wished everything was still the same between them, but now it was impossible. Had she been foolish? Was her career so important? She had wanted to become a doctor to fulfil an ambition. Sometimes, she doubted if she really knew. There was one thing, however, she did know. She knew that she would never forget him, and she wondered if he would remember her. Will his business take him to Australia? She could not force this thought from her mind.

If only we had met at a different period in my life. . . .

Had she been too presumptuous and acted too impulsively in her refusal of his proposal? She had spoken in haste. The throbbing pain shooting through her body was more than she could bear, now. That was when she had fallen asleep. As he had said, "It was bad timing," and the bitter words they had exchanged were now devastatingly real. How could she gather her shells of emptiness and go on?

His decision to leave could not have been an easy one, especially when she refused to marry him. But, how was she to know all the reasons behind his outburst of emotion? Now, she

realized that was what he meant by bad timing. She wondered too whether she would ever see Julius McIntyre again. If his Irish determinations were anything like hers, she already knew the answer. But, does he love me? Our meeting was so intense and so soon.

In the first two weeks of knowing him, she had discovered details about his family and himself, and she was surprised his line of ancestry was so long. If she had not been so absorbed with stargazing on the slopes, none of this would have happened. For the second time in her life, she felt despair. An awful sense of uselessness flooded her emotions like a tidal wave. She knew she had not felt this helpless for a long time.

As the years since that ugly scene with Uncle James passed, somehow, she always managed to surmount everything. At the moment, she was helpless to do anything. And her eyes brimmed with tears as the suppressed pain of the past once again became a reality.

She knew she could not forget those words Julius had spat at her. "You wouldn't know how to please a man, let alone marry one!" How humiliated she had felt. It was as if he had struck her with an ice pick, for the words bit into her heart. She knew she would never forget the waspishness in his voice and the challenging expression in his eyes that day.

She realized she was a coward, for there was truth in what he had said. But weakling was a better word. She should have brought herself to face up to James, but courage had failed her. This had to be the torment of her life, as if she had not suffered enough.

Why must I have this burden too?

"Oh, let the past stay where it belongs," she said dryly.

For at this time, the accident was uppermost in her mind. The past seemed to slide away as quickly as it had come.

Today, she was an avalanche of emotion as her thoughts took a momentary grip on that startling scene. Hastily the view of the accident sprang into clarity.

It was while they were skiing down the uppermost tip of the slope that Maureen had become too relaxed and equally careless in

her attention to the skills required at these speeds. She knew she had lost all sense of knowledge then as to what she was doing. At the time it seemed to be a couple of seconds in which she casually glanced across at Julius's profile, forgetting that she was also rapidly gaining speed as they began the descent while maneuvering between the firs and pines.

She had been, however, too elated to consider the escapade that she had embarked upon. Her happiness was unchecked as her heart sang in time with the swooshing of the snow on her skis. Abandoning her self-control, she gave herself freely to this wild freedom.

Julius, her heart sang.

Julius soon shouted something as she slammed into the unseen, low-hanging branch of a tree that was laden with snow. Its sudden impact jolted her back to reality. Before she could do anything, she was bearing down on another tree. It was too large to sidestep, although she tried desperately as she balanced her weight and her skis. She frantically maneuvered the ski to the left in a semicircular direction. The closer she came to the tree, the more obvious it became that she was losing control. And now she felt panic seize her mind and body violently as if she were glaciated.

Originally, Margot and John Carmichael had been accompanying them on the outing but they were nowhere in sight.

Vaguely, Maureen heard a voice calling out. The voice seemed faraway as she lay motionless in the snow. She was lucky her right leg had taken the brunt of the impact, along with her right shoulder. Somehow, she had managed to swing herself sideways to escape a head-on collision with the tree.

While she was momentarily stunned, she remembered watching Julius as he attended to her. Then he went to make a splint for her leg, but something must have happened after that. For although she could hear him speaking distantly, she could not reply. Then everything went black as she drifted into a deep sleep.