

The Law of Success
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Confidence is an art, a stylistic design that is intricately conceived from the way that your smile tints the room to the way your heels touch the ground. Knowing how to wield it could turn it into a deadly weapon.

Amber Delacruz knew the tale by heart, her unwavering self assurance engraved in her with every step she took. Whether her heart was filled with pride or empty with grief, the world would only see what she wanted them to see- a presence worthy of observation.

As she entered the Calgary Courts Centre, she was feeling more of the latter. She prayed this case would be insignificant on her record, washed away in the wind, although she knew it would be quite the opposite. She brought the sin upon herself the moment she answered the phone three days back, unsuspecting of what wreckage was about to be thrust upon her.

Just as she took a left into the first hallway, a familiar face of golden light burst turned to face her, rushing towards her. Her soft, blonde locks emanated a scent of rose petals and cinnamon dust- an aroma that identified her in seconds. Mirren was particular in that sense, always doing things in a detailed, routinely manner that made her stand out from others. “Amber!” She gushed, releasing her tight hug only to face her, verdant eyes sparkling. “What are you doing here?”

It occurred to her that she hadn’t seen her best friend in months, wading her hours away in Lethbridge as she watched over her mothers sickly demise. While she was counting dollars,

Mirren was counting the very days that led up to today's trial- the conviction of Darren Sandlers. She invited Amber weeks in advance to accompany her in the public seating area, but until three days ago- Amber didn't anticipate in the slightest that she would find the time.

And yet here she was, attending the same exact case for a completely different reason.

It all started at six in the morning, when she received a call in her office from Connor Sandlers, Darrens older brother and strong willed advocate. When an empowered associate of a crooked convict dials your number, your gut instincts are meant to protect you from potential mayhem and hang up the phone immediately.

But the daunting offer of riches kept her on the line. A bid of two million dollars, a one time transfer that could finally pay for her mothers awaiting medical transplant. No matter how many cases her solo practicing law firm racked up, it felt like all the funds were being drained into the whirlwinds of consultations and medical inspections- temporary walls hiding a permanent solution. Two million could pay for the entirety of a heart transplant, one with effective donors and top lined doctors that would ensure the survival of her last standing family member.

The only cost? Defend his murderous brother in court, and win.

The moral conflict had less to do with the crime and more with the suspect. Darren Sandlers, a forty five year old supermarket employee who blatantly shot a married couple in their own home, breaking in and out in less than five minutes. Their only daughter, Mirren Valencia, had been at a friend's house for the duration of the tragedy, immediately calling the cops over her parents' corpses when she arrived home. With a nifty set of DNA left at the scene and an alibi

without further confirmation, the evidence traced back to Darren, whose fate for the next twenty five years would all be determined by an awaited verdict.

It was Mirren's job to sit in front of the arrays of seating and give herself closure..

It was Amber's job to sit in front of the judge and convince her otherwise.

She wanted to tell Mirren immediately, to break the ice now before it shattered later- but there was something about the joy in her eyes, the bubbling excitement and hope she hadn't seen since the accident, that felt too fragile to break.

So her whimsical confidence played a facade. "I couldn't let you watch him go down alone, could I?"

The words were acid on her tongue, dissolving every last bit of dignity she had in her heart. Mirren's face glowed as she hugged her tight, thanking her as she grabbed her hand excitedly to enter the courtroom. Amber cherished what she could of it, knowing it would fade all too bitterly.

Calgary wasn't known for its extravagant crimes the way most cities were, and so the case of a double homicide was enough to gather a full public seating area. While Mirren was eyeing the empty seat in the front row, Amber noticed her client almost immediately, his black hair brittle from the back and swooped at the front. She fluffed her carmine tresses with preciseness, making eye contact with him as he faced her from his seat. With such captivating blues, it seemed impossible to view anything from the surface but innocence.

But a surface was all it was- a clean face to hide a filthy personality.

As Mirren ushered to take her seat, Darren stood up tall, turning to face the pinstriped man sitting next to him.

“You’re fired.”

With such a booming voice, the crowd ushered into gradual silence. The man looked up at him, perplexed and frankly bewildered. “Excuse me?”

In response, Darren pointed to the grand doors where Amber had just made her entrance. “I have a new representation. Amber?”

All eyes turned to face her, Mirrens included. Straightening her posture, she walked straight ahead towards the judge, who seemed nothing but amused at the spectacle.

“Amber Delacruz- Criminal Defense Attorney, Ma’am. Due to a lack of commitment and proper etiquette from Mr Sandler’s previous lawyer, we have filed a Notice of Change of Counsel that allows me to appear as Sandler’s new defense counsel.”

The judge pushed her glasses up in consideration, confirming her statement on the side before eyeing the previous lawyer. “You are excused.”

The man sputtered in protest, but was met with no reply. When cornered, he simply spat at Darren’s shoes and ushered out of the room in distress, leaving the crowd to mutter among themselves.

“Order in the court!” The judge called for stillness as Amber took a seat next to Darren. She stiffened in his presence, the smell of blood practically bursting from his ambiance. The judge made the formal introduction, naming the case with a few listed rights and introducing the Crown Prosecutor as Crown Prosecutor Jaron Smith. Amber made eye contact with his slim figure and flint-eyed determination, nodding and reacting when applicable with minimal attentiveness. She recalled the narrative she practiced in the mirror, unaware of how she managed to look herself in the eyes as the sour words came out of her mouth. The case was as

rough as granite and yet somehow, she was assigned with a nearly foolproof take on the case that seemed both fictional and plausible.

Finally, she snapped back when Jaron rose to make his case. It was her task to profile him extensively, from the flow of his words to the movement of his body. She knew confidence well enough to catch someone out of it- and use it well to her advantage.

“Cadence and Jaren Valencia had the right to be safe in their own home. They always had been, until the fateful night of April 30th, when they were brutally murdered in their bedroom. Four shots- one to the head and another to the chest each, ended the lives of a couple who had their entire lives ahead of them. They co-owned a successful real estate firm- Valencia & Co and left behind a daughter who desperately needed them. Mirren Valencia, an astute woman who was frolicking with a friend before tragedy struck her door and ripped her life to pieces.” Amber winced at Mirren's mention, withholding herself from turning around.

“She called the cops to investigate, in which they found the DNA of Darren Sandlers all over the stairs and tinted on the carpet.” Jaron made his way towards the judge with laminated reports. “Pieces of his fallen hair, a fingerprint and some absorbed saliva don't just appear in the house of a dead couple out of the blue, do they? Additionally, his previous dealings in crime make him a likely candidate and his close proximity as a neighbour made it easy for him to sneak in and out.” He shot a glance at Darren in search of a reaction, but he was just as skilled at hiding repercussions as he was hiding truths.

“The gun that he used was never found, but it is quite plausible that he managed to obtain and hide a gun the same way he obtained and hid drugs in the past.” Jaron listed the many felonies on his fingers. “He found dealers, made exchanges and both used and sold weed and

fentanyl under the radar for years- what makes you think that he couldn't have gotten ahold of a weapon as common as a gun?"

Amber gave credit where the credit was due, admitting the intelligence of that argument. When a suspect has already been nailed down by the justice system before, all you have to do is tighten the screw to secure the argument. When Jaron finished, he returned to his table, eyes glowering with arrogance.

As he took a postured seat, hands clasped together with study precision- Amber couldn't help but smirk in anticipation. He didn't know what was coming- and she oddly thrived from egoistic competition.

The judge, compelled by the rationale, turned her attention to the only witness on the stand. It was an elderly lady, frail to the bone with strands of hair that withered like winter frost.

"Lyra Crescent." The judge formally introduced her. "It is my understanding that you were next door while this was all occurring. Your statement?"

Lyra chapped her lips together, looking around hesitantly before releasing a breath. "I was watching reality TV in the living room, blasting the volume quite high to keep myself entertained. Twenty minutes into my episode, I heard a gunshot." She paused. "Then another. Then another. Then another."

Her hands shook at the stand, her mauve, pale eyes locked onto Darren as she stood as firm as possible.

"It took me a moment to get my composure together, debating on whether I was simply hearing things, but eventually, I gathered the spilled guts to walk up to the living room window." She creased her eyebrows, remaining deep in thought. "Just as I walked up towards it, he ran out. He was dressed in all black with a hood, but I caught a glimpse of his slight face, build and height."

She nodded her head with a quiet thank you, the judge motioning her attention to Amber with the single inciting words to strike her going.

“Your defense?”

Without hesitating, Amber stepped up to the center, equipped with a stone cold visage with her eyes locked on Lyra.

“Can you say with one hundred percent accuracy that you saw the suspect clearly?”

She nodded- no words necessary. She may have appeared to be assertive on the surface, but Amber knew the mastery of credence with every stroke- detecting the difference between artificial boldness and true assurance in an instant.

“Okay, then let's say Darren Sandlers is the man you saw, dressed in all black in the middle of the night after committing a murder.” She took a small step closer, hands at her side.

“He is a former drug addict, correct? A dealer and user who was sentenced to four years in prison but got out two years early for good behaviour.” Amber motioned to Darren, who was loosening his position to appear less rigidified and nervous by the intricate spotlight. “If you were a criminal who dodged prison, it is unlikely you would risk relapsing to a secondary, drastically worse crime and get caught so easily.”

Lyra didn't flinch with an instant comment. “Federal prisoners in Canada who are sentenced to two or more years are seventy percent more likely to reoffend within two years after their release- earlier depending on the circumstance.”

The lights in the courtroom flickered as Amber masked her impression on Lyra, who had clearly done her research before showing up. She knew she would be on the stand as a neutral

witness alone, but the stare she gave Darren during her testimony said everything about where she stood on the scale.

Amber nodded. "Let's take that statistic into consideration. Darren walks into the house due to the door being left open, shoots the parents and then searches for an escape. All premises within a two kilometer radius were thoroughly searched for any signs of weapon disposal and nothing came up- meaning he took the gun with him at least that far." She feebly cracked her knuckles.

"If you were running out of a house, dressed in all black in the middle of the night with experience with cops and a weapon on you- you wouldn't run into the middle of the road, would you?"

Lyra took a second to process that the question was not merely hypothetical.

"No, you would not."

"Exactly." Amber began to pace, slightly moving towards the witness. "Your house is right next door, meaning you only have a single living room window and it faces the front of the house. For you to walk up to the window at the exact moment of escape, the suspect would have to be passing by the front of your house with nothing in front of it but an open space."

Murmurs passed through the crowd, but Amber was just getting started.

"The crime took place an hour prior to midnight, with a suspect dressed entirely in black. Now, if we were to assume, though we are not, that a seasoned criminal would be careless enough to cross an open road, fully visible to passing cars and witnesses, it would still be impossible to identify them based on minor details alone."

She cracked her neck back momentarily, continuing her statement.

"If the suspect was running for their life, accurately judging their height would be nearly impossible. In the darkness, black clothing would make their build blend seamlessly into the

night. And finally, in the panic of the moment, getting a clear look at their facial features would be highly unlikely."

Amber paused, only to absorb the very moment of silence. The witness's eyebrows were creased in question of her own words, giving Amber the scar of opportunity to turn to the judge with a statement.

"Your Honor, there are many reasons in which I chose to represent Darren Sandlers today. He is a past sinner, but a recovering one. He deserved proper representation as every human does- but that is not all. The truth is, I am not just here to prove the innocence of my client- but shed light on the true instigator of the situation."

She sighed, constricting herself from biting her tongue into a bloodbath. This assertion was the hardest to convey with a straight face.

"I have reason to believe that the one to kill Jaren and Cadence Valencia was none other than their own daughter- Mirren."

The crowd erupted into gasps and dramatized chatter as all the spotlight fell on Mirren. Although she had yet to muster the courage to look her in the face, she could imagine the emotion brimming underneath her crystalised skin, an imbalance of curiosity and anger. "Order! Order!" The judge called expressively, hushing the entire room into soundless pause. Jaron watched her intriguingly as the floor was hers to steal.

"The court has made an attempt at creating a justifiable excuse for the mysterious door being left unlocked." Her voice wasn't just conviction, it was power- enough to attract an entire audience into watching her every facial expression through and through without an ounce of boredom. "It's easy to say the unsuspecting daughter accidentally left it open, but that is a flimsy

argument. I mean- Mirren goes in and out that door everyday and never leaves it unlocked, let alone at night.” Amber requoted her earlier thoughts. “She always has a particular way of doing things.”

She allowed the judge to take quiet note of that before bringing on her next point. “Then, let's talk about professions, shall we? Mirren is a young, healthy twenty five year old actress and trained stunt double while my client is an aging forty five year old man working a minimum wage supermarket position and a recovering drug addict.” Amber grabbed a flimsy case file from the table and brought it towards the judge. “The reports show that the bullets were at perfect accuracy, right dead center in the forehead and straight through the heart.” She paused for emphasis. “Shot from the front door to where they sat on their beds, was a two feet distance.”

The silence in the room was aggravating, giving Amber the space to continue her argument as she began to pace again. “Four perfect shots with foolproof accuracy. My client only began rehab two months ago, not giving him nearly enough time to set himself straight- let alone have the bonafide grip and aim of a trained professional.”

Unless that client had been clean long enough to practice in his basement like the sadist he was- except the court didn't have to know that.

“You are comparing an old, shivered man to an individual who has been doing fight scenes and stunts for years, trained with eye-hand coordination with full access to the victims house and born into a rich enough family to cash grab a gun from any local dealer?” She shrugged. “I think we can agree on who has the raw potential.”

“Objection!” Jaron was quick to his feet. “It was confirmed during an interview that Mirren Valencia had been at the house of Ariel Summers during the time of murder- she couldn’t have possibly been slaughtering her parents at the same time.”

Amber straightened her shoulders as she elegantly retreated to her clients table, shooting Darren a doubtful glare before grabbing a second set of files. She felt her nerves slipping down her stomach and steadied herself with a deep, measured breath and recalled what she could.

“Ariel Summers- twenty three year old only child who is currently living at her parents house.” She handed the judge the second file, reciting the facts that were on it. “Plane tickets confirmed that her parents are currently in Las Vegas, set to return next weekend- leaving her as the sole alibi to Mirren Valencias presence at her house.”

Amber pushed her hair to the side. “Ariel has a history of unreliable behaviour- remarkable moments in which she took bullets for others and embraced dishonest culture. If you look closely at the file, you will see that I have compiled several instances in which Ariel defied the code of honor, perhaps diminishing her reliability as an alibi.”

There were more murmurs among the multitude, judgemental glances being thrown Mirren's way as the judge peered down at the writing, tipping her glasses to the side as she read out the multiple, proven offenses.

“Falsely reported a mugging incident at a cafe to receive a replacement phone, faked a short-term illness diagnosis to receive public sympathy and expelled from a business management course she applied to due to fabricating university reports.”

More hushed chatter emerged as Amber made eye contact with Darren, confirming that the information was real. He was the one who gathered all the accusations against Mirren- she was only getting paid to execute it. Most of those incidents were old, from the very peak of her

teenage years down to her early twenties that would have taken days of searching to obtain hard evidence of.

“As you can see, Ariel has lied and manipulated society on several occasions- what's to stop her from covering for a friend who needed a way out of her parents murder?”

Amber side glanced at Jaron, who was compiling himself to make another objection- but Amber stopped him in his tracks.

“And if you're about to argue on a motive...” she reached for her phone that was conveniently placed in her back pocket, practically seething for this moment. “There are text messages of conversation that prove otherwise, messages obtained legally and entered as evidence before the hearing, in which Mirren admitted how desperately she craved her parents' inheritance- the thrill and stability of all the riches that could come with it if they had just disappeared”

As she made her way to the judges desk, a pitched voice yelled from the audience.

“Your Honor, she can't show that!”

All eyes, including the judge, turned to Mirren who was furiously gripping the borders at the front.

“That is a violation of my privacy! I conversed with her in private about a personal subject and she is connecting it into an unrelated situation, thus making it irrelevant.”

Amber eyed the judge, the phone inches away from her desk. “I can assure you- it is relevant.”

The judge paused ephemerally, glancing between them both before accepting the device.

“In this courtroom, all evidence is accepted given that it supports the defendant's argument and as she stated, she filed it beforehand.”

Just as she grabbed it, the world shifted. For the first time since she entered the courtroom, Amber looked Mirren in the eyes. Her outward confidence never wavered to the

public, but she felt her heart tearing away to the flames in her eyes, a raging fire within her emerald gaze. She recognized the text messages that were being shown without even glancing at them- a conversation in which she foretold all her worst concerns to Amber in a state of vulnerability. It was one of their first poignant conversations in a while, connecting through shared opinions and brutal feelings. She discussed situations where her parents would pass and she would inherit all of their wealth and earnings, giving her an opportunity to spend freely without the judgemental scrutiny of her parents. They were all transparent, hypothetical situations discussed on inclination.

But with the right twist, you can make anything dangerously incriminating- as long as nobody else knows the truth.

As a few more seconds dragged on, Amber formed a steady conclusion.

“All of the evidence makes my client a less likeable candidate. No physical capabilities, no effective motif and no motive- all qualities that lean more towards Mirren Valencia. In fact, my client has informed me that within the past few weeks, he has encountered Mirren around him several times in situations where she could have obtained DNA.” Amber noted the variety of situations, from bake sales to charity drives- all with dozens of possibilities where Mirren could have tricked Darren into leaving behind a paper trail of DNA for her to plant.

“She believed selecting a former criminal would be an easy scapegoat, but the statements against him have many open gaps- questions that put him out of the picture and at the very least, make Mirren a primary suspect.” Her eyes met the judges, standing firm before giving a timid thank you and returning to her seat. The judge was quick to call a brief recess, putting conversation into motion again.

“Well played” Darren muttered, his gaze diverted to the side. “I heard you were a strong arguer, but you talk about a bigger game than I expected.”

If he was expecting her to be flattered, he was mistaken. Her guts were churning in and out, the taste of guilt fresh on her tongue. Never in her career did she anticipate using her career to frame her best friend, let alone being complimented for it. If the case was rejected, Mirren would never forgive her.

And if the case was accepted, she wouldn't be around to consider it.

Throughout her anxious minutes, she kept a firm face to avoid suspicion or potential accusations of her inability to focus. Finally, the judge called the courtroom back to order, her focus on Jaron.

“Could you provide a counter that could explain why Darren is a more probable candidate than Mirren? Anything at all?”

Sometimes, strong silence is better than a weak rebuttal, but most prosecutors don't back down willingly.

“W-well all of what she has suggested is merely hypothetical. Darrens DNA was all over the scene, excessively.”

“Excessive enough to suggest a desperate framing?” The judge questioned, catching Amber by surprise. Was she about to take her side?

Jaron stammered in defense. “Not necessarily.” but his attempts were nothing but a consistent repeat of points, each point turned down before he was told to step down. Even from the audience seats, Amber could recognize Mirrens fearful gasp, subtle yet confused. The judge slammed a gavel to avoid the inevitable rush of noise, bringing all the attention to the front.

“We have heard both sides of the argument, taken by surprise by the sudden accusations of Miss Delacruz that put a new potential suspect into light.” She contemplated before delivering the final verdict. “In light of this new evidence, I am to declare this trial compromised. Darren Sandlers is to be released pending further investigation with Mirren Valencia taken into immediate custody for further questioning.”

The gavel slams, the sound shaking all the nerves in her body into cold submission. An odd mix of emotions rose from the crowd, some were cheering while others were protesting- but all attention suddenly fell on Mirren, the innocent girl trembling in fury.

The judge motioned to two officers who were spectating on the sides, the nudge of her head commanding them to withhold Mirren. Before they could seize her, she pushed past the individuals blocking her in an attempt to dart out of the room. If Amber had been next to her, she would have instructed her to stay put, as it would give the cops less of a reason to charge her in questioning and less situations to use against her.

But if Amber had been next to her, she wouldn't have needed to run in the first place.

Darren gives Amber a pat on the back, whispering a reassurance of the riches to be transferred into her account for setting him free. Meanwhile, all Amber seems to have the confidence to do is stand on her two feet and watch.

Watch the solid hands grab her by the forearms before she can make it out the door.

Watch the cold metal sling around her wrists, the cuffs reddening her skin from impact.

Watch the betrayal unfold in front of her own eyes, the pain that she caused and the friendship she just burned into ashes.

Mirren looked back at Amber, the fire in her eyes only seeming to burn brighter. As she was shoved into the distance, Amber could read between the flames. The heartbreak of betrayal, attached with a newer promise of revenge.

“You were worth every penny.” He smirked, thriving over the commotion and serving a bitter reminder of what Amber had done.

She had just freed the guilty and locked away the innocent.

Amber was an artist of confidence, someone who knew how to put on a show that defied all her raw emotions. She was a lawyer, someone who studied the cortexes of criminals in order to do what was right.

But as her best friend drained into the distance, she couldn't bear to think of herself as any type of artist or hero. Who was she to determine what was right and what was wrong, when she just sold her other half for a quantitative sum of numbers. The winner took it all, except she didn't feel like a winner when it was her who lost everything. It didn't take too long for her to realize what she had truly fought for- the only law she really knew.

Take what you need to survive, even if it kills everyone else.