



THE UNWRITTEN JOB DESCRIPTION

How to Redesign Work and Life on Your Terms

The most important job is not the one you have been hired for,
but the one you live every day.

Serena Martino

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You should write a book

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Chapter 1 - Why Does Success Feel Like This

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The difference between what looks good and what feels like yours

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Chapter 2 - The Invisible Script

How we unconsciously inherit models of work, success, and worth

Meet Alex.

Alex is an ambitious VP, who's worked all her life in tech, starting from entry level. At every company she's been with, she was a top performer. Every challenge she was given, she found a way to overcome. Despite the hard work, despite the occasional frustration, she was proud of all she had accomplished.

And yet, sometimes - at the end of a heavy week, or once every few months - she couldn't help but wonder: *Is that it?*

Then there's Peter.

Peter built his career in finance first, and consulting later, with one clear goal in mind: *be successful.

This was proven by the fact that he was always given new projects, new responsibilities. No matter how difficult the task, he'd take it on - and just get it done.

The tiredness started building over the years, especially as his family grew. But he felt good knowing he was giving them a good life.

Too often, though, he caught himself thinking about the sacrifice. *Was it worth it?* But the thought would pass quickly. Something else would come up. And he'd say to himself, *well... this is just the way it is.*

I'm pausing here for a moment to clarify something

important. Alex and Peter, like everyone you'll meet in this book, aren't exactly real in the way a biography is real. Their names are changed to protect their privacy.

But what you're reading comes from real conversations, held in strict confidence. Private sessions. Unfiltered confessions. The quiet truths shared after a long pause. Their stories are composites, drawn from hundreds of hours of coaching, and from the invisible weight so many people carry, silently.

These characters aren't invented. They're chimeras, formed from real experiences, patterns I've seen again and again.

Their stories don't belong to one person. They belong to many. Maybe even to you.

Let's go back to Alex.

That Friday evening, she sat in her car outside the house. The Slack notifications kept buzzing all the time during the ride, but only now could get her attention. A message from her manager, another "quick ask" to check before Monday. She didn't respond. Not yet.

Inside, the lights were on. But she stayed in the car, staring at the dashboard.

It wasn't that she was unhappy. She liked her team. She was proud of how far she'd come. But something — she couldn't quite name it — had started to feel off and uneasy. As if a part of her kept waiting for something, and another part was afraid it would never come.

Now, Peter.

He woke up in the middle of the night and passed by his laptop - still on. The room was dark except for the screen's glow. He paused

for a second to check the messages, then sat down. After a while, he heard a noise behind him. He turned, distracted, and noticed his wife giving the biberon to their daughter.

He suddenly remembered why he had gotten out of bed.

His wife's face wasn't disappointed, more resigned. She barely looked at him and went to the next room.

He wanted to say something, but then a ping caught his attention again, pulling him back.

"I'll just answer *this last one* and then I'll go back to bed."

At this point, it would be easy to start explaining why this happens, to observe, to judge their choices, or even to take sides. But the truth is, there's nothing inherently right or wrong in what they did or how they felt.

What Alex and Peter are living was formed long ago, running deep inside them. It's something they didn't write, didn't sign up for, and mostly don't even see.

This is the invisible script: the unconscious stories and rules we inherit about work, worth, and what it means to be successful.

It runs beneath the surface, steering decisions, defining our identity, and often pulling people like Alex and Peter into patterns they wish they could escape.

1. The script we do not see

A familiar way to find your hidden script it is listening that quiet voice in your head, whispering rules you didn't choose but somehow live by every day.

It's the set of beliefs, expectations, and assumptions about work, success, and who you need to be -- passed down silently, like a family heirloom since the day you were born, maybe earlier.

Again, we don't want to put "good" or "bad" labels on it. At this point, we only want to recognise them and understand where they

come from. Only after that can we decide if they're useful or if we want to rewrite part of them. So let's keep going without judgment for now.

Take work, for example. Let's start with your parents (they always end up with some blame anyway). They shape so much of our core beliefs and life experience. You might have hardworking parents who pushed you to excel — a good thing — but it might also mean you feel the need to keep proving yourself to avoid disappointing them. Or maybe your parents weren't a good model for success, and you strive to be different, to prove your worth another way.

Whatever your history, it shapes your choices and your sense of value. The feeling that if you slow down, you're lazy. That saying "no" means weakness. That your worth depends on what you produce, not who you are.

I was discussing this recently with a client, about how their identity and value kept changing throughout their career and was always very tied to their role. This is why a job in a well-known company might give you a sense of pride, compared to a similar role in a company nobody knows, regardless of the actual value you bring.

This is a dangerous equation: Worth = Role. My value is my job. Or, put another way, *my identity is what I do*. We'll explore this more deeply soon.

Let's look back at Alex. Something inside her pushes her to keep going, to meet every challenge, to prove she belongs. It's why she's at the top of her game, but also why, in quiet moments, she wonders if — and when — she decided to follow this path.

Or Peter, who keeps shutting down his inner voice by staying busy — demanding more, tying his worth to the hours logged — but that voice is screaming louder and louder every day now that his life is changing and a new script is being written — trying to remind him he's forgotten why he's building what he's building.

This invisible script is what I call the busyness script, and it shows

up in countless ways:

- The endless to-do list that never feels finished.
- The guilt when you take a break.
- The hesitation to ask for help.
- The fear that resting means falling behind.

But there are many others we all know too well. Like pushing ourselves to be productive all the time, even when we're exhausted. That voice inside saying, "If you stop now, you're not good enough." It's not just about finishing tasks; it's about proving we're worthy: worthy of respect, success, or even rest.

Rest itself becomes tricky. When things slow down, that quiet space makes us wonder, "Am I falling behind? Wasting time?" So instead of stopping, we keep busy, scared that if we pause, we lose control or value.

Saying no feels almost impossible for many. It can come with guilt, like we're letting people down or being difficult. So even when overwhelmed, the script pushes us to say yes, keep going, don't rock the boat — because our worth depends on how much we do for others.

And at the core of it all, we tie our self-worth to what we produce. We feel valuable only when we check off tasks or hit goals. But who we are beyond that — the kindness, creativity, or curiosity — is often ignored or forgotten.

These patterns aren't just habits we have adopted; they shape everyday decisions, quietly running our lives — just like they do for Alex and Peter. Once we can recognize them, we start thinking about changing.

2. Where it comes from

These invisible scripts don't just appear out of nowhere. They come with us from the very beginning, quietly weaving themselves,

like pairs of tinted glasses that change how we see the world, and ourselves. They're not rules written down in a handbook, but emotional codes picked up through everyday moments. Subtle, often unspoken, and deeply felt.

So how do they take hold?

It's not just what we're told — it's how we *feel* those messages. The warmth or coldness in a parent's voice. The tension in a teacher's silence. The pride in a colleague's nod. These feelings stick with us, often without us even noticing, like background music to our thoughts. These scripts evolve over time, layering themselves as we move through different stages of life. Each environment adds something new — family, school, work — shaping us until the script becomes the story we live by.

Family

Family often lays the first bricks. From our parents, family or the people who raised us.

Even before we understand language, we're absorbing how the world works — how we should be to fit in, to be loved, to stay safe. A raised eyebrow, a sigh, a cheer — or the quiet disappointment when you didn't measure up to some unseen standard — it all teaches us something. Not just about behaviour, but about our worth.

Some of us heard:

“Be the good girl.”

“Make us proud.”

“Don't be a burden.”

“Prove yourself, we didn't get the chance.”

Or maybe, “Don't end up like us.”

Others never heard it said out loud. But we felt it. We learned early how to please, how to avoid upsetting anyone, how to achieve just enough to earn affection or attention. These lessons weren't framed as life advice. They were absorbed in everyday life — at the dinner

table, during moments of silence, in small reactions that repeated often enough to become a pattern.

And it's important to say: this isn't about blame.

Parents bring their own stories, fears, hopes, and pain. Most of the time, they pass down scripts they didn't even know they carried. Some of those scripts come from love and care — a desire to protect us, to push us toward what they thought would make us happy. Others might come from their own wounds, unhealed and unexamined.

It's complicated. And that's okay.

What matters is seeing that these messages weren't just logical ideas — they were emotional blueprints. And they still shape us long after we leave home.

Early Influencers

If early childhood is where the first scripts are planted, growing up — especially the teen years — is where they start to take shape.

It's when we begin noticing how the world works. Not just through what adults tell us, but by watching what gets rewarded, what gets overlooked, and what gets quietly punished. School reinforces these early scripts through grades, rankings, and rules. It teaches us to perform, to fit in, to prove ourselves.

We start learning how to belong.

For some of us, that learning happens in school, but it's not really about what's in the textbooks. It's about the spaces between the lessons. The subtle rules behind a good grade (or a bad one), who gets noticed, and what happens when you step outside the lines.

You might hear:

“Get top marks or you'll go nowhere”

“Don't stand out too much.”

“Fit in...or get left out.”

“If you make a mistake, everyone will see it.”

Even if no one says those words directly, the message gets through. Sometimes from teachers. Sometimes from parents. Often from friends, classmates, or the systems around us.

And by this stage, we're already learning to link being accepted with doing things *right*. Performing well. Keeping it together. Avoiding mistakes. Chasing praise — or at least avoiding judgment.

For many, this is also when the inner voice starts to form. The one that pushes us, doubts us, compares us. The one that says, "You're only good enough if..." or "Don't mess this up."

Of course, not all of it is negative. Some of these lessons help us grow, stretch, succeed. But when they're absorbed without awareness, they can quietly shape how we see ourselves, long before we've had the chance to decide who we want to be.

By the time we step into adulthood, most of us are already carrying a set of beliefs that feel like *truth*.

But really, they're just stories we picked up along the way.

Workplace

Adulthood doesn't erase the scripts we've absorbed, it just adds new layers.

The workplace becomes the next stage where these messages evolve. We move from trying to be the "good student" or "good child" to becoming the "perfect employee," the "go-to person," the one who always delivers.

But now, the rules are different.

We start hearing new messages. Not directly: they rarely need to be said out loud. We just feel them.

"Be irreplaceable."

"Don't switch off."

"Keep proving yourself."

"Your worth is in your output."

You might not walk around saying, “I must earn my worth through productivity,” or “Rest is only allowed when everything is done.” But you might notice how uncomfortable it feels to slow down. Or how quickly guilt creeps in when you’re not being “useful.” That’s the script in action—*not* shouting, just quietly directing the show.

They show up in the unspoken tension of a late-night email, in the praise that only comes when you go the extra mile, in the discomfort of saying *no* to one more task.

Work becomes the place where overachievement is rewarded, and rest quietly questioned or met with raised eyebrows. Where urgency becomes a badge of honour. Where being “always on” is not just accepted but expected. And where many of us start tying our value directly to what we produce, how quickly we respond, and how much we can handle.

These scripts are often reinforced not just by managers or leadership, but by the culture around us — peers, teams, entire industries. And because most of us spend a huge part of our lives at work, these beliefs can sink in deep.

What makes this even trickier is that these new scripts often sound familiar. They’re not totally new. They echo the old voices we picked up as kids or teens, just dressed in more professional language. The same need to prove. The same fear of not being enough. Just with more sophisticated stakes: a promotion, reputation, job security.

Sometimes these scripts drive us to do great things. They push us to stretch, grow, and contribute. But the danger is when we don’t even know they’re running in the background — when they become the mirror through which we see ourselves, our performance, and our worth.

They’re powerful because at this point they feel like our only reality.

And it’s hard to question something that feels like “just the way it

is.”

Culture

Culture shapes us in quiet but powerful ways. It’s not just about where we’re born or the language we speak. It’s the water we swim in, often unnoticed, yet deeply influential. Culture can mean the country you’re from, the religion you were raised in, or the values your society holds up as “right.” It can even be about time, how old you were when something happened, or the era in which you grew up.

Having worked with people from all over the world, the simplest way I’ve found to explain cultural scripts is by looking at two broad ends of a spectrum: East and West.

In many Eastern cultures, there’s a strong focus on the group—family first, society first, harmony first. The individual comes second. Life decisions are often shaped around collective needs: What will make the family proud? What will bring honor? What keeps the peace? There’s pride in fulfilling your role and doing what’s expected, even if it comes at a personal cost.

In contrast, Western cultures tend to lean hard into individualism. “Follow your dreams.” “Be your best self.” “Stand out.” Ego isn’t just accepted—it’s rewarded. We’re encouraged to carve our own path, chase personal success, and be seen as exceptional. The story is: put yourself first, and everything else will follow.

Of course, neither approach is inherently right or wrong. They’re just different ways. But the challenge becomes sharper for those who live in between.

What I often see, especially with clients who’ve moved countries, grown up with immigrant parents, or live in a culture that clashes with their upbringing, isn’t that they’re able to take the best from both worlds. It’s that they feel torn between them.

Not Eastern enough. Not Western enough. Always caught between two sets of rules.

Instead of freedom, it often creates guilt. A sense of never quite measuring up. They carry the weight of expectations from both sides and feel like they're constantly disappointing someone, sometimes even themselves.

Beyond geography and heritage, culture also includes the social and economic worlds we grow up in. The expectations and pressures of a wealthy upbringing can be very different from those of a more modest background. Whether it's the resources available, the role models we see, or the assumptions others make about us, these factors quietly influence our beliefs about success and what's possible.

It's a quiet, internal battle: Should I put my needs first, or is that selfish? Should I follow the rules, or break them? Am I being true to myself, or betraying where I came from?

This inner conflict becomes its own invisible script: *You must be everything to everyone. You must do it right, for all sides.* And that's exhausting.

The point here isn't to pick a side or declare one culture "better." It's to notice how these big, invisible forces shape our beliefs about success, identity, and worth. To see that sometimes, the conflict we feel isn't personal—it's cultural. And that awareness can be the first step in loosening the grip.

3. Why It's So Hard to See or Challenge

By the time we're adults, most of these scripts feel so natural we don't even recognise them as scripts.

They don't just come from our parents, schools, or jobs. They're everywhere. In the air we breathe. In the magazines we flipped through as teenagers, the movies we watched, and the way people talked about success or failure at family dinners. Society hands out silent expectations like party favours — who you should be, what a "good life" looks like, what's acceptable, admirable, or enough.

Some of these messages are subtle. Others are loud. But over time, they become so familiar that we stop noticing them. We think we're just being "realistic" or "doing what's expected." But really, we've absorbed rules we didn't consciously choose.

They were responses. Adaptations. Emotional strategies to stay safe, connected, and accepted.

This is what makes the invisible script so powerful: it's become so much like the truth that you forget one important thing: it's just a layer. One that runs deep, yes. But one you can choose to peel back, to rewrite, if you need to.

But once we become aware of them, we get the chance to pause and ask: Is this still mine?

Does it serve me? Or is it time to rewrite a few lines?

Not just yet. We'll get there.

Part of what makes these scripts so sticky is that they've often worked. They've protected us, earned approval, helped us succeed. Being the one who always delivers? That probably got you noticed. Saying yes, keeping things together, pushing through? Someone probably called you impressive, dependable, strong.

Those patterns become part of how we define ourselves -- not just what we do, but who we believe we are.

And that's where it gets tricky.

Because when a script has helped us feel safe, valued, or loved, the idea of challenging it doesn't feel like a small tweak. It can feel like a threat. Like we're pulling on a thread that might unravel something much bigger.

Even if the script is starting to cost us something -- our energy, our peace of mind, our sense of self -- we tend to stick with it. Not out of denial, but out of habit. Out of fear. Out of not knowing what's on the other side.

There's also the fact that these scripts are rarely named out loud. You don't get handed a memo that says: "Here is your core belief: Your value equals your output." Instead, you get a promotion after

working weekends. You get praised for always being available. You feel proud when you never drop the ball. Over time, the pattern is reinforced. Quietly. Consistently.

And because so many people around us are running similar scripts, it all seems normal. Expected. Just the way things are.

But it's not.

What looks like a universal truth is often just a well-practiced survival strategy. And even though the script might have started as a response to a particular moment — family expectations, school pressure, workplace culture — it doesn't always evolve with us.

Sometimes it stays frozen, even as life moves on.

So when the script begins to strain, or no longer fits, we don't always recognise what's happening. We might feel stuck, overwhelmed, or restless without knowing why. We might try to push harder, when what we really need is to pause and look underneath.

That pause isn't easy. But it matters.

Because once you start to see the pattern, you can begin to loosen its grip. Not by rejecting everything it brought you, but by making space to ask new questions.

And that's where we'll go next.

4. What's the story beneath the surface?

Now it's your turn.

You've been following along, maybe recognising pieces of yourself in the invisible scripts we've explored. You've seen how they form, how they shape us, how they show up in the way we work, strive, and prove ourselves.

This is a good time to pause. To get quiet, even just for a moment. Because buried under all the roles you play (the titles, the habits, the things you do without even thinking), there's a story you've

been living. A set of beliefs you didn't write but have carried for years.

You might not know exactly where it came from. But chances are, it's shaped how you work. How you show up. How you measure your worth.

This is where I usually stop with many people. Some need more time to just hold it for a little longer, others need space to reflect before they're ready to go deeper. If that's where you are right now, it's totally fine. You can keep reading or come back here anytime you feel like it.

If you want to continue and look at what's on the other side, know that this is like crossing through the river. You'll need to get wet.

We're not here to fix anything. Not to find the "right" answer. Just to turn inward and notice what's there.

We need to start with the simplest of questions: What does being "a good worker" mean to you?

If you took out all the "I have to" from your day, what's left? What's truly yours to hold?

She was taking time for herself every week to go get her hair done. Seems like a good self-care routine, except she hated going to the hairdresser.

"But my hair still needs to look great, right?"

But what if it doesn't? What does it say when even your precious time for self-care starts to feel like a chore?

Maybe it's someone who always says yes. Who never drops the ball. Who's calm, reliable, constantly delivering. Maybe it's someone who stays late without being asked, who answers messages on the weekend, who earns trust by pushing through even when they're exhausted.

Where did that image come from?

Most of us don't remember the exact moment these ideas took root. But they tend to start early. At home. At school. Watching how adults behaved. Listening to what got praised, what got ignored. Over time, the message gets louder: this is what good looks like. This is who you need to be.

Then ask yourself: What makes you feel valuable at work? And what happens when that value isn't recognised?

Do you try harder? Do you shrink a little? Get frustrated? Feel invisible? Do you judge yourself for not doing more, or for caring too much?

And what happens when you think about slowing down? Not in theory, but in practice. Taking a proper break. Saying no. Not being available all the time. What shows up? Guilt? Anxiety? Fear that you'll fall behind, be seen as weak, or simply feel... lost?

You don't need to answer these questions right now. But pause here if you want to write them down. Let them sit with you. Not as a checklist, but as a mirror. Noticing is enough.

Sometimes, the most powerful shift begins with a quiet: "Oh. That's what I've been doing." "That's where it started." "That's what I thought I had to be."

This is exactly where Alex found herself. Not in a breakthrough moment, but in a quiet one, sitting with the realisation that her ambition wasn't just hers. It was inherited, shaped, rewarded. The pushing, the drive, the pressure to prove herself... it didn't come from nowhere. It came from a deep, unspoken belief that to be seen, she had to excel.

The beauty is that after she saw it, she felt relief. No, she didn't quit her job to sunbathe in Bali. But she asked: how can I use these skills for something that is truly mine? How can I use my ambition not to please others, but to find myself?

And that is exactly what she did.

And Peter? He started noticing how uncomfortable it felt to

slow down. He needed a change in his life to see that. To start questioning what had held true for all his life up to that point.

It's not unusual. Most people get that same pivoting point in 3 situations: when they start a family, have to deal with a health issue (their own or someone they love), or lose their job. It's the moment that makes you question everything. And you know you can no longer ignore it — you need to find the answers.

The way guilt crept in when he wasn't being useful. The fear of letting someone down if he wasn't constantly available. He'd always prided himself on being dependable, the one others could count on. But suddenly, that story started to feel tight. Like a suit that no longer fit, and needed to be changed.

He didn't have the answers yet, but he started asking different questions.

And that's where we are now. You don't need to rewrite anything yet, just pay attention to the voice beneath the surface — the one that's been whispering all along.

5. The contract rewrite

By now, you've started to see how much of what you believe about work, worth, and success isn't really your own story, it's a script passed down, layered on, absorbed without question. This invisible script can feel like an unshakable truth, but it's really more like an old contract you signed without fully understanding the fine print.

Here's the good news: you don't have to live by that contract forever. You can rewrite it. And the best way to begin is with just one line, one belief, one expectation that feels heavy or limiting.

There are likely many beliefs and expectations that will come up as you start this process. To keep it manageable, choose the one that feels most important or pressing to you right now. That's the one you'll start with.

You can do this exercise as many times as you like. In fact, it's usually best not to try rewriting everything all at once. Instead, spend some time writing down your thoughts, then step away from it - for a day, or even a week. When you return, look again to see if it still feels like the right direction. This space allows clarity to emerge and prevents overwhelm.

We all know that beliefs influence our values, which shape our thoughts and ideas, and these show up in the actions and behaviours of our everyday life.

1. Name the belief. What's a thought or rule you find yourself repeating about how you must show up at work? Maybe it sounds like, "If I'm not always available, I'm replaceable." Or, "Rest is a luxury I can't afford." Or, "I have to push through or I'm weak." Say it out loud or write it down. Naming it gives it less power, it takes it out of the shadows.

2. Trace its origins. When did this belief first start? Was it something you heard growing up? A lesson from school? A pattern you picked up at work?

Maybe it came from watching how people were praised - or punished - in the world around you. Knowing where it came from can soften your grip. It helps you meet it with curiosity, not blame.

Most of these beliefs began as protection. Or motivation. They might have made sense once, even if now they feel like chains

3. Reflect on the agreement. Ask yourself: "Did I actually agree to this? Does this belief still serve me? Is it true everywhere, or just in certain situations? What might change if I saw it differently?"

This isn't about being right or wrong. It's about opening a window where the wall used to be.

4. Rewrite the contract. Now you can start drafting a new contract, one that fits the person you are now, not the one you were when you first agreed to the old terms. For example:

- Old contract: “I must always be available or I’ll lose my relevance.”
New choice: “My presence is valuable, even when I set boundaries.”
- Old contract: “I have to do everything perfectly or I’m a failure.”
New choice: “Doing my best is enough, and mistakes are part of learning.”
- Old contract: “If I slow down, I’m lazy.”
New choice: “Rest fuels my creativity and strength.”
- Old contract: “I must prove myself every day.”
New choice: “I am enough as I am, regardless of output.”

5. Live the new contract.

Rewrites aren’t magic spells that fix everything overnight. They’re gentle reminders, quiet anchors, invitations to pause, breathe, and choose differently.

Start small. You might write your new contract somewhere visible, on a sticky note, a journal page, your phone wallpaper. Let it become something you return to, especially when the old script tries to shout louder.

Notice what shifts, in how you feel, how you work, how you speak to yourself.

Because change rarely comes in one big moment. It comes in dozens of small ones.

This process isn’t about tearing down everything at once or being perfect. It’s about rewriting your story line by line, claim by claim. It’s a gradual reclaiming of your own narrative, giving you space to decide who you want to be, not who you were told to be.

Here are a few more examples to inspire your own:

- Old: “If I say no, I’ll disappoint others.”
New: “Saying no is an act of self-respect and trust for others”

- Old: “Success means constant hustle.”
New: “Success includes balance, rest, and joy.”
- Old: “I’m only valuable if I’m producing.”
New: “My value is who I am and how I show up for others.”
- Old: “Showing vulnerability is weakness.”
New: “Vulnerability builds connection and courage.”

Take your time with this. It’s your story, and you get to write it. It’s not about fixing yourself, but about noticing the quiet patterns that shaped you... and asking if they still make sense.

You’re not starting over. You’re just beginning to live more in tune with what’s true for you now.

These scripts aren’t proof that something’s wrong with you.

They’re proof you’ve adapted.

But you don’t have to live inside someone else’s story.

You get to choose what’s still true, and what’s ready to be rewritten.

Your notes

Use these lines to reflect, underline what stood out, or scribble the first sentence of your rewrite.

Chapter 3 - When Pushing Hard Doesn't Add Up

How to recognise the signs that something's off

Awareness is powerful. But it's only half the story.

You can trace the steps that brought you here. You can name the patterns. You can even start to see where the scripts came from.

But then comes the uncomfortable question: *Now what?*

Knowing you've been following invisible rules is one thing. Actually changing your behavior? That's where it gets tricky.

Because these patterns didn't just appear - they've been protecting you, earning approval, helping you succeed. Even when they start to cost you something, they're hard to let go.

This is the story of an always-efficient, helpful productivity wizard. This time I don't need a fake name — I see her every day in the mirror.

I wasn't the type to overwork in the classic sense; always putting in tons of extra hours or burning the midnight oil. Thankfully, I've always been good at using my tools, tricks, and processes to keep me from crashing under stress.

I was the person people would come to for help or to brainstorm ideas, and I never turned anyone away.

Even as I progressed in my career, it often felt like I was "behind" in visibility or stuck with less exciting projects than some peers. It got worse when I moved into management.

My process-oriented efficiency mindset worked for me, but it didn't always translate to my team. Some needed more space to reflect, some more time to get things right, others just needed something different.

I channelled my frustration in the way many managers do: taking more on my shoulders, helping everywhere, even raising my voice (yes, I was a yeller) when anyone dared to come up with unrealistic demands, last-minute changes, or extra pressure that kept landing on the team.

Most days, I felt exhausted, mentally more than physically. And yet, I told myself I was doing fine — because I wasn't constantly collapsing under work and stress. Like winning a gold medal at a race where everyone else tripped over the starting line.

I would lie if I said that just a bit more experience was what I needed to go from stress to zen-type control, and I just woke up one day with the realisation that there was a different way, but it wasn't so easy.

As soon as the only models you see around you are stress, overload, and constant busyness, you can't imagine there is a different way. And to be honest, even if there were better models, they'd be hard to notice when you're just busy all day trying not to sink in the quicksand.

We'll get to what helped with the change later on. Spoiler alert, it starts with Stopping.

For now, pause one moment, ask yourself: *What's one thing I keep doing even though I know it drains me?*

Let's continue

Many years later, it was easy to see why my approach didn't work — looking back always is. What made it worse was continuing to see people for whom these patterns are still there, unchanged.

They're everywhere around us, false beliefs we think will help because they make sense on paper, but in practice, they don't.

Let's look at them:

Myth 1: More money or hard work will solve everything.

Reality: Time is the real currency. You have heard it many times, so it feels cliché at this point. But that doesn't make it less true.

If you have time, you can usually find a way to make more money; but if you have more money, you cannot buy time. This is why vampires are always rich.

I'd take this concept a step further: attention is becoming more important than time. Even when we have time, we can be so scattered, stressed, and not present that it's as if we are not even living. Because without attention, even time loses its meaning.

Myth 2: You have to be always on to succeed. These are the invisible rules that sneak into every decision. They tell us that resting is lazy, answering emails at 9 PM proves commitment, and taking a pause is a weakness. Most of us don't notice how deeply we've internalised these rules until we try to stop.

Have you ever taken a Thursday afternoon off just to breathe and think — only to see your inbox piling up, the phone ringing, and a rising panic: "What will people think? Who will notice the slack I'm leaving?" Your body will go on high alert at those thoughts, but once you let it go, nothing terrible happens — the world keeps spinning. Many of those fears aren't reality; they're habit and expectation talking, keeping us tethered to busyness long after it stops helping.

Myth 3: Pushing harder = better results This is really hard to swallow. We keep being told that if we just apply ourselves more, results will follow. Columbus never made it to India, not because he didn't put in enough effort, but because he was off course. We spend so much time pushing ahead on things that aren't important or underestimating what will actually get us there.

Addendum: Nobody cares how hard you work, only how much value you provide.

Myth 4: Productivity hacks can solve everything (Yes, I'm using that term.) I had it all under control - or so I thought. For some reason, it didn't work. This is the trap I fell into for so long: it makes you feel like you're moving in the right direction even when you're not.

The reality is that while basic organization and time management skills help if you're coming from chaos, they backfire if that's all you do. You end up doing more, leaving less breathing room to think, and feeling even more stressed. Productivity tips are a great starting point, but they're not the final solution.

Even when we know these are myths, we keep acting as if they're true. We work longer, control every detail frantically, and hope it will get us closer to the results we want. We check emails late at night, squeeze extra meetings into our triple-booked calendar, and convince ourselves to keep pushing, even when our attention is gone. The harder we try under stress, the further the results we chase seem to slip away.

You don't always notice it in the moment, because busyness can feel productive. You're moving, accomplishing, ticking boxes. And yet, the cost is hidden until it's undeniable: decisions get rushed, creativity fades, relationships suffer, and even achievements lose their meaning. *We think we are avoiding failure, but mostly we are avoiding stillness — the space that would make us confront what's really important.*

This is why a pause is necessary. Not a dramatic stop, not a week-long retreat (though those are nice when they happen), but a conscious moment to notice what we are doing and why.

You might try sitting for a few minutes, noticing your own breathing while the world moves around you. Or simply observing how often your attention jumps between tasks, notifications, and obligations. The goal isn't judgment; it's awareness.

Once you start noticing, patterns begin to reveal themselves. Certain habits that seemed harmless suddenly look more like chains.

The constant sense of urgency, the compulsion to respond immediately, the pressure to produce beyond what's necessary — these are the invisible rules shaping your days. And the first step to stepping out of them is seeing them clearly.

Pause long enough, and you might realise that much of what drives busyness isn't truly important. It's the expectations we already discussed: from society, from others, from ourselves. And the moment you pause and see it, you can begin to imagine a different way of showing up, a way that doesn't demand exhaustion in exchange for accomplishment.

How Busyness Shows Up

Once you've taken that pause, it becomes easier to notice how busyness shows up: we often believe it's a single dramatic event, instead it's often a pattern weaving through your days. It's in the little things: answering emails as soon as they arrive, juggling half-finished tasks, multitasking while walking between meetings. It's in the decisions you make without thinking, simply because you're rushing to the next thing.

Also, busyness wears many masks. Sometimes it appears as perfectionism — the need to refine, polish, and tweak, believing that every detail defines your value.

Sometimes it takes the form of constant urgency, responding to every notification, every demand, as if the world would fall apart if you paused for even a moment.

And often, it masquerades as helpfulness: saying yes to everything, stepping in to fix, smoothing over, rescuing everyone.

The common thread is that busyness rarely serves what matters most. It's reactive, not intentional. It keeps you in motion, but rarely in direction. And the strangest part is how normalized it feels: because everyone around you is moving too, it seems like

this is just how life works. You can even feel proud of it — the busy badge of honor, the quiet validation of constant motion. But beneath the surface, it often masks anxiety, fear, or a sense of inadequacy.

The first step to breaking this pattern is recognition, but the second is imagination. What would it feel like to work with purpose rather than reflex? To decide which fires are truly urgent and which are illusions? To distinguish between what's externally expected and what truly matters to you?

I remember vividly this feeling, and I've been there many times—facing a huge decision, brain buzzing, options everywhere, when suddenly someone waves at me from across the room. My reflex is instant: 'It MUST be important! Drop everything and go!' Let's leave this behind and come back to it later... or never. In that split second, busyness shows its true colors, always ready to hijack your attention with the tiniest distraction.

It's time to turn the mirror toward yourself. We've explored why busyness feels necessary, even noble. Now, let's make it personal.

Each of us has a default pattern: a way of staying productive, proving our worth, and keeping control. At first, these patterns help us succeed. Over time, they start to drain us.

Recognising your own pattern is like holding up a mirror: what once felt inevitable starts to make sense, and with that awareness, new choices become possible.

The 4 Working Archetypes (And How to Escape Them)

1. The Firefighter

You don't have time to think, you're too busy putting out fires that other people started. Your inbox is flooded with 'urgent' messages,

your day hijacked by last-minute crises, and it feels like you're the only one holding everything together.

Here's the deeper truth: You've gotten so used to pulling people out of burning buildings that you've forgotten to check who's lighting the matches. When was the last time you taught someone how not to start kitchen fires instead of rushing in with a hose? Your overload isn't what you choose to carry, it's what keeps landing on you.

How to break free: Set up better systems so you're not the go-to fixer. Stop making everyone's urgency your problem to solve.

2. The Hero

You save the day. Always. People rely on you because you come through. But let's be real, you're exhausted. A client of mine recently told me, "I am so tired of trying to be a superhero. I just want to be myself."

Here's what's really going on: You're addicted to feeling indispensable. You thrive on the rush of being the one who can fix things. Even more, you fear that if you're not absolutely essential, you might just become...replaceable. But in doing so, you've trained everyone around you to step back while you fix the impossible.

How to break free: Start letting others solve problems without you. Instead of rescuing, TEACH. Even Superman takes off the cape sometimes, why can't you? Ask yourself: am I solving this because it needs solving, or because I want to be the one solving it?

**3. Atlas **

You carry the weight of the world — and nobody asked you to. You just don't trust anyone else to do it right. That's your call, your role... or your self-imposed punishment (take your pick).

If you don't do it, who will? So you keep adding more, saying yes, and pushing through, even when nothing is actually on fire.

Here's the deeper issue: You're so focused on holding it all together that you don't see the cracks forming. Your overload isn't coming at you, you're creating it by holding on. You're not saving the world—you're slowly collapsing under it.

How to break free: Accept that you need help. If you keep saying, 'It's easier if I just do it myself,' you'll never stop drowning. Start small: delegate one thing today, and don't take it back.

4. Achilles

You won't stop tweaking until it's flawless. You refine, polish, and adjust; because what if it's not perfect? You tell yourself that having high standards is your strength... but that's becoming your weak spot.“

Here's the real problem: Your perfectionism isn't about quality. It's about fear. Fear of criticism, of failure, of not being good enough. The more you tweak, the more you delay, and the less you actually deliver things that matter.

How to break free: Define 'good enough' in advance, and stick to it. Set deadlines that force you to finish rather than endlessly polish. Ship before you feel 100% ready, because perfection is an illusion.

If you see yourself in one or more of these archetypes, take a moment to pause. Which one feels most like you? Or do you recognize traits from several? Let's simply observe for now — - notice the patterns, the ways busyness shows up in your life, without judgment.

This reflection is the first step before we dive into the full exercise. The goal is not to label yourself, but to gain clarity on your default busy patterns so you can start making intentional choices about how you spend your energy.

Remember that “always-efficient, helpful productivity wizard” I introduced at the start of this chapter? She's still there in the mirror, still learning to pause, still discovering what's worth carrying and what's not. The difference now is awareness. You don't have to

wait for a big revelation or a perfect system to start noticing the habits that drain you.

Exercise: Spot Your Busy Persona

Now it's your turn. You may have reflected on some of the prompts throughout this chapter, but this is the time to take pen and paper, find a quiet space, and really focus.

By now, you've met the four archetypes — Firefighter, Hero, Atlas, and Achilles. You've seen the ways busyness shows up in your life and how it can steal your energy, attention, and even your sense of self. This exercise isn't about labeling yourself, or feeling stuck in a category. It's about noticing, reflecting, and slowly beginning to understand your own patterns.

Start with a quiet moment. Take a deep breath. Let your mind settle on the last week, the last few days, the last moments when you felt pulled, reactive, or overextended. Ask yourself gently:

- Which archetype feels most familiar right now?
- Are there moments where multiple archetypes appear, overlapping?
- What situations tend to trigger that mode?

Write down whatever comes to mind. Short phrases are fine. You're simply noticing. This is about observation, not judgment.

Next, think about impact. How do these patterns affect your energy, focus, and relationships?

For example, when the Firefighter takes over, do you feel exhausted yet responsible for everyone else's urgency? When the Hero shows up, do you notice pride mingled with fatigue? When Atlas dominates, does the weight of responsibility crowd out your own priorities? When Achilles strikes, does perfectionism slow you down more than it helps?

Jot down a few reflections. Try not to overthink, the purpose is to make the invisible visible. Awareness is the first step toward choice.

Finally, imagine one small experiment. Pick one moment this week to respond differently, even in a minor way:

- Pause before jumping in on a “fire” and notice what happens.
- Say no or step back from a request that isn't yours to handle.
- Delegate something small to someone else, and resist the urge to take it back.
- Finish a task at “good enough” rather than perfect, and observe the outcome.

You don't have to do everything at once. Start small. One experiment, one observation, one reflection at a time.

The Trap of Constant Motion

Busyness is seductive. It feels productive, noble, necessary. When your day is full from start to finish, it can seem like you've accomplished something important. But there's a quiet trap beneath the motion. You might check emails first thing in the morning, jump into urgent tasks, automatically say yes to requests, and feel guilty the moment you consider taking a pause. All of this gives the illusion of progress, yet often it masks what's really important.

Think of busyness like a treadmill that grows heavier the harder you run. Sometimes the push is good—it builds stamina and resilience—but if your goal is actually to go somewhere, all that effort still leaves you in the same place. You expend energy, feel a brief rush of accomplishment, and yet the scenery never changes. You may cross off dozens of items on your to-do list and still feel stuck. Small wins accumulate, but long-term clarity and energy slip away

It's easy to mistake movement for momentum. When your day is packed, the mind can't pause, the body can't breathe, and choices are reactive, not intentional. Urgency makes each task seem like the one that matters most, even when it doesn't.

The tricky part is that busyness often brings short-term rewards. People notice, you feel needed, and tasks get done. But over time, these wins start to cost more than they give. The mental exhaustion, the creeping frustration, the sense that something is always behind.

Reflect for a moment: have you ever noticed how accomplishing more can sometimes leaves you feeling smaller, not bigger? That's an early sign that busyness is no longer serving you.

The Hidden Expectations

One of the strongest forces behind busyness is invisible expectation. We already have covered on how these are the rules no one ever states out loud, but everyone seems to follow. These silent pressures shape decisions and reactions without you realising it.

Hidden expectations are insidious because they feel like common sense. Rest seems lazy. Taking a pause feels like falling behind. Saying no appears selfish. And until you notice them, you'll keep surrendering time and energy, thinking you are being responsible or committed.

Ask yourself: *which of your daily choices are driven by expectation, not intention? *

Now go one layer deeper: notice *how expectation sneaks into your reactions*, not just your choices. When a colleague asks for something last-minute, or a client push for a faster deadline, how quickly do you feel the tension rise? That immediate pull - the reflex to answer, adjust, or fix - often isn't about the task itself. It's expectation speaking: the silent script telling you that you must be available, perfect, or indispensable.

To see it clearly, try this: pause for a moment when you feel that pull. Ask yourself: *Am I reacting because this it's important to me, or because I feel I should?*

The first time you notice it, it might feel small, almost meaningless. But these micro-moments repeat all day, shaping your energy, focus, and sense of control. Start labeling them quietly: *'expectation,' 'habit,' or 'intention.'* Over time, these labels help you separate what's truly yours from what's inherited or imposed.

Mental Load

Busyness isn't just about visible tasks; it's also about the mental load that accompanies them. This invisible labour can be heavier than any spreadsheet, email, or report. Planning contingencies, juggling priorities, remembering small yet critical details — all of it sits in the mind, quietly draining energy.

Consider a typical day: mentally rehearsing meetings during breakfast, running through priorities while commuting, remembering who needs updates, who is overloaded, who is blocked. The physical tasks may take hours, but the mental weight will last all day.

Mental load doesn't announce itself with a single warning; it builds gradually. It's like a post-it that doesn't really stick, so you keep holding it, hoping you won't forget. These are the moments where fatigue begins to erode clarity. Over time, the cumulative effect can be draining, leaving a constant sense of anxiety even when nothing urgent is happening...that uneasy feeling that you might still be forgetting something.

Notice this pattern in your own life. *How often does your mind drift to unfinished tasks during downtime? How often does worry fill small gaps that could otherwise be used for rest or reflection?* Even a few minutes free from mental clutter can feel revolutionary.

Metaphorically, carrying mental load is like wearing an invisible backpack at home: heavy, pointless, and always there. Acknowledging this invisible work is the first step in reducing it.

Behavioral Traps

Busyness rarely appears as a single, isolated habit. See if you recognize yourself in one or more of these:

- **Over-responding:** Answering every message, attending every meeting, reacting to every “urgent” request. Attention fragments.
- **Over-committing:** Saying yes too quickly, taking on tasks that belong to others, or trying to anticipate everyone else’s needs.
- **Absorbing others’ pressure:** Carrying your team’s stress, colleagues’ expectations, or your manager’s anxiety as if it were yours.
- **Perfectionism:** Over-refining and tweaking every detail, believing it defines your value.
- **Procrastination disguised as preparation:** Delaying tasks while “preparing” or seeking more information. Busy, but stalled.
- **Multitasking:** Juggling multiple things at once, which breaks focus and increases mental load.
- **Over-planning:** Filling every slot in your calendar, leaving no space for reflection, rest, or unplanned creativity.

These behaviors create invisible tension. You’re not consciously overworking, yet stress piles up quietly. Decisions become reactive rather than intentional, and moments of reflection shrink to nearly nothing.

The key is noticing that these patterns are adaptive. You learned them because they helped you survive or succeed in the short term. But left unchecked, they anchor you in perpetual busyness.

- Where do I carry work that isn't mine?
- Which habits make me feel busy but don't move the needle?
- How often am I reacting instead of directing my focus?

Emotional & Cognitive Impact

When these behavioral patterns persist, they shape more than just your schedule, they shape your inner state. Frustration and irritation bubble up at minor obstacles. Tasks that should feel manageable start to feel exhausting. Your cognitive load increases as you constantly juggle responsibilities, priorities, and expectations, leaving little bandwidth for strategic thinking.

Disconnect from meaningful work can occur subtly. You might still check off tasks, but the projects that excite you, the work that's important to you, quietly slip down the list. This is not laziness or failure; it's your mind and body adapting to a system that doesn't match your priorities.

The exhaustion may feel personal, but it's systemic. Recognizing this distinction can be liberating: it's not about fixing yourself, it's about understanding the environment you've been navigating.

Ask yourself:

- When do I feel drained without clear reason?
- Which tasks leave me energized versus drained?
- How might my stress be a signal that I'm misaligned, not inadequate?

Busyness also has a profound emotional impact, not only physical and mental. Guilt, anxiety, impatience, and irritability are constant companions. You may notice yourself snapping at minor frustrations, feeling anxious about small delays, or comparing your output

to others. These emotions create a feedback loop, pushing you to do more, which in turn fuels the stress that created them.

Many people don't realise how deeply busyness affects relationships, self-perception, and overall well-being. The mind, body, and heart all react to constant pressure. Small irritations feel monumental. Minor setbacks trigger disproportionate frustration. Even moments of rest are tainted by the anticipation of the next task.

Recognising this emotional toll is not a judgment; it's awareness. Awareness allows space for choice. By noticing the feelings busyness generates, you can begin to see which behaviours are habitual, which are necessary, and which can be released.

Effort it's not result (reprise)

It's one thing to know the idea that working harder doesn't always bring better outcomes — it's another to see it in action. The truth is, effort without direction or alignment often creates the illusion of progress. You may be busy, you may be active, yet the results that truly matter remain out of reach.

Think of it as paddling a canoe in circles. Each stroke is effortful, precise, and consistent. Yet if the canoe is pointed in the wrong direction, all that effort only moves you around the same point. The task is done, the box checked, but you're no closer to where you actually want to go.

Relentless effort can feel like competence, but it can quietly scatter your energy and mask the deeper misalignment between what you do and what truly matters. It's not about laziness or failure; it's about noticing when your work is reactive, habitual, or driven by external expectation rather than intentional choice.

Ask yourself:

- Which of my efforts are repetitive motions with little real return?
- Where am I substituting action for impact?
- What would happen if I paused before responding, delegating, or taking on the next task?

Recognizing this distinction --- busy versus effective --- is key. Effort alone is not the measure of your work. True progress comes from aligning what you do with what's important, and noticing when your energy is being pulled in ways that don't serve your goals.

By now, you've seen how familiar these patterns can feel. They're not flaws --- just learned responses to a world that rewards motion over meaning. Across teams, companies, and industries, certain ways of overworking repeat almost predictably, almost like natural adaptations to pressure, expectation, and belonging.

Understanding these patterns is the bridge from recognition to action. When you can name the way busyness shows up in your life, you can start separating habits that help from those that don't.

The next step is understanding how busyness shows up for you personally, which is where the four archetypes come in.

Each captures a distinct style of busyness, its strengths, and its blind spots. It is not about labelling yourself, but about understanding the rhythm of your energy and attention.

Before we move on, let's acknowledge why these patterns are so hard to break:

- We tie our worth to productivity. If we're not doing something, we feel guilty.
- We like being needed. The alternative? Feeling worthless and disposable.
- We don't know another way. No one taught us how to work better, only harder

Which is exactly why, when people finally get space to pause, panic often follows

The Panic of Stillness

Now that you've identified which archetype(s) resonate with you, you might notice something subtle. Awareness can feel strange, like suddenly noticing things you had under your eyes for years. Recognising these patterns is empowering, but it also opens a gap between knowing and acting.

You've seen how you tend to respond, and now the question is: what happens if you don't follow the reflex? If you pause, delegate, do less, or simply question the usual rhythm of busyness.

Here's the plot twist: when people actually regain a bit of time, many panic. Suddenly, the silence feels heavy. The urge to "do something" rises. Thoughts like, "*What will people think*" "*Will they notice*" or "*Am I less valuable if I'm not constantly producing?*" can surface. You may even feel a strange withdrawal, as if your productivity has been your identity all along.

This is normal. You are not broken. You are simply detoxing from the habit of constant motion. It feels strange because it's unfamiliar. You've rarely been taught to sit, pause, or just be present without a checklist. That unease is a sign that you're stepping into something new.

Silence, stillness, and space aren't luxuries. They are skills to cultivate. You can practice them in small, manageable ways, while walking, cooking, stretching, or dancing. The key is to notice it, allow it, and gently return if your mind drifts. The discomfort will soften over time, and gradually, you'll begin to see the value of intentional pause.

Start Naming What's Shifting

As you sit with this uneasy stillness, take a moment to notice what's shifting. You're starting to question not just what's next on your list, but what's truly necessary. This isn't about doing better — it's about doing differently. You're not being asked to quit everything. It's about choosing what's worth showing up for, and letting go of what doesn't serve you. Naming this shift is the first step in making it real.

For now, simply observe. Let yourself notice the tension, the reflex to “do,” and the emotions that arise. You don't need to fix anything yet. Awareness is enough.

In the next chapter we'll explore how to use this space to truly listen to what matters to you, and make choices that align with your energy, values, and goals. For now, take a breath, notice, and allow yourself the permission to simply be.

*You've learned how to run.
You've learned how to carry.
You've learned how to fix.
Now you're learning how to pause.
Let that be enough for today.*

Your notes

Use this space to notice what archetypes, triggers, or reflections stood out, and jot down the first insight that comes to mind.

Chapter 4 - The Pause Before The Pivot

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Creating space to listen to what you really want

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Inside this book

Chapter 1: Why Does Success Feel Like This?

The quiet gap between what looks good and what feels like yours

Chapter 2: The Invisible Script

How we unconsciously inherit models of work, success, and worth

Chapter 3: When Pushing Hard Doesn't Add Up

Recognising the signs that something's off

Chapter 4: The Pause Before the Pivot

Creating space to listen to what you really want

Chapter 5: Redefining Success (Without Burning It All Down)

Practical tools to challenge your metrics

Chapter 6: What You Actually Stand For (COMING NEXT)

Discovering your core values and using them as anchors

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This is a living book, new chapters arrive monthly and you'll receive them automatically as they're ready. The structure is planned, though chapters may evolve as it grows.

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Identifying what drains you vs. what fuels you

Chapter 8: Designing with Intention

A framework to redesign your work-life architecture

Chapter 9: Setting Boundaries That Stick

Realistic ways to protect your energy and time

Chapter 10: Courage in Small Steps

Testing new ways of being without needing to quit tomorrow

Chapter 11: Living the New Job Description

Integrating, sustaining, and evolving your aligned life

A Note from the Author

I'm Serena Martino, and I help people ease their decisions to find what's actually theirs to do.

Over the past 20 years in business, I've worked with professionals and leaders navigating the gap between what looks good on paper and what actually feels right.

I've coached more than 250 executives 1:1, and supported many more through group programs in fast-growing startups and global organisations.

I started my career at Google during its hyper-growth years, leading teams, scaling businesses, making difficult decisions, and learning the hard way that achievement doesn't always equal alignment. I've been where many of my clients are now: successful, exhausted, and quietly wondering if the path that got me here is still the one I want to be on.

This book comes from that space.

It's for people who've done what they set out to do and are now asking:

What's next?

And how do I design it on my own terms?

My work is personal, practical, and focused on clarity, not productivity. I help people see what they're actually choosing, understand what drives those choices, and redesign work and life to fit who they are now, not who they were ten years ago.

This book is not a conclusion.

It's a place to pause, notice what's no longer working, and begin making choices that feel more intentional and more your own.

If you'd like to explore more of my work, you can find it at *serenamartino.com*.