

MEGHAN: When I was 11 years old, growing up in LA, I saw a commercial that would change the way I understood my place in the world. Let me be clear: it wasn't because this ad was some kind of ingenious piece of marketing – actually, it was just the opposite.

So, here's what happened: I was in the 6th grade, I was sitting in my classroom – and we were watching TV, when a commercial came on...

IVORY DISH SOAP COMMERCIAL: The gloves are coming off! Women are fighting greasy pots and pans with Ivory Clear. [dip ad down and fade]

MEGHAN: I was furious. Women? Did I, did I really just hear that guy say just *women* – as in *only women* – only women, women are the only ones who wash dishes?

And then, then I heard them – these two boys in my class, breathing life into my biggest fear. They said, "Yeah! That's where women belong. In the kitchen!" Oh man, this did not sit well with 11 year-old me.

[MUSIC IN]

NICK NEWS - 11 YEAR OLD M: They knew it hurt my feelings. It makes me feel like they're gonna grow up thinking that girls are less than them.

MEGHAN: Yeah, in case you couldn't tell – that's me. From 1993. On Nick News.

NICK NEWS - 11 YEAR OLD M: I don't think it's right for kids to grow up thinking these things, that just mom does everything.

[MUSIC DEVELOPS]

MEGHAN: When I'd seen the ad – for *Ivory Clear Dishwashing Liquid* – and when I heard those boys and their idea for what my future held, I knew something was just *wrong*. And I knew I had to do something about it. So, I went on what you might call a "letter writing campaign." I really like to write letters. And I reached out to some of the most powerful people I could think of: the First Lady at the time, Hillary Clinton; Attorney Gloria Allred; and Linda Ellerbee, who hosted my preferred news source, as an 11 year old – Nick News – W5! But I didn't stop there – I also reached out to the soap manufacturer, the very people who made the commercial.

NICK NEWS - 11 YEAR OLD M: The president of Procter + Gamble, Procter + Gamble Company, Cincinnati, Ohio; dear sir...

I explained the whole thing. The classroom. The boys. And then... my ask:

NICK NEWS - 11 YEAR OLD M: So I was wondering if you would be able to change your commercial to “People all over America.” Thank you, Meghan Markle.

MEGHAN: And would you believe it? Three months later, a new version of the ad appeared on tvs all around the country...

IVORY DISH SOAP COMMERCIAL: The gloves are coming off! People are fighting greasy pots and pans with Ivory Clear. [dip down ad and fade]

MEGHAN: They changed the language in the ad – from *women* to *people*.

[PAUSE A BEAT // MUSIC IN]

MEGHAN: Now, I could paint this as a moment of triumph. And don’t get me wrong: it was. Because I learned that my one small action could have a ripple effect far beyond me. But this experience was also something bigger: an *awakening*. To the millions of ways – big and small – that our society tries to box women in, to hold women back, to tell women who and what they should and can be.

I’ve never lost touch with that reality. And in the last few years, my desire to *do something* about it has grown. My 11-year-old voice has also gotten a little more confident, maybe a little louder...

NICK NEWS - 11 YEAR OLD M: If you see something that you don’t like or are offended by, on television or any other place, write letters and send them to the right people, and you can really make a difference for not just yourself, but lots of other people.

MEGHAN: She’s right! But, at this point, I think something else might be a *tiny bit* more effective...

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INTRO

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<< I AM WOMAN BEGINS >>

MEGHAN: Hi, I’m Meghan. And this is ARCHETYPES – my podcast about the labels and tropes that try to hold women back. Over the course of the next dozen episodes, we’re going to *live inside* and *rip apart* the boxes women have been placed into for generations – boxes like diva, crazy, the b-word, slut. Some of these words – these labels – are *harsh*; they’re *abrasive*. And I want to get to the bottom of where they come from, why they’ve stuck around for so long, and – importantly – how we can move past them.

[MONTAGE OF GUEST TAPE - RIFFING ON THEMES]

Robin Thede: I call my girlfriends bitch all the time. I'm like, Hey bitch!, you look good bitch!, you know, like all that kind of stuff. But if a man is like, You ugly bitch, I'm mortified.

Allison Yarrow: Painting a woman as dumb or not smart is a very old way of trying to discredit her.

Margaret Cho: Well, Dragon Lady really comes from this sort of fantasy of Orientalism.

Amanda Seales: ...someone had told me that the word diva being attached to me was like an albatross around my neck that was preventing me from getting work.

MEGHAN: To do all this, I'm going to sit down with some of the smartest, funniest, strongest, most passionate women and people I know. And some that I've never met before; I'm making friends along the way, too.

VOICES FROM SHOW - TALKING ABOUT THEMES

Mindy Kaling: I often feel when I'm asked about imposter syndrome, where I just want to say, I think I'm supposed to say yes, but the answer's no, because if I didn't think I could do this job at this point, I have to be like clinically unconfident.

Ziwe: You could pretend to be the perfect version, like Stepford Wife and still have the exact same outcome as someone who's being authentically, truly themselves. And wouldn't you rather live with a version of yourself where you can look in the mirror at night?

MEGHAN: I'll be talking to household names, experts, cultural commentators. And they've all, in some way or another, borne the brunt of the labels we'll be picking apart. And of course, I know a thing or two about those labels myself. My hope is that my own lived experience will help other women open up. To reveal the layers that thrive within all of us. And the truth that none of us are alone in this world. That the future is something we get to write together.

And for our first episode, ooooo, we have got someone really exciting...

SERENA: I was always very competitive. I had to win. I always had to win.

MEGHAN: Serena Williams! My dear, dear friend. The greatest of all time! I asked her to come on to talk with me about that *dirty, dirty* word when it comes to women – *ambition*. And little did the world know, we'd also have some *other very big* things to discuss... mmhmm, I'm talking about Serena's recently announced *evolution away* from tennis. We're getting into all of it.

Stay with me, we'll have more after the break.

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ACT 1
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MEGHAN: There's an all-girls Catholic school in Los Angeles called Immaculate Heart. Back in the 1960s, an order of nuns, including many who taught at Immaculate Heart, they wanted to make some changes at the school to keep up with more modern times. They also didn't want to wear the habit. And when the conservative cardinal of the Archdiocese found out, he was not interested in this plan. No matter how much the sisters tried, the church, just, they wouldn't accept these changes. So the nuns had to make a choice. They renounced their vows so they could live their lives. Authentically, comfortably and on terms that made sense to them. Now, this didn't mean they lost their faith or their commitment to social justice. What it meant was they started their own community. A place where they were recognized as full human beings, not beholden to a system or this patriarchy that they weren't comfortable with. And they molded their school – Immaculate Heart – in their new image: theologically driven. But feminist.

Now, look, I'm not Catholic. I wasn't raised Catholic. But about one year after my letter-writing campaign, I started middle school at Immaculate Heart. I stayed there through high school. I was there for 6 years! And this feminist ideology trickled down into nearly every aspect of my education. It's probably safe to say into every aspect of my life. This message to me and my classmates was clear: our futures as young women were limitless. Ambition? That was the whole point!

So, I don't remember ever personally feeling the negative connotation behind the word *ambitious* until I started dating my now husband. And um, apparently ambition is, uh... a terrible, terrible thing, for a woman that is – according to some. So, since I've felt the negativity behind it, it's really hard to *un-feel* it. I can't *unsee* it, either, in the millions of girls and women who make themselves *smaller* – *so much smaller* – on a regular basis.

So I wanted to talk to someone who embodies the spirit of ambition, to see how she thinks about the word and the connotation, and how the other many labels that affect all women have affected her, too.

MEGHAN: *All right, so here we are. Hmm. It's my first podcast.*

SERENA: *Good! I get to be part of the first.*

MEGHAN: *First? Of course.*

SERENA: *Let's make magic.*

SERENA: Serena Williams needs no introduction, but - if we're gonna talk about ambition, I just have to give her the props she absolutely deserves... 319 weeks ranked Number 1 by the Women's Tennis Association... 23 Grand Slam Singles titles... 14 major doubles titles... trendsetter, trailblazer, businesswoman, mom... she's done it all.

And Serena recently shared some pretty big news with the world: she's retiring from professional tennis. Or to use her words... she's evolving away from tennis. So that she can continue to grow her family. And focus on her other passions.

She's just a remarkable woman. And she's accomplished all of this in the midst of a culture that um, hmm, how should we say this? ... Doesn't exactly prize ambitious women, let alone ambitious Black women.

So, let's get into it.

[HARRY WALKS INTO THE INTERVIEW]

MEGHAN: *Hi! You wanna come say hi? Look who just popped in.*

SERENA: *Hello! Hello there! (in British accent)*

MEGHAN: *Hello! (in British accent)*

HARRY: *How you doin'?*

SERENA: *Good how are you?*

HARRY: *I like what you've done with your hair! That's a great vibe*

SERENA: *Thank you. Good to see you too as always, I miss you guys!*

HARRY: *Well come and see us!*

SERENA: *I will!*

MEGHAN: *We'll make a plan.*

HARRY: *Have fun!*

MEGHAN: *Thanks my love!*

[HARRY WALKS OUT OF INTERVIEW]

MEGHAN: *I was thinking about when I texted you, this is what I want to do, here's the concept, here's the idea.*

SERENA: *Mmmhmm.*

MEGHAN: *And just this thought of like these archetypes, but it's the kind of stuff you and I talk about so much of these boxes and labels and oh, the things that we both have been called and witnessed each other being called. So I guess part of it just to set the table is, what made you want to do this with me, besides the fact that you're my girl?*

SERENA: *I was gonna say because I love you and I believe in you! We've been friends for so long. I'm super loyal, to a fault, you know that.*

MEGHAN: *Oh, I know. But do you remember when we met for the first time? I was thinking about that. Do you remember?*

SERENA: *Yeah. At that game, right?*

MEGHAN: *Oh my gosh, it was the same year as the Super Bowl when the Super Bowl was in New York. I had never been before. And then I show up and I see you walking towards someone. And I remember going, Oh, my gosh, who's Serena Williams going to talk to you? And I look behind me, and when I turned around, you were there in front of me.*

SERENA: *hahaha*

MEGHAN: *We became such fast friends.*

SERENA: *Yeah. We have a lot in common.*

MEGHAN: *I know— so much. I mean, the things people think and the things that people don't... But in our friendship when you have to see things that are mischaracterizing of me, but you experience behind closed doors the pain that I'm going through and vice versa. Right. But I think what's so interesting is even though that's on a world stage, I don't know if that feels much different for any woman. If you're in a small town and you see someone saying something about your best friend, that is just completely untrue, how that feels, you know.*

SERENA: *Mmmhmm.*

MEGHAN: *You know, when I was talking about all the different archetypes that women are affected by and just in terms of if a man is ambitious, for example, that is so celebrated. But you look at a woman, a woman like yourself, who I think is incredibly ambitious, and that's a testament to who you are as a person. But that's also why you've become so successful. When you hear the word ambition, do you think of it in a negative or a positive way?*

SERENA: *I was talking to I don't know if it was my mom or my sister, but I said I have to check myself because I've been so blinded by society.*

You know, if a man is ambitious, am I saying? Am I bringing down society by saying a woman is something different than ambitious? Or what do I think of women that are ambitious?

Often women are definitely put in these different boxes when we are ambitious or when we do have goals or when we reach our goals, it's a negative connotation on how we reach the goals.

MEGHAN: But even for little girls in a school room, right? If a little girl is ambitious or raises her hand more, what is she called? Bossy?

SERENA: Well, that – and I was reading an article about how girls tend to raise their hand less and less as time goes on because their confidence starts to fade because of the things that they're called. Um...so it's quite interesting. By the time they're in high school and for sure in college, they're not raising their hands as much. So hopefully we can teach our girls to continue to raise their hand and to be fearless.

MEGHAN: Well, and YOU were fearless as a little girl, and so confident. I was watching a clip, I think we have when you were 11 and they said if you were a tennis player, who would you want to be like? Do you remember this? Do you remember what you said?

[TRANS WORLD SPORTS CLIP]

INTERVIEWER: If you were a tennis player, who would you want to be like?

SERENA: Well, I'd like other people to be like me.

SERENA: I do. I said I wanted people to be like me. Honestly, I couldn't have written that better. I don't know why I said that, because, quite frankly, I kind of sucked at the time, but maybe I knew something. I don't know.

MEGHAN: But it was something that's in you. And it's funny if I think of it, because I was 11 at the same time and we're the same age and we grew up both in L.A. Although, this morning I was saying to Harry, I said, Do you remember, one of those?

SERENA: I'm the one for the record that grew up in Compton.

MEGHAN: And I was about to say when they said, Harry's girl is straight outta Compton, I was like, are they talking about Serena?

SERENA: You know, cause that's my guy. You know.

MEGHAN: You love a redhead. And I'm like, I'm not from Compton. I've never lived in Compton. My mom doesn't live in Compton. But by the way, what's wrong with Compton? My girl Serena's from there!

SERENA: Yeah, I was like wait a minute. And I'm so proud to be from Compton, I have to say. Like Dr. Dre is from Compton, you know. What's his name? The actor Kevin. Kevin Cont. Uh, no...No! Um, oh, my goodness. I'm blanking.

MEGHAN: I don't think Kevin Costner was from Compton.

SERENA: *Kevin Costner is from Compton!*

MEGHAN: *No, he's not.*

SERENA: *He is. Yes, he is. Google it! [laughter]*

MEGHAN: *Oh my gosh, that's wild!*

SERENA: *He even talks about it! Isn't it fascinating? I'm like yasss! It's pretty cool. You unfortunately can't have that.*

MEGHAN: *I can't claim Compton. But I love that look at that— Both of us at 11 years old, growing up in L.A., that was the time that I found a commercial to be sexist. And I wrote the letters and that commercial got changed. That's the same time you at 11 years old, when someone says if you were a tennis player, who would you want to be like? And you said I'd want other people to be like me. So there was something we obviously didn't know each other then, but what was it about our 11 year old selves? Because when you're young, I find you're so innocent, but you're also so fearless. Right? And somehow as we get older, because of these archetypes, because of what society's doing, because of the pressure of the media, because of all this noise, I don't think that we're as fearless as we were then. And I think sometimes then it's just, as you say—*

SERENA: *I think you're fearless. You're way more fearless than I am.*

MEGHAN: *That is so not true.*

SERENA: *That is absolutely true. You're fearless, like, even, you know, this is so silly because, you know, I'm a little silly, but... Like swimming, I won't swim in the ocean, hahaha*

MEGHAN: *What?*

SERENA: *You can't get me in the ocean now. I'm so afraid of open water like it's a joke. But, yeah, fearless, fear can go on so many different levels. When you're younger, it's like.*

MEGHAN: *You don't think about it.*

SERENA: *You don't think about it. Everything is such, such an amazing experience. And I see it in Olympia. I see, like, how fearless she is. And I encourage her because I'm afraid of heights. And I just be like, Oh, this is great. And she, like, embraces it because I don't want her to take on my fears. And I think that's important that when you're raising a child you don't let them take on your fears.*

MEGHAN: *But Olympia has to be role modeling herself after all the other things she sees about you with business as an entrepreneur, not just like the greatest tennis player of all time, but just everything you're doing with your business, you know, to watch that, the investments you make, how you do philanthropic work, that is the role modeling your daughter sees that is a version of ambition that I think, you know, some people don't maybe see it because they focus on only one media narrative. But at the end of the day, it's that that I think is the most incredible.*

SERENA: *Yeah, I hope she does. She's still young and I don't even know if she knows what I do. Slash did. Slash currently do, I guess. Question mark? I don't know. I don't know, I don't know if she really even knows who I am, what I... She'll be like, "why does that person know your name?" And I'm like, "uh, I don't know, what do I say to that?" haha*

But yeah, I think fearlessness is super important. I think as you grow with the experience that you get, you think of it as a wound - if you burn yourself, obviously you don't touch the fire again. So you're learning behaviors that make you stop and that gives you this healthy fear – because there is a healthy fear and, you know, kind of like a godly fear as well. And it's not a bad thing. It's just a precaution that we need.

And then we also, unfortunately, gain through our experience, some unhealthy fears. And I know I've experienced that in tennis for sure, when, you know, I've had a lot of bad experiences in New York, in particular in New York and other places as well. But just at the Open, it's been you know, it's been hard. And I know a lot of people have seen it. And it's just what is it? Bad luck? I don't know.

MEGHAN: *But hold on a second, unless you want– can I jump in there? Because there are certain things that I know you won't want to say. About your experience, but I lived through a lot of that with you.*

SERENA: *Yeah, but there are some experiences I didn't deserve at all.*

MEGHAN: *Oh my gosh, of course. You were treated completely unfairly.*

SERENA: *It just wasn't one thing I'm telling you. The reason that I have trauma from it was because it's been like five things or more. I know the first reason the hawk eye became like a thing was because they were calling my balls out and they weren't even close to the line.*

[MUSIC IN / PAUSE A BEAT]

MEGHAN: Serena's referring here to her US Open Quarterfinals match against Jennifer Capriati in 2004.

[AUDIO OF JENNIFER CAPRIATI US OPEN MATCH]

SERENA: *In that match I had this fear of hitting because every time I hit a ball, they would call it out no matter how close it was or how far it was.*

[SHORT CLIP OF MATCH]

SERENA: *And it became impossible to play because it was like they just kept calling them out.*

[LONGER CLIP OF MATCH]

SERENA: *So that was one of the first things that happened, and there was a plethora of things that happened after that. But eventually I remember playing in Australia years, years later, that I just didn't have the Serena in me because I was afraid. I was afraid to be Serena because of all the experiences that I've had and I ended up losing a match because I was afraid to challenge, or to be myself. I can't win being someone different, I have to win being Serena. And sometimes that's more fierce. But is it fierce when, you know, guys are saying, come on and pumping their fists? It's pretty exciting. But for me it's pretty – it's aggressive. Or it's what is, I don't know, they said that I... oh my goodness, I'll never forget. There's one article that said this guy was passionate and I had a meltdown and I was like, wait, how do I have a meltdown? But this guy's passionate. It was just so—*

MEGHAN: *Mmmm the double standard. And look, there's something that happens in being archetyped that's really dehumanizing. And I think of that from my personal standpoint of being there in the box with you know, your mom and your sister. And like watching you win. And at the same time, watching the pressure, the external pressure that I knew was mounting. And we'd be at the open or we'd be at Wimbledon. And knowing that there's a real person behind all of that.*

I find it traumatizing too, to go back to that moment where I feel you were treated so unfairly and it was reported so unfairly. But I would like us to listen to some of the moments that men have had on the court that people don't seem to have as visceral a response, you happy to hear some of these fellas?

SERENA: *Sure, let's do it!*

(PAUSE)

[AUDIO CLIP OF MEN BEHAVING BADLY]

SERENA: *Some of that was funny. I love it, I love Andy.*

MEGHAN: *Can you imagine if you had done that? Can you imagine?*

SERENA: *I got a game taken away from me and I didn't use a bad word at all. But yeah that was nuts. But, you know, I don't know, I just feel like there's obviously a double standard. I mean, and whether people want to admit it or not, that's okay. But just first of all, it makes tennis more exciting to see these players have these emotions. Right. Let's just say that because tennis is very, you know, black and white, not literally, but like it's just like it is like the hit, hit, hit. And there're so many rules of things that they try to tell you not to do. But if you look at soccer, if you look at basketball, if you look at all these other sports, you have people screaming and you have people, the fans, really a part of it. And tennis players are grown up and taught to just like be monotone and people are not monotone, which is why you see these attitudes. So if they want to have these attitudes, I'm all for it. Just don't say I can't either. And, you know, I feel like, you know what? Let them be them. But, you know, within reason, obviously. And again, I just do feel that there was a moment where I wasn't proud of how I acted and how I behaved. And I didn't like how I behaved at all. And I think I was totally at fault there. But I think there's a lot of other moments where I'm just like being myself and like I said, I got a game taken away when I didn't use the curse word, not even not not one bad word, period. And so I just feel like there is obviously a double standard.*

[PAUSE]

MEGHAN: After the break, Serena's coming back with us and talking about balancing her ambition with being a mom – and how that played into her incredibly difficult decision to step away from professional tennis...

SERENA: ...I was just sitting in the hotel at the desk, just typing and deleting and typing and thinking and then crying and sitting at my computer and tears streaming down my face as I'm writing these words...

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ACT 2

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MEGHAN: Welcome back. So, I've been talking with tennis superstar, cultural icon, and my friend, Serena Williams, about the boxes that she's been put into over the years – including this idea that she's too aggressive, too loud, and ughhh – dare I even say it? Too ambitious.

We're gonna jump back into that conversation in just a minute – but first, I just wanted to dig a little bit deeper on this idea of the “ambitious woman.” So, I thought, let's talk to a professional – something that you're gonna see us do from time to time in this series. And for this, we spoke to Dr. Laura Kray, she's a professor at the Haas School of Business at University of California, Berkeley and the faculty director of the university's Center for Equity, Gender and Leadership.

MEGHAN: She focuses her research on how ambitious women are viewed in society, and especially in the workplace. And her research helps give context to these double standards Serena and I were just talking about.

DR. LAURA KRAY: As researchers, we run experiments and we give people scenarios of men versus women. We see that the identical behavior is rated more negatively when it is a woman than when it is a man.

So an ambitious woman is power hungry, is manipulative, is not trusted, whereas an ambitious man is seen as, I want to emulate him. He's a role model. He's a captain of industry. Right. So we see people using these different terms for the identical behavior. So the only explanation is, it boils down to antipathy towards women.

And it's almost, you know, the fix is in – it's by design. It's a way of keeping women in their place.

MEGHAN: And oftentimes when women don't "stay in her place" as they say...it comes with a lot of backlash. She gets labels thrown at her. Like, "she's a climber," or "she's competitive." Which, in turn, leads to a ripple effect of even more negative labels.

DR. LAURA KRAY: If I'm going to acknowledge that you are an extremely competitive, you know, person or athlete or whatever domain we're talking, there has to be something wrong. And women often get stereotyped as hysterical. Right. Not rational, too emotional. So if that's a label you want to apply to somebody, then you will generate evidence consistent with it and use that against the person.

MEGHAN: As it was used so often against my friend, Serena.

And this workplace backlash continues when it comes to another big role that many women play – as moms.

DR. LAURA KRAY: Ambitious women who have children and then come back to work and attempt to perform at the highest level are violating people's expectations of what's the most important thing for women to be is to be nurturing and to, you know, love children. And so anything that a woman does that could potentially call that into doubt is going to incur backlash.

When men have children and they take time off and then they come back, they often experience a boost in, in their pay. People will say, well, he's got kids now. We need to help him to support his family. And it benefits them career-wise when they have kids.

MEGHAN: The double standard between how men and women are treated after having kids is so, so real. I've felt it. And it's certainly been a big part of Serena's story as well.

MEGHAN: Do you feel like it was different for you and the pressures that you experienced or were treated with once you had Olympia and were back on the court?

SERENA: Yeah, absolutely. People always ask me, how do you do the mom/work balance? And even my husband, he talks about this all the time. He's like, they never ask me that. I'm like, No, because you're a dad now, too. You never have to worry about why are you doing this? Or how do you balance your time? And um, so it's, it's always different.

Again, this goes to, this goes to what I said in the beginning this is hundreds of years, maybe thousands of years of – I can't say thousands. That's silly. Hundreds of years of– (laughter) Hundreds of years of!--

MEGHAN: Millions and millions of years!

SERENA: When the dinosaurs roamed the earth! (laughter) Of our minds being conditioned to thinking one way.

You know, I'm always devil's advocate. Moms do more, I know that now there are more dads that do a lot. But moms traditionally do more, which is why they always ask, how do you balance this, mom? How are you going to be able to play tennis and be able to still have a kid? Because, quite frankly, we care and we're there and we're breastfeeding and we're rocking that baby to sleep. I'll never forget, this is a crazy experience. I don't think I've ever, like, said anything about it publicly. At the French Open, it was, that year I wore that infamous catsuit. The one piece, black.

MEGHAN: Oh I remember that!

ARCHIVAL - NEWS CLIP ABOUT SERENA'S OUTFIT AT FRENCH OPEN

[MUSIC IN]

SERENA: So that year I had Olympia and I had a match the next day and that night, she fell out of her high chair and broke her wrist. And she was on my watch. And I was just basically devastated. Like, I literally couldn't think. I felt so guilty. I just, anyway. So she fell. We went to the hospital and she had a small tear, a break in her wrist, so she had to get a cast and we didn't get back 'til like four in the morning. Meanwhile, of course, it is the one day I was playing early. I remember holding her the whole night and just like rocking her to sleep and I just didn't let her out of my sight at that point because I was already and I'm hard on myself, and I'm a little bit of a perfectionist. But I was so mad at myself for even allowing that to happen. So I think I got like 30 minutes of sleep and then I had to go play this match. And I'm just thinking, how am I going to play?

ARCHIVAL - MATCH PLAY, RESULT

I somehow managed to win, but I was so emotionally spent and just like so emotionally drained that it was, it was crazy. And, you know, and then like every night after that, I just was with her the whole time and was like you're going to be with me. I just took a lot on. But moms do a lot. Like I look at my mom, I don't know how she had five kids. I don't know. Like I.

MEGHAN: *But you are such an amazing mom and that kind of story.*

SERENA: *And I would drop anything at any time to whatever I had to do for Olympia. Middle of a Grand Slam final. I would leave if I had to.*

MEGHAN: *And yet you still show up and do the match. You still get the thing without people having any sense of what was happening behind the scenes. And I think what's so key and for us as women and just not just women, I think our husbands are really good at this. Other men need to get even better at this as well as recognizing what people don't see. Right. So when you went and played that match the next morning, no one knew what your night had been like the night before. They forgot that human piece of it. Just like when we went on our tour to South Africa, we landed with Archie. Archie was what, four and a half months old. And the moment we landed, we had to drop him off at this housing unit that they had had us staying in. He was going to get ready to go down for his nap. We immediately went to an official engagement in this township called Nyanga, and there was this moment where I'm standing on a tree stump and I'm giving this speech to women and girls, and we finish the engagement, we get in the car and they say there's been a fire at the residence. What? There's been a fire in the baby's room. What?*

SERENA: *Stop!*

MEGHAN: *Oh my god, I can't believe we haven't talked about this.*

SERENA: *No*

MEGHAN: *And so we're in the car. We had just landed, what, an hour or 2 hours before racing back? We get back our amazing nanny, Lauren, who we'd had all the way until, um. In Canada here. Lauren in floods of tears. She was supposed to put Archie down for his nap and she just said, You know what? Let me just go get a snack downstairs. And she was from Zimbabwe and we loved that she would always tie him on her, her back with a mud cloth, and her instinct was like, Let me just bring him with me before I put him down. In that amount of time that she went downstairs.*

SERENA: *Oh, my gosh.*

MEGHAN: *The heater in the nursery caught on fire. There was no smoke detector. Someone happened to just smell smoke down the hallway went in, fire extinguished. He was supposed to be sleeping in there.*

[MUSIC IN]

And we came back. And of course, as a mother, you go, Oh, my God, what? Everyone's in tears, everyone's shaken. And what do we have to do? Go out and do another official engagement? I said, This doesn't make any sense. Can you just.

SERENA: *How did you not bring him?*

MEGHAN: *I was like, Can you just tell people what happened? And so much, I think, optically. The focus ends up being on how it looks instead of how it feels. And part of the humanizing and the breaking through of these labels and these archetypes and these boxes that we're put into is having some understanding on the human moments behind the scenes that people might not have any awareness of and to give each other a break. Because we did— we had to leave our baby.*

SERENA: *Mmmm.*

MEGHAN: *And even though we were being moved to another place afterwards, we still had to leave him and go do another official engagement.*

SERENA: *I couldn't have done that. I would have said uh-uh.*

MEGHAN: *Oh. Well.*

[MUSIC OUT / LONG PAUSE]

MEGHAN: These human moments behind the scenes, the ones under the surface... they're everything. Because when we don't swim in the shallow end, and instead choose to dive into the deep end, that's when we gain a more nuanced understanding of each other.

And speaking of life moments... Serena's just been through a big one. And while the world now knows the big news – that Serena, that *Serena Williams* is stepping away from professional tennis – the backstory, the feelings underneath it all, I think those are less well-known.

Now, when we originally recorded this conversation, the news of Serena's *evolution away* from tennis wasn't yet public. I knew about her plans – as you'll soon hear – but Serena and I couldn't quite talk openly about it in this type of forum. She's my friend, I wasn't gonna betray that trust. But now that we *can*, I knew that I needed to call her up and record some more of this. Because even though we talk all the time, you guys needed to hear this, too. To hear the deeper story behind the scenes of this monumental decision.

MEGHAN: *Hey, you.*

SERENA: *Hey, you.*

MEGHAN: Look, I even put on my little U.S. Open baseball cap today. I said, let's get into the mood. I have 15 minutes, and I didn't get my hair. I didn't have time to do my hair done. So I was like I just put this on.

SERENA: Well, me neither but this is... thank God this is a podcast.

MEGHAN: I know, right?

SERENA: My eye is swelling from my flight, I'm like, oh, my God, what's wrong with my face?

MEGHAN: You look beautiful. I was like, oh, my gosh, here we go. I have coffee. And then I try to feel, really, she can give myself a biscotti. I was like, then I feel like I'm on vacation. Like, you're not on vacation. You're in your baseball cap at home. So obviously, I mean, you and I were texting the other day and I told you I was like, Oh, my God, it's out. It's out. The world knows that. How does it feel?

SERENA: It's out. Well, you know, I've struggled with it for a while. I don't know. I was just saying to someone, I'm going to be crying at everything. And so don't think I'm sad. It's not sad tears. It's just like. I don't know what to call them. You know, I like I cry at a, I look at a butterfly. So but yeah, it's it's weird because you have to think about it. I've been doing this since I was, since I can remember. And I'm 40 years old now, so it's like my whole entire being and my whole entire life has been for one purpose. So to kind of not do that anymore, it's exciting, right? I'm really looking forward to it. As you know, I'm honestly, I can't wait to wake up one day and literally never have to worry about performing on such a high level and, you know, you know, competing. And I've actually never felt that. I mean, I've had a baby and I stopped and I've had injuries, but there was always somewhere in the back of my mind that it's still a possibility. So for it to just be completely gone is, it's new territory for me. And I'm, like I said, I'm happy about it, but it's just also something that I've actually literally have never experienced in my life.

MEGHAN: I think there's something really great about that, that it's a new chapter. It's a new... of course, it has layers, I can understand, like I think most people can. We all have our own version of it where you toil over this decision, you pray over this and you cry over the decision. And then you make the decision.

SERENA: Yeah.

MEGHAN: And when you sent me the piece, I just thought, oh, wow. Because remember, you were like I have to face time, I need to talk to you.

SERENA: Yeah, but you knew about it for a long time, and I talked with Harry about it a lot as well, when you know...

MEGHAN: I remember that day you were here at the house and I was like, What are you two just chatting about? It must have been like an hour...

SERENA: He was trying to knock some sense into me and I'm just like uh...

MEGHAN: I think, you know, I think both of us, or the three of us, really know that sometimes the right decision isn't the easiest decision.

SERENA: ...Is the hard decision.

MEGHAN: It's a hard decision. And it takes a lot of thought and a lot of counsel and a lot of support to just go, uh uh uh and then just make the choice.

SERENA: I just wanted to just walk away quietly. And that's how I've always seen my career. Just like, all right, I wanted to leave with no goodbyes.

MEGHAN: You're not going to do that. No one, no one in the planet would let you do that. You are too loved. I mean, I and what I'm most excited about is that the last hurrah will be at the U.S. Open because it's home.

SERENA: Yeah. And you guys have known about, you know, I've been trying to decide what to do and I've been, like, in and out and not really sure where to go. And that's the worst place to be, is on the fence, as you know. So it's like make a decision, either be in it or be out of it. And, you know, I was on the fence for a while because I love what I do. And like I said, I've been doing this my entire existence even before I was born. It was what I was meant to do and what I was supposed to do and what was chosen for me. So, yeah, it's, it's hard. And I sent you that article early because I want you to see it because I also wanted you to see that. Well, I didn't want you to read about it *laughs*

MEGHAN: I was like, Oh, okay, I'm going to talk about this for a long time. Can I get a little heads up? So thank you.

SERENA: But I also just wanted you to just understand what it meant to have your support and for H's support, for everything. Because it's been, it's been hard, you know, like you've been in the locker rooms where I've been really down and debating why am I even doing this? But ultimately, I love what I do and that's why I'm still doing it. And it's good to have a chance to go out there and have a nice goodbye, but I'm definitely, will be very emotional. But it's not like again, it's not sad tears, but there are sad tears, but it's not like the tears were like, are you okay, Serena? You know, you know, it's different. It's totally different. And honestly, I don't know how I'm going to feel in three weeks or four weeks. I just, I don't know. My whole life has been one thing. And so now I can focus on Serena Ventures, which I'm excited about.

MEGHAN: Mm. But that's why I like that you're calling it an evolution. It's an evolution, right? Versus a retirement because words are so powerful. That's what this whole show is about. But the word that you chose to describe this doesn't mean something has stopped. One specific part of you, a huge part of you has stopped in the way that you've known it. But it doesn't mean that stops being a part of you, and it doesn't mean that you

as a person stop. No, you evolve into something else and continue the evolution which you and I both love so much, which is being a mom.

SERENA: Yeah, I love being that and I'm excited about that. And it's so funny. I do like the word evolution because it's like, I don't want, I don't like the word retirement because it has like, I don't like it for me in this scenario because I will never retire from something that you absolutely love. I will always have some sort of involvement. And it won't be professionally, but I will always want to be involved in some way, shape or form in tennis. You know, obviously I'm retiring professionally, but it's also an evolution. I'm doing more business things. And I really want to expand my family. And, you know, I've been putting it off for so long. And as a woman, there's only so, so long you can put that off. And, you know, other people out, other men out there can continue to play. But, but I love being a woman and I love, I loved being pregnant. You know, I was one of those

MEGHAN: I know

SERENA: I was like, oh, I love this. The nothing, nothing's oh, I'm so happy. Like, I was literally.

MEGHAN: Oh, with the belly chain.

SERENA: One of...Those women.

MEGHAN: Forget it. Yeah. Yeah. It's just like everything. You made pregnancy looks so sexy. I just waddled around. I was just tired. So tired. Oh my god.

SERENA: I was the annoying one. You were under a lot of stress.

MEGHAN: Yeah, it's true.

SERENA: But I have to say that it's just I look forward to it. I think, I you know, I've been fortunate enough to play tennis really well, but I think my best is being a mom. I think I can really be really good at that.

MEGHAN: And also, I think the way that you chose was interesting. You just said, you know, playing tennis was something that was chosen for you. Like this was your path, right? Even before, like something higher than not even a family choice. Like this was your calling, but it's so interesting. Now, how does it feel to be choosing a path for yourself?

SERENA: Oh, my gosh. I love how you, how you speak to me, you always put things differently. Yeah, because tennis was chosen for me and I loved that choice and I couldn't have made a better choice, right? So I was really happy that that happened. But now, for the first time in my entire life, I'm choosing to do something. And it's hard because it's like. It's something I've actually never done. I've always done something different, and I've always enjoyed it so much. But I'm making a different choice and one,

you know, to stop doing what I love and to have, hopefully, have more kids and to, and to focus on other things and to do more with, you know, other stuff that I want to do.

MEGHAN: *It takes a lot of courage, I think, too, to stop something in many ways than to keep going sometimes. Ah. When you go out on the court at the U.S. Open.*

Serena: *I know. How am I not going to cry? Like, I mean, this is almost, isn't fair, you know, it's like, okay, Serena. I'm going to go out there and it's just like, I don't know, maybe if I, hopefully if I can get through a couple of matches, then maybe I'll feel better. But I think initially it's going to be hard because every time I step out there, it's, it's literally my last time.*

MEGHAN: *I just got chills. I just got chills thinking about when we were just like yes.*

SERENA: *After like, yeah after like 20 something years of a career. You know, I think my first grand slam was in 1999. That was a long time ago.*

MEGHAN: *Oh, my gosh. That's, that's the year that I graduated high school.*

SERENA: *Me too.*

M: *'99. Wait, the year you graduated high school was your first grand slam?*

Serena: *My first Grand Slam win, yeah.*

MEGHAN: *Oh, my God, Serena. That's, that's... I mean, when you put it.*

SERENA: *Some kind of career.*

MEGHAN: *When you put it in that kind of perspective, that's insane. That's when that.*

SERENA: *I need to stop, right? It's like, Serena, you need to stop.*

MEGHAN: *No, I was thinking, like, I was not achieving anything like that at that point. I was driving my little Nissan with the license plate holder that said, "classy girl." I was not winning Grand Slams. I'm just excited to see you. I'm excited to see all that. I love how you shared this news, too, because if so much of this is about making the choice, you made the choice. You chose the words so that you could control this story and how it landed. You could, you could control and choose how you relayed that to all of your supporters and your fans. And I think that for me is when you say, you know, if you look at a butterfly and it could make you tear up. Yes. Because there's an emotional element to everything that's happening right now. But it's because you're choosing in many ways this freedom, this liberation, this new, this newness. And I love that. I love that so much. How hard was it to find all those words, to put pen to paper? And why did you choose to do it that way and not in an interview?*

SERENA: Yeah. It wasn't very easy. Like, I remember I was in ... randomly, I was in Switzerland and I was just sitting in the hotel at the desk, just typing and deleting and typing and thinking and then crying and sitting at my computer and tears streaming down my face as I'm writing these words and going back on these memories. And it was just like, God, it was, it was really hard. Um. I mean, but I was like, if I'm going to do this, it has to be Vogue September issue, right?

MEGHAN: I'm sure Anna was grateful.

SERENA: It doesn't get, it doesn't get better than that. So, yeah, Anna was really grateful and super supportive and kept it secret, too, because it was like we did that photoshoot a while ago.

MEGHAN: Oh, it's so beautiful, that picture of you in that gown on the beach and Olympia oh the whole thing. That part you didn't tell me about that I got the surprise of, I said, well she's not messing around. You looked stunning.

SERENA: You know, I gotta always have Olympia in there.

MEGHAN: I know... she always gets to see you working. You guys are inseparable. It's the sweetest thing.

SERENA: We're tied at the hip. I'm like, that's my best friend.

MEGHAN: Is there anything that you want to say to all the people that love you?

SERENA: Yeah. I said it all in my article that, you know, I love them for all the support that I've gotten over the years and I couldn't have never dreamt of it. And to hear everyone so happy and so intense and like, I'm just from Compton and I never, I never vision that this would be me. You know, I just was just the youngest of five and in a two bedroom home. And to have people really supporting and really there to just hang on and to every thing has been the most amazing experience and the most amazing ride. And oh, and I am so grateful for every moment that everyone has been there and.

MEGHAN: Oh, you're going to make me cry. Oh, don't.

SERENA: Oh, yeah. And Rena's Armies deserve a special shout out there. I'm not going to cry, though, cause I'm going to do enough of that in the next few days.

MEGHAN: I know I am. I mean, why am I getting emotional? I'm just. Yeah, I was thinking about that. Your final twirl, your signature twirl. And that moment when you just will do that twirl.

SERENA: Oh, yeah... another twirl.

MEGHAN: And you've got a twirl.

SERENA: *Maybe I'll just do some twirls right on out of the stadium.*

MEGHAN: *The whole way through. Like, they'll be like, wait, is part of her evolution?*

SERENA: *To the bar— to the bar. That's something to do afterwards. I'm just going out because I can never drink.*

MEGHAN: *Yeah, we're going to have fun.*

SERENA: *So, yeah, yeah. Have a glass of champagne.*

MEGHAN: *As you should. We'll make sure you get a good one.*

[BEAT / MUSIC IN]

MEGHAN: Oooohhh, I'm so, so deeply proud of her. Cheers to you, Serena!

And now, to close things out, there's a little section here at *Archetypes* that we call "Three Words."

MEGHAN: *At the end of each of these conversations, what I want with the same series of questions is to hold a space for you as a guest to define yourself. So what three words would you use to describe yourself as a kid?*

SERENA: *Oh as a kid?*

MEGHAN: *As a kid!*

SERENA: *Oh! I was very quiet. I'm still semi quiet. Um so I would say quiet... um, very competitive. I had to win. I always had to win. And I was extremely competitive. My goodness. Oh, and really insane perfectionist, like to a fault.*

MEGHAN: *So quiet, competitive and a perfectionist. So what three words would you use to describe yourself now, today, as the woman that you are?*

SERENA: *I would say thoughtful. So I listen. I would say compassionate. I try to be very compassionate and I would say very funny, if I do say so myself!*

MEGHAN: *I think you're funny! And I love that you are someone who always laughs at my jokes. Either we're the only two people in the world who find each other funny or we're genuinely funny. But I mean, most of our time chatting is just laughing. I know, it's so good.*

SERENA: *Way too much.*

MEGHAN: So good. So what does the difference or similarity in those words tell me and tell you about your life? I mean, I hear that and I go, that's growth. But that's also dimensionality.

SERENA: Yeah. I was gonna say growth.

MEGHAN: And dimensionality like that's the whole point.

[MUSIC IN]

You can be all of those things, that is part of being a fully fledged human being. So ultimately how do you define yourself and how do you want the world to see you? That's my last question for you.

SERENA: Yeah. So I define myself as I'm Serena. I'm powerful, and I have a voice, and I'm not afraid to use it. And I really define myself as someone that's super understanding. And even how I try to be as a mom, I try to be extremely understanding, extremely thoughtful and extremely compassionate. I try, I really try to do those things. Um...and yeah... And I think above all, I'm just a mom. And I love being a mom.

[MUSIC OUT]

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SHOW CLOSE
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MEGHAN: That was Serena Williams. We were talking about ambition, a marker of drive and a commitment to achievement. And yet, as you heard in my chat with my dear friend, the notion of ambition comes with many judgments and nuances, especially for women.

The misconception that if you're an ambitious woman, you have an agenda, you must be calculating, or you're selfish or aggressive, or a climber, and that if you're that fierce or strong or brave, then you somehow deserve whatever gets thrown at you. However disproportionate or unfair it may be. And even when it's more than most could endure, most men, most anyone. Sometimes ambition in women also seems to suggest that you aren't afraid of anything. But as you heard Serena say, of course, fears still exist. I've lived through them with her. The fear of making this recent decision. Maybe not her fear of swimming in the ocean. Serena. Sirena. My little mermaid. Ironically, who can't bear being in the dark open waters of the sea. Or who also shared that she has a fear of heights. But the truth is, I'm afraid of heights, too. And maybe that's the point. That the perception and the reality, they're just never really the same thing. So while Serena's soon closing her chapter of playing professional tennis, she's not shutting the door on her ambition. She's going to continue to do great things. To be the greatest of all time off the court. To be ambitious, and I think that's a beautiful thing.

I can't wait to chat with you again next week, when we hear from the one and only...

MARIAH: La la la la la la!

MEGHAN: (laugh) Mariah Carey! Ahh! It's a really good one! We'll see you guys next week, thanks for joining me! As ever, I'm Meghan.

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