Alex Grimaldi

I'M NOT CRAZY, I'VE JUST GOT AuDHD

How AuDHD, Dyslexia and Dyscalculia Broke Me, Shaped Me, and Finally Set Me Free

I am not crazy, I've just got ADHD

By

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Prologue: Read This First

Before you turn the page, there's something you must know.

This is not a story of healing.
Why is society so obsessed with happy endings—in books, in films, in life?
What even *is* happiness? A fleeting state? A body super-fuelled by dopamine?

There is no happy ending.
There is only the journey—sometimes smooth, often intricate—and then the end.
Let's be done with the foolish expectation of a healed soul or a magic pill.

You won't find a map out of the woods in these pages, because I'm still navigating the forest.
You won't find five steps to quiet the volcano—because I *am* the volcano. I still erupt.

In an earlier phase of this book's life, I was told the narrative needed clearer direction.
A journey away from pain.
But that would be a lie. Another mask. Another performance.
And I am done performing.

The truth is, I am still in the dark.
The diagnosis I received was not a cure. It was a key.
But not to a door leading *out*—to a door leading *in*.

For the first time, I walked through the chaos of my mind and saw not a personal failure, but a neurological landscape.
A reason. A pattern. A truth.
But the magma still bubbles.

For fifty-four years, I tried to translate myself into a language the world could understand.
I wore masks. I played roles. I adjusted. I fit. I *homologated*.

But I am who I am. And I'm proud of who I became—not in spite of my neurodivergence, but perhaps because of it.
That's it.

I'm finished trying to fit.
Society—you are done classifying me by your stale, rigid rules.

Humans are not standardised. Brains are not uniform.
We are all a constant *becoming*.
And those rules?
They only serve the ones who feel safe when told what to do and how to be.
I am not one of them.

And like me, there's an army of people who don't fit.
An army larger than you might think.

I have come to a radical conclusion:
I do not need to change to be accepted by society.
Society, for once, can learn to *omologate* to me.

That is the beauty of being alive:
To live in a world defined by difference—from the animal kingdom to the plant world, to us.

So, this book is not a promise of peace.
It's a testimony of existence.
A glimpse inside the beautiful, terrifying, vibrant, and exhausting reality of a mind that isn't broken—just wired differently.

If you're looking for a story of triumph over adversity, you may be disappointed.

But if you're seeking a story of truth, of defiance, of what it feels like to finally meet yourself in the wreckage and refuse to look away…

Then turn the page.

Welcome to the magma.

Chapter 1 The Mask I Wore for 54 Years

For more than half a century, I wore a mask so skillfully shaped I often forgot it was there. It wasn't a theatrical mask. It was invisible, silent — and yet it wrapped around everything I did, everything I said, everything I thought I was. I didn't wear it to lie. I wore it to survive.

On the surface, I seemed fine. Gifted even. Articulate. Curious. Sensitive. Funny. But underneath that mask was a child — then a teenager, then a man — who was terrified he was fundamentally broken. And what made it even harder was that nobody could see it. Not even me.

A Body That Screamed Before I Could Speak

My first rebellion against the world was through my skin. I don't remember a time without pain. My eczema was so severe, so consuming, that it coloured my earliest experiences. I scratched until I bled. My nights were sleepless, my clothes crusted in ointments. My body was a battlefield — red, raw, wrapped.

Children stared. Adults tutted. Clothes irritated me. Sweat made me feel like I was burning alive. The outside world was hostile. My own body betrayed me. And so, quietly, without even knowing the word for it, I began to withdraw.

Dissociation, Daydreams, and Survival

Psychologists would later tell me I dissociated. That I retreated into fantasy to avoid the pain of reality. They said, "He lives in his own world." And they were right. But they never realised that world saved me.

I didn't retreat into silence. I escaped into sound. My lifeline was a small, battery-powered vinyl player I carried around like a talisman. I didn't sit still listening to music. I walked. Endlessly. In circles around the flat. For hours. The real world faded away as I was transported into musicals like The Sound of Music, Mary Poppins, My Fair Lady — not just as a listener, but as a citizen of those worlds.

I memorised every word. Every dialogue. Every pause between songs. They weren't just stories. They were scripts for how life could be. Magical worlds where people were kind. Where families stuck together. Where problems were big — but always solved. Where people broke into song rather than shouted. Where there was always a happy ending.

That became my internal reality. A beautiful lie I needed to believe.

The Emperor and His Soldiers

I didn't play with toys the way other children did. I didn't role-play with them. I observed. I directed. My father played with them more than I did — as if stepping in to do what I couldn't. My younger brother became my soldier, following commands I created in my mind. I didn't build with blocks. I built empires in my imagination. I was the emperor. I issued orders. I created mythologies.

To others, it may have looked strange. But to me, it was order. Power. A world where I was in control, when everything else in life — especially my own skin — reminded me that I wasn't.

School: Where Gift Met Failure

I knew I was bright. People told me so. But school seemed designed to expose my flaws. I couldn't concentrate. I forgot instructions the moment I heard them. I was either three steps ahead or completely lost. I couldn't write neatly. I couldn't complete worksheets. But I could talk passionately for hours about philosophy, history, music, ideas beyond my years.

Still, I failed. Over and over again. And every failure was not just academic — it was personal. It reinforced the growing, invisible truth I carried inside: You're not enough. You'll never be enough.

I didn't understand why. So I blamed myself. I thought I was lazy. Defective. Selfish. The shame grew louder than any praise.

Near Victory, Crushing Defeat

Despite everything, I pushed through. Somehow, I made it to university. I studied economics — a course built on logic, structure, equations, order. I threw myself into it with everything I had. I studied obsessively. I built elaborate revision systems. I colour-coded notes. I created rituals to trick my brain into focusing.

It wasn’t just hard. It was punishing. But I survived. Five years. I clawed my way through the chaos, through depression, through overwhelm.

And then, with just five exams left to complete the degree, I stopped. I dropped out.

I collapsed.

Not physically. Emotionally. Psychologically. Spiritually. My entire inner world caved in. I couldn’t breathe under the pressure anymore. The inner scream — Why can’t I just finish like everyone else? — became too loud to silence.

I told myself I didn’t care. But I did. I still do. It was the greatest regret of my life. I carried that moment like a secret shame, buried so deeply I tried to rewrite it in my own mind. I’d tell myself, “It wasn’t the right time,” or “I just changed direction.” But deep down, I knew the truth:

I had run out of strength.

That unspoken failure shaped everything that followed. I never forgave myself. Not for quitting. But for needing to quit.

Until recently.

The Fog Begins to Lift

Years later, worn out from the same patterns of burnout, overachievement, and inexplicable paralysis, I began to search for answers. I didn’t know what I was looking for. But something inside me — that same obsessive hunger that once memorised musical scores — now turned toward understanding myself.

That’s when I found the words I had missed my entire life: ADHD. Dyslexia. Executive dysfunction. Sensory processing. Emotional regulation.

Suddenly, everything snapped into place.

It wasn’t that I was lazy. It wasn’t that I lacked discipline. It wasn’t that I was emotionally weak. I was neurodivergent. My brain was wired differently. My struggles had a name. A pattern. A reason.

I wasn’t broken. I was misunderstood.

Removing the Mask

Fifty-four years. That’s how long it took for me to stop blaming myself for being different. To stop hiding the deepest wounds under layers of humour, intellect, perfectionism, and guilt. The mask protected me. But it also suffocated me.

Now, I’m learning to take it off. Slowly. Carefully. With compassion.

I’m learning to forgive the boy who couldn’t stop scratching.

The teenager who got lost in fantasy.

The man who couldn’t finish five exams — not because he didn’t care, but because he cared too much and couldn’t take the pain of failing again.

I am no longer rewriting my story to make it less painful. I’m finally telling the truth — in all its mess and beauty.

I am not lazy.

I am not broken.

I am not a failure.

I’m not crazy.

I’ve just got ADHD.

And for the first time in my life — I’m beginning to feel free.

Chapter 2: The Performer

For most of my life, I wasn't just someone who lived with undiagnosed ADHD and dyslexia. I was a performer — a shape-shifter — someone who learned to read a room before reading a book. I became an expert in mirroring expectations, fitting into roles, adapting personas to survive. I wasn't trying to manipulate the world — I was trying to survive in it, to feel safe, accepted, loved.

In school, I mastered the art of being "the good one," especially in English. That subject wasn't just a strength — it was my sanctuary. Words flowed for me like second nature. I didn't need to study like others did. Language lived inside me. I could write essays without drafts, read poetry aloud with feeling, mimic accents and emotions from memory. It was where I could breathe.

And I had a teacher who saw that. I don't remember her name as much as I remember her presence — stern, but fair. Encouraging, but not effusive. She believed in me. She told me I had something special. She praised me in front of others — not to show me off, but because she wanted me to know I mattered.

Then came the moment I betrayed that.

I must have been eleven, maybe twelve. The summer holidays had ended and we were back at school, sweating slightly in our scratchy uniforms, fidgeting in wooden desks that always seemed just a little too small. That day, our teacher was going through the homework we'd been assigned over the break. Randomly, she was calling on students to show their work. As she moved through the room, I could feel my stomach tighten. I hadn't done it.

I had no excuse — or maybe I had too many. Maybe I was overwhelmed. Maybe I forgot. Maybe I started and couldn't finish and the shame stopped me from trying again. But I didn't tell her that. I joined in with the others when she asked who had completed it. I raised my hand, nodded along, echoed the "yes, miss" in chorus like a fraud. I was hoping to slip through unnoticed.

But she noticed. Of course she did. She knew me too well — my rhythm, my handwriting, my pride.

She kept going, questioning students, flipping through notebooks, listening carefully. And then, at the very end, she turned her eyes to me. They were calm, unflinching.

“Grassini,” she said, “let me see your homework.”

It was as if time stopped. Every hair on my body stood upright, alert, alive with dread. My skin burned. My throat dried. I felt my insides collapse and expand all at once. I couldn’t move, not really. But I stood.

My seat was near the back, and the desks were arranged in gentle rows that sloped downward so the teacher could see all of us clearly. That meant I had to walk past every single student in that room — all thirty of them — each of them now suddenly watching.

That walk was the longest of my life. It felt like I was walking to the guillotine. I remember gripping my notebook with both hands, knuckles white. I remember not looking up once. Not at her. Not at them. Just at the floor. My shoes. My steps. My shame.

Some classmates stared with sympathy. Others with smug satisfaction. The boy who always did well — the teacher’s favourite — had finally fallen. For some, that was justice. For me, it was humiliation.

I reached her desk. I held out my notebook. She opened it slowly. Empty pages. She must have known before she even asked. But she had to go through the ritual.

“This notebook is empty,” she said, her voice low, steady. And then she took out her red pen and marked it. F.

She wasn’t angry. She didn’t yell. She was disappointed, yes — but worse, she let me feel what I had done. And in that moment, I thought I had let her down. But what stayed with me far longer was the realisation that I had let myself down — not because I failed, but because I had tried to hide it.

I never forgot that shame. It didn’t just pass. It burrowed. For years I carried it like a quiet scar — not visible, but always there, especially when I was close to success. Especially when I was about to be seen. Because that moment taught me that being caught — being exposed as less than perfect — was worse than failing outright.

So I performed. I excelled where I could. I overcompensated. I built a personality out of achievement and charm. But inside, the child walking to the teacher’s desk was still very much alive, still trembling, still ashamed.

Looking back now, I can see what others couldn't. I wasn't lazy. I wasn't careless. I wasn't trying to be deceptive. I was scared. Scared of being seen for who I really was — not because I was bad, but because I didn't understand why I couldn't do what others found so easy. I didn't know I had ADHD. I didn't know my brain worked differently. I just thought I was broken.

And when a child believes they are broken, they don't ask for help. They try harder. They try to be perfect. They try to be invisible.

That day taught me a lesson far more powerful than any academic one: when the mask slips, the truth hurts — but it's also the beginning of something real.

Now, decades later, I'm beginning to understand that the moment of shame was actually the beginning of truth. Because we only truly heal when we stop hiding from ourselves. And we only stop hiding when we finally know we're not broken — we're just wired differently.

And that's something worth walking toward. Head held high. Notebook open. Empty or not.

Chapter 3: The Body Remembers

I don’t remember when I first became aware of my body, not as a vessel, but as something I was trapped inside. A hypersensitive shell — twitchy, reactive, always on edge, as though every nerve ending had been wired too close to the surface.

As a child, eczema defined the borders of my skin. Red patches. Open wounds. Burning. Scratching until it bled. The discomfort was constant, but it wasn’t just physical. It was psychological. Emotional. It wasn’t just the itching — it was the shame. The ritual of bandages. The thick, greasy ointments. The way adults would frown and whisper. The sideways looks from other kids. The sense that something was wrong with me, something defective, exposed.

I couldn’t wear what I wanted. I couldn’t move freely. I couldn’t relax into play. I was always regulating, always bracing for the sting — from a scratch, a comment, a glance. My body was a battlefield, and I never felt safe in it. I lived with the constant anticipation of discomfort. And even when the skin healed, that anticipation remained.

Because the body remembers.

That early hyper-awareness — of pain, of judgment, of being visible in the wrong way — seeped into everything. It taught me that exposure was dangerous. That vulnerability led to rejection. That being seen as I really was meant being unlovable.

So I built a different body. A social one. A personality I could wear like armor. And over time, I became very good at wearing it.

I was the charismatic one. The intense one. The sensitive one with a wild mind and passionate opinions and complicated charm. I made people laugh. I listened deeply. I loved like a firestorm. But the truth was, I was always acting — not in the sense of lying, but in the sense of translating myself into a version I thought others could accept. A version who wasn’t too much, too loud, too different, too broken.

I did this in relationships, too. Maybe especially in relationships.

I gave everything — attention, empathy, desire — but I also held back the one thing that mattered most: my truth. Because what if they saw the chaos? The impulsiveness? The half-finished projects? The inability to plan or remember or function like a “normal” adult? I

couldn’t risk it. So I shaped myself into what each partner needed. Not to deceive them, but to keep them. To not lose love.

And it worked. For a while.

Until the cracks started to show. Until the pressure of pretending became unbearable. Until I found myself in yet another relationship where I was adored — and yet I felt more alone than ever. Not because I didn’t love them. I did. Intensely. Maybe too intensely. But because they were loving someone I had created, not someone I had revealed.

And sometimes I wondered: was there even a “real me” to reveal? Had I ever truly met him myself?

The shame was unbearable. Every time I failed to maintain the performance, I’d spiral. I’d retreat. I’d implode. Or worse, I’d stay and pretend even harder — doubling down on charm, on attentiveness, on performance — until the whole thing collapsed. And it always did. Because no love, no matter how powerful, can survive in a vacuum of authenticity.

And yet, even in those moments, I wasn’t faking out of selfishness. I was surviving. I was trying, desperately, to be enough.

Because the body remembers.

The body remembers what it’s like to feel alien. To be the itchy kid in long sleeves in summer. The distracted student whose leg won’t stop bouncing. The adult who cries during supermarket trips and doesn’t know why. The one who loves deeply but panics when it’s returned. The one who wears noise like pain, who feels everything at once, who has never known peace inside his own skin.

But there was one place — one sacred, chaotic place — where the mask could slip, and I could just be.

Music.

As a child, I would play the same records over and over again on our old stereo, a machine that didn’t have headphones but one integrated loudspeaker that could be heard from miles away — or at least, that’s how it felt. It was my scream to the world: I’m not different. I’m not special. I’m just me.

I'd torment my poor mother with the same songs, again and again. But she never judged. She was the only one who didn't. She let me have that space. That freedom. That release. She didn't always understand, but she accepted. In those moments, her silence was the loudest form of love I've ever known.

The records played like rituals. Songs became prayers. Melodies became lifelines. And though I didn't know it then, I was self-regulating. Creating rhythm where there was none. Matching sound to emotion. Giving form to the formless chaos inside me.

I still do this, even now.

Because the body remembers.

And my body still craves the pulse of a song to soothe the storm of a mind that never stops spinning.

Looking back, I see it clearly now: the sensitive skin, the performance, the desperate need to be loved, the fear of rejection, the loud music, the silence of shame — they're not disconnected parts. They're one system. One story. One body trying to make sense of a world that was never built for it.

And the hardest part? I'm still learning how to live inside this body.

But I'm closer now. The performances are fewer. The music is still loud. The scars remain, but they're no longer burning.

Because maybe, just maybe, the body remembers not just the pain — but the path to healing too.

Interlude — Feed the Birds

It was one of the first things I did after moving to London.

No flat yet. No job. Just a suitcase, a dream, and a memory that wouldn't die.

I put on my headphones and walked to St. Paul's Cathedral.

Not to admire the architecture. Not to be a tourist.
But to find something I had been chasing since I was a boy.

I pressed play.

Julie Andrews. "Feed the Birds."

The orchestration rose in my ears like prayer.
And there I was — standing in front of that enormous dome,
singing quietly, then louder, to no one and everyone.

A grown man, trembling.
A grown man with tears already threatening.
Mouthing the words of a lullaby that once promised me everything.

I wasn't just singing.

I was summoning.

The child in me — the one who had watched Mary Poppins until the tape wore thin,
who believed London was a place where magic perched on rooftops,
where lonely old women were saints,
where tuppence could change a life —
that child had made a pact with the world:

If I ever make it, take me there.

Take me to the steps of St. Paul's.

And I had made it. I was there.

And it was nothing like I imagined.

No bird woman.

No Mary Poppins.

No Admiral Boom on the rooftop with his cannon.

No Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane.

No Banks family.

No house shaking twice a day at 8am and 6pm as the Admiral saluted the sky.

Just tourists. Traffic. Planes. Noise.

The music was still playing. The cathedral still stood.

But the magic… was gone.

And I broke.

I wept like I hadn't wept in years.
Right there. On the pavement.
In front of strangers who didn't care, because this was London — a city that leaves you to your grief with quiet civility.

But I wasn't crying for the moment.

I was crying for the lie I had built my life around.

That if I just tried hard enough —
believed long enough —
escaped far enough —
one day, I'd arrive at the place where pain became wonder.

And I had arrived.

And there was no wonder.

There was no Julie Andrews.
No tuppence.
No magic sweeping in with the wind.

It was a reality crumbling in my memory.

But something happened. Just for a moment.

Although there were tourists and traffic and planes overhead,
although I knew this wasn't the world I'd imagined —
my mind, my heart, my memory did something extraordinary.

It recreated the scene.

Just for a flicker in time,
the sky shimmered with nostalgia.

And I saw it.

The music matched the moment.

The cathedral seemed to glow.

And for that one, fleeting instant —
the child inside me lived his dream.

Little Alessandro lived his dream.
For the first time.
For the last time.
He was there.
Truly there.

Watching the pigeons take flight.
Hearing the gentle voice of Mary Poppins in his ears.
Believing in magic, not because he was naive —
but because he needed it to survive.

And then — it passed.

Like all magic does.

And I was back in London.
Just a man. Crying in front of a cathedral.
Mourning something no one else could see.

It wasn't just disillusionment. It was mourning.

I wasn’t mourning London.

I was mourning the child who thought London would save him.

The one who had survived shame, eczema, rejection, and silence
by clinging to the idea that somewhere, over there,
in some grand city filled with music and kindness,
he would finally be held.

But that city didn’t exist.

And standing there — in front of that majestic, indifferent dome —
I finally understood:

I hadn’t come to London to find magic.

I had come to bury it.

And it broke me.

Because I didn’t want to let it go.

Even now, as I write this, my hands tremble.
My throat tightens.
Because I remember that day too well.

The headphones.
The song.
The cathedral.
The unbearable silence between fantasy and reality.

That was the moment the child in me let go of the dream.
Not because he wanted to.

But because the world gave him no other choice.

And the man I became?

He’s still standing there sometimes.
Looking at that dome.
Listening to that song.
Searching the steps for a figure that never comes.

Because some dreams don’t die with time.

They die when you finally touch them —
and realise they were never real to begin with.

Chapter 4: Vesuvius — A Volcano of Emotional Dysregulation and Rejection Sensitivity

I've always thought of myself as emotionally intense — too much, too quick, too deep. But it wasn't until recently that I began to understand this wasn't simply a personality trait. It was neurological. It was ADHD.

Imagine living at the foot of Mount Vesuvius — a majestic, unpredictable force of nature. Most days, the sky is blue, the air calm. But beneath the surface, pressure builds. One small trigger — a look, a word, a perceived criticism — and it all erupts. That's what emotional dysregulation feels like for me. An internal volcano, always simmering, waiting for a reason to blow.

As a child, I didn't have the words for it. I just knew that I felt things bigger than everyone else seemed to. A small injustice could ruin my whole day. A friend's forgotten birthday invitation could send me into despair. A teacher's tone of disappointment could tear my insides to shreds. I'd go from fine to furious, confident to crushed, without understanding why. My reactions were too much — even for me. But I couldn't stop them.

I carried that volcano into adulthood.

It shows up everywhere. In relationships, it manifests as Rejection Sensitivity — an invisible wound that flares at the slightest sign of disapproval. I've ended conversations, jobs, even potential friendships, not because someone rejected me outright, but because I feared they might. I would rather self-destruct than risk being unwanted. Better to walk away than to be left behind. It's not rational. It's survival.

This is what people don't see — the behind-the-scenes torment. The spiralling thoughts. The catastrophising. The way a single "we need to talk" message can make me rehearse a thousand worst-case scenarios before a word is spoken. The way I apologise too much, over-explain, retreat, disappear, or overcompensate with charm and warmth just to avoid feeling that pain again.

In the moment, the feeling of rejection doesn't just sting — it burns. It confirms every buried fear I've carried since childhood: You're too much. You're not enough. You're broken. You're a burden.

And yet, I love fiercely. I feel everything — joy, passion, heartbreak — in stereo. Full volume. When I connect with someone, I do so completely. I'll give everything. But there's a cost. Because deep down, I don't believe they're really loving me — just the version I've curated to be lovable.

This brings me back to the theme that haunts so much of my life: performance. Even in the deepest moments of love and vulnerability, I've often been acting — not to manipulate, but to protect myself. I mirrored what I thought they wanted. I adapted. I made myself desirable. Not because I was deceptive, but because I was terrified that being my real self wouldn't be enough.

I loved them. Each of them. Intensely. Desperately. But I let them down. Not through malice or indifference — but through a kind of internal exile. I didn't know how to be fully known. I craved connection, but I didn't know how to stand in it without the mask. Every goodbye cut deeper because it reminded me that I had never fully arrived in the first place.

And I ask myself now — did I even know who I was back then? Or was I just a collection of responses, reflexes, personas I'd built to survive in a world that never seemed to fit?

Sometimes, the only place I felt truly seen — or at least heard — was in music. Not just as background noise, but as ritual. As declaration. I remember playing my records as a child not through headphones, but through a loudspeaker — a crude one, tinny and scratchy, but booming. It wasn't just loud. It was louder than me. It echoed through the flat and into the street. Maybe it wasn't as loud as I remember — but it felt like it. Like I was screaming without words: I'm not different. I'm not special. I'm just me.

I tormented my poor mother with those records, playing the same songs on repeat. But she didn't stop me. She didn't judge. She just let me be. In a world that always tried to correct or fix me, she gave me the rarest of gifts: acceptance without condition. That loudspeaker wasn't about noise — it was about being allowed to exist, fully and without apology.

Even now, I struggle to find that kind of space — a space where I can erupt without destroying, cry without guilt, feel without shame. A space where my volcano can breathe.

Vesuvius isn't evil. It's nature. It's ancient and powerful and unpredictable. It's both danger and beauty. And maybe that's what I am too — not broken, not defective, but wired for intensity. Wired to burn bright. Wired to love, to create, to erupt.

And now, instead of fearing the fire, I'm learning to tend it. To name it. To live with it. To stop apologising for being a volcano.

Because somewhere beneath all that ash, I'm still here. Still standing. Still learning not to be afraid of my own heat.

Chapter 5: The Mask Maker – Perfectionism, Shame, and the Fear of Being Seen

Long before I ever knew the word “masking,” I was already an expert in it. I didn’t put on a mask to lie. I wore one to survive. To pass. To be loved.

I became a craftsman of personas — polished, charming, clever — a performer who knew how to inhabit roles with just enough brilliance to distract from the chaos underneath. I wasn’t trying to deceive anyone. I was trying to become what they needed. What the world needed. What I thought would make me safe.

But each mask came at a cost. And eventually, the cost was myself.

It started at school. I was the “gifted” one. The talkative, expressive one. But only until I was asked to read aloud. The page would blur, the words would dance out of order, and my own voice would betray me — stammering, halting, hollow. I’d feel myself float outside my body, watching this child — red-faced, humiliated — try to decode a sentence as the class waited.

I wasn’t just embarrassed. I was ashamed. Ashamed of how long it took me. Ashamed of how my brain couldn’t keep up with the world around me. The shame didn’t end with reading. In maths, I’d grasp the concepts but invert the numbers. 14 became 41. I’d understand the equation but fail the test. “Careless,” they’d write. “If only he applied himself.”

They didn’t know that I did. That I tried. That I burned with effort just to stay seated, stay focused, stay in the room.

So I learned to overcompensate. I became the funny one, the creative one, the philosopher in the corner who asked deep questions and knew how to charm adults into forgetting the assignment I didn’t hand in. I wasn’t faking intelligence. I was faking functionality.

That need to perform didn’t disappear as I got older. It evolved.

In the workplace, I was either obsessively efficient or completely paralysed. There was no middle ground. I could run a department, organise galas, coordinate the impossible — but then forget to pay my electricity bill. I'd remember a hundred details for a client event and forget to eat. I lived in extremes. On the outside, I looked competent, brilliant even. But inside, I was always one email away from collapse.

People praised my charm, my eloquence, my presence. They didn't see the chaos behind the scenes. The panic at 3 a.m. The spreadsheets open but unfinished. The laundry that had been sitting in the machine for days. The unopened letters. The bank account on the brink. The tax returns never filed.

And the spending… Oh, the spending.

When something caught my eye — a jacket, a book, a dinner I couldn't afford — it wasn't a want. It was an urgency. An obsession. A dopamine-soaked craving to fill the void, to claim some version of joy. I'd justify it with twisted logic: I'll skip meals this week. I'll figure it out later. I'll pay with next month's hope.

I once bought a pair of shoes instead of paying rent. I told myself they were for a job interview that never came.

After the purchase came the shame. Then the debt. Then the panic. Then the lie. It was never about greed. It was about need — the need to feel good, to feel in control, to feel alive for a moment. But the relief never lasted.

Nothing lasted.

I lived in spirals. I would build a structure — a new planner, a new app, a new system. Colour-coded. Time-blocked. Promising. But the moment life threw me a curveball — a change of plan, a bad night's sleep, a critical word — the whole system collapsed. And I collapsed with it.

Executive dysfunction became a quiet thief. I'd stare at a simple to-do list and feel paralysed. Text messages went unanswered. Bills unpaid. Opportunities ignored. Even things I wanted — things I longed for — remained untouched. Frozen by dread. Swallowed by fear.

But no one saw that.

Because I still wore the mask.

The perfect friend. The witty dinner guest. The thoughtful son. The romantic partner who knew how to seduce, to care, to make someone feel like the centre of the universe — while quietly vanishing inside.

Because when the mask started to slip — when I felt too exposed, too messy, too real — I'd overcorrect. I'd give more. Try harder. Buy the expensive gift. Plan the grand gesture. Hide the truth of who I was: a man exhausted by the effort of appearing fine.

They never knew how close I came to drowning. How every "you're so capable" felt like a dagger. If only you knew, I wanted to say. If only you knew how much energy it takes to appear capable when your brain is screaming that you're not enough.

And still — I performed.

Because deep down, I believed the real me was unworthy. That if I stopped performing, people would leave. That if I showed the full picture — the forgotten keys, the overdraft, the dysregulated emotions, the noise in my head, the scars on my arms — they'd walk away.

So I kept the mask on. Even when it bled.

But something has shifted now.

Maybe it’s age. Maybe it’s burnout. Maybe it’s grace. But I’ve started to ask myself: What would it mean to stop performing? What would it mean to be seen — truly seen — without shrinking in shame?

What would it mean to forgive the boy who couldn’t read aloud? To soothe the man who bought shoes instead of food? To understand that executive dysfunction isn’t laziness — it’s neurological? That impulsivity isn’t a flaw — it’s a survival strategy?

I’m still learning.

But I’m trying now to speak the truth, even when my voice shakes. To admit the debt, the disorganisation, the detachment — not as excuses, but as realities. I’m trying to believe that I am not my chaos. I am not my bank balance. I am not my mistakes.

I am someone who tried to make himself lovable by being perfect.

And now, I’m learning that I don’t have to be perfect to be loved.

Maybe that’s the truest unmasking of all.

Chapter 6 Love in Fast-Forward – Grief, Goodbye, and the Cruelty of Unlived Futures

Love, for me, has never been a gentle slope. It's a vertical plunge — instant, intoxicating, and all-consuming. While others edge cautiously into connection, I leap. People often said I fell in love too fast. But it wasn't just falling — it was velocity. Acceleration. Like my entire being — body, mind, and soul — was engineered to burn through stages at hyperspeed. First date. First kiss. First "I love you." And I meant it. I always did.

But my timeline never matched the world's.

"Slow down," they'd say. "You're moving too fast." But how could I explain that my brain doesn't do slow? That the intensity wasn't performance or manipulation. It was my truth. My love was a flare — irradiating, overwhelming, sincere. And sometimes, it burned us both.

But here's the paradox: I always chose the ones who wouldn't stay.

Not because I wanted to be hurt. But because something in me needed the chaos. I didn't crave safety — I craved electricity. The impossible. The unpredictable. The emotionally unavailable. The ones who stirred my mind and unsettled my soul. Because their complexity mirrored my own. Because part of me believed that chaos was love.

I never sought perfection or appearance. What drew me in was how they thought. How they challenged me. How they made me feel intellectually alive. I longed for someone who could walk with me through the labyrinth of my thoughts. Someone who could hold my contradictions and still say: I see you.

But they never truly saw me. How could they? I never fully let them.

I gave them the curated version — passionate, articulate, emotionally attuned. But not the disoriented, dissociative, overwhelmed Alessandro underneath. I was scared that if they met him, they'd run. Or worse — stay and not really want him.

So I kept performing. I became what they needed. I disappeared in the process.

I no longer knew who I was. The empath? The lover? The intellectual? The lost boy in need of holding? The man desperate to seem untouched? I was all of them — and none. A patchwork of projections shaped by longing and fear.

When the end came — as it always did — it wasn't just heartbreak. It was bereavement. I didn't just miss the person. I mourned the version of myself I became with them. I grieved futures we never lived: shared Sunday mornings, birthday traditions, holidays that never happened.

I was always the one left behind.

And not just left — but erased. As if I'd been a placeholder, an intensity too bright to keep. They turned the page. I stayed re-reading the chapter, trying to understand where it broke. I'd scroll through old messages like archaeological relics. Reconstructing moments. Searching for signs.

The sadness lingered not because they were perfect — but because I had imagined a perfect story with them.

Grief wasn't about loss. It was about the emotional architecture I'd built in my head — and the echo it left behind when it collapsed.

And then came the shame.

Not just of being left, but of being too much. Of having once again loved like a wildfire — scorching, loud, impossible to contain. Of having opened too fast, hoped too hard, offered too much. I'd vow to do it differently next time. Slower. Smarter. Safer.

But next time never changed.

The pattern did.

Because eventually, I stopped showing up as myself at all. I shapeshifted into what I thought might be easier to love. Not to deceive — but to survive. I wanted love so much I edited myself out of it.

And that's what hurt most.

That I never even gave them a chance to love the real me.

Still, I kept seeking it. Because even after the pain, the abandonment, the devastation — I still believed in love. I still longed for it with a raw, unreasonable hunger.

But love, for me, has never been a gentle thing.

It's always been sacred. Epic. Mythic.

And every time it ended, it wasn't just goodbye — it was an existential unraveling. A loss of narrative. A crisis of identity.

There were moments I'd walk by the places we shared — cafés, benches, corners of a street — and feel my chest tighten like I was breathing memory instead of air. It wasn't nostalgia. It was haunting.

The future we didn't live became more painful than the past we did.

And even now, when I meet someone new, I feel the ghost of those old loves lingering — watching, warning, whispering: not again.

But I try again. Because I still believe.

Because part of healing is not to erase the desire — but to hold it gently.

And ADHD intensifies it all.

I don’t fall in love slowly — because my brain doesn’t do slow. It either hyperfixates or forgets. When love hits, it hijacks my dopamine-starved nervous system and floods it with meaning, urgency, hope. Suddenly, I’m alive in a way that nothing else makes me feel. The love becomes a mission, a purpose, a fixation.

And then, when it fades, it doesn’t just hurt — it annihilates. Because in that vacuum, all the noise returns: the shame, the restlessness, the inner critic, the unbearable silence.

I used to think this made me broken. But now I understand — this is how my neurodivergent heart processes love. Intensely. Urgently. Completely.

And now, I am learning this:

I don’t have to burn to prove I feel.

I don’t have to shapeshift to be worthy.

I don’t have to lose myself to be loved.

Maybe love won’t always be a supernova. Maybe it can be a hearth — warm, steady, enduring.

And maybe, next time, I’ll arrive as me.

No mask. No performance. Just presence.

Because grief, too, can be a teacher.

And in its silence, I’m learning the most radical truth of all:

That I am worthy of love — not because I’m intense or devoted or dazzling — but because I’m real.

And that’s enough.

Chapter 7: The Chameleon and the Collector

I have always been drawn to the haunted. Not to ghosts in old houses, but to the ghosts that live inside people. I didn't fall in love with beauty, not in the classical sense. I fell in love with the beautiful ruin, the masterpiece in pieces. I saw the exquisite tragedy in a soul that had been fractured by life, and I felt a pull so profound, so instinctual, it was less a choice and more a law of my own private physics. The wound was the point of entry. The pain was the invitation.

It took me a lifetime to understand that this gravitational pull was not saintly. It was a desperate, elegant form of self-harm. I sought to heal others to avoid the terrifying silence of my own inner world. If I could be someone's savior, I would never have to be my own.

For the sake of this story, let's call him A.

A was my opposite in every way that mattered. Where my mind was artistic and visionary, loving the world of design, shapes, and forms, his was a fortress of logic, built from the stark beauty of computer programs, numbers, and code. I was drawn to the magnificent architecture of his intellect, a world entirely unknown to me. I was fascinated by a mind I can only describe—and I mean this as the highest compliment—as almost autistic in its singular, focused brilliance. His intelligence felt superior to any I had ever encountered, and I became a student of all its facets.

Our conversations were symphonies of intensity. We would lose all track of time, falling through rabbit holes of thought, leaping from philosophy to the psychological influence of AI on society, from the nature of consciousness to the future of the human soul. His mind was a vast, intricate landscape, and I wanted nothing more than to explore every corner of it.

The connection was not just intellectual. He was stunning to look at, and the physical intimacy was a revelation, a continuing discovery that touched the deepest, most dormant parts of my own sexuality. But it was his mind that held me captive. His meticulous, detailed way of seeing the world challenged me constantly. Our relationship was one of extremes, of dizzying ups and devastating downs. We argued, constantly. The core of our conflict was a strange and painful dance: I knew, on some deep, intuitive level, that he was almost always right. His logic was unassailable. And I hated it. I would fight, not to prove him wrong, but to prove that my own, different way of seeing and feeling the world was just as valid. It was a battle I was destined to lose, because I was arguing against a fortress with feelings, and he knew it.

His unique genius was never more apparent than in the kitchen. He was an amazing cook, but he was not an artist in the way that I was. I am an improviser; I see guidelines and then I use fantasy, pulling things together, creating dishes from instinct and whim. He was a scientist. He didn't follow recipes; he understood them from their atomic structure. He knew the chemistry of taste, the precise temperature at which an amide would transform, the exact reason why certain ingredients would sing together, and others would clash. He would create new, breathtaking dishes not from fantasy, but from a profound knowledge of the rules of the universe. I would stand in his kitchen for hours, utterly captivated, listening to him explain the science behind a perfect sauce. I was completely, hopelessly taken by him.

But with great light often comes a great shadow. I believe that people of such extreme intelligence often possess a dark side, one they themselves cannot or will not acknowledge. And I, like Icarus, was so dazzled by the sun of his brilliance that I flew too close. I did not see until it was too late that the heat was not warmth, but fire.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his brilliance curdled into a pure, unassailable narcissism. His rightness became a weapon. His logic became a tool of manipulation. I, the chameleon, contorted myself to survive in the intense gravity of his world. I suppressed my "illogical" artist's soul to better appreciate his science. I learned to second-guess my own intuition because it could not be proven with data. I began to disappear. I was the fly that flew into the flame, and I got burned. Badly burned. I lost myself so completely that I almost didn't find my way back.

The hardest truth to write is this: I hate to admit it, but I still love him. Or, I love the idea I constructed of him, the beautiful, intricate world he showed me. I loved the man I believed him to be. But as I piece myself back together from the ashes, a haunting, terrifying thought remains. Maybe the man I gave everything to, the man I tried to heal and understand, the man I changed myself for, was never really there at all.

Maybe I never, never actually met the real A.

Chapter 8: The Sensory Spiral

Have you ever listened to a favourite record, one you know by heart? Not just heard it but lived inside it. You know every swell of the orchestra, every breath the singer takes before the chorus. The melody is a physical place, a home you have returned to a thousand times.

Then, without warning, the needle hits a deep, unseen scratch.

The song is violently ripped away, replaced by a brutal, repeating noise—a jagged loop of pure static. The music is gone, but the sound of its breaking is now fused to the memory forever. You can lift the tonearm, stop the spinning, but you can't un-hear the damage. You can't smooth the flaw in the groove.

That is the heartbreak I am talking about. It is not a gentle fade-out. It is a deep scratch carved into the vinyl of your life. And in the deafening silence that follows, the real haunting begins.

The emotional hangover is brutal. For weeks, sometimes months, I exist like a ghost of myself. Paralyzed. I cancel plans. I avoid mirrors. I wander my flat touching objects we once used together as if they'll speak. I rehearse dialogues that never happened. I replay messages. I perform imaginary closures. Because the real one never comes.

I obsess. I overthink. I write texts I'll never send. I scroll their social media and then hate myself for it. I try to behave as if I've moved on, but my nervous system hasn't. It's still lodged in the moment they said goodbye — or worse, when they didn't say anything at all.

And then comes the sensory spiral.

Suddenly, everything is a trigger. The scent of their skin in a passerby's perfume. A coffee cup left on the counter. A voice in a crowd that sounds like theirs. Songs become landmines. Even silence hurts — especially silence. I've walked out of shops mid-purchase, frozen in queues, shaken by a flashback I couldn't predict. People think heartbreak is poetic. It isn't. It's disorienting. It's visceral.

What makes it worse is that I don't know how to "just let go.". ADHD traps memories in my body like static in a wool jumper. The more I try to shed them, the more they cling. I can't control the flashbacks. They don't arrive when I'm ready. They arrive when I'm trying to make toast.

And then — as always — comes the shame.

Shame for caring too much. For falling too fast. For texting again. For imagining too much too soon. For believing love could save me from myself.

But if I'm honest, I wasn't just loving them. I was trying to save a part of me — the little boy inside me who has always felt alone, who still thinks if he loves hard enough, he'll be chosen this time. That someone will stay. That someone will see him — not the mask, not the performance — but him. Fully.

He's still waiting. And I'm still trying to protect him.

That’s why I give too much. Why I overcompensate. Why I chase. I don’t know how to love in moderation. I either give everything or nothing. I either scream “stay” with every heartbeat or vanish altogether.

Sometimes I walk away before they can. Not because I want to — but because the terror of being left without explanation is worse than leaving by choice. At least when I leave, I control the story.

And yet, I still believe in love. I still romanticize. Still write poems in my head about people I’ve just met. Still believe that one day, someone will arrive not to fix me, but to sit with me in the fire. To love me not despite the intensity, but because of it.

Until then, I try to hold space for the mess. For the heartbreaks that feel too big for their briefness. For the futures that lived only in my imagination. For the pain that’s real, even if the relationship was short.

Because in my world — the ADHD world — time doesn’t measure depth. Intensity does. And I have loved with an intensity that would terrify most people.

But I am not ashamed of that anymore. That fire is not my flaw; it is my forge. For too long I tried to smother it to keep others warm, only to be left in the cold. Now I understand it is the very engine of my survival. It is the proof that I am alive.

And maybe, just maybe, one day someone will see that light not as a warning, but as a welcome. Someone will step into the warmth instead of running from the heat. Someone will love me back at the same impossible speed.

And stay.

Chapter 9 – The Collector of Broken Wings and The Time Traveller of the Heart

I've always had a soft spot for broken things—people, stories, objects that others had discarded or passed over. I couldn't help it. There was something about the fractured, the unfinished, the ones who didn't fit, that called to me like a secret language only I could understand. Like I was meant to rescue them. Love them back to life. Maybe because, deep down, I was also waiting for someone to do the same for me.

This is because I have never really lived in the present when it comes to love. I've always lived either at the burning beginning, where time collapses and reality feel suspended, or at the end—long after the other person has moved on, while I remain caught in a spiral of memory and longing, pacing through the ruins of what once was. I'm a time traveller of the heart. But I don't travel willingly. I'm pulled backwards—violently, uncontrollably—into moments that refuse to be laid to rest.

People always told me I fell too fast. That I mistook fire for permanence. But it wasn't immaturity. It was the way my brain and soul were wired—on high frequency, running ahead of the moment, trying to collapse all stages of love into a single breath. While others took months or years to develop trust or comfort, I was already sprinting toward the finish line with arms wide open. I wasn't pretending. When I said: "I love you," I meant it. With every cell. With a depth that scared even me.

The problem was never the intensity of my love—it was the terrain it travelled through. I was drawn to those who were impossible, distant, or mismatched to my values and needs. Not because I wanted to suffer, but because my mind craved the challenge, the mystery. I looked for depth—for the eyes that held oceans of pain, the laugh that trembled just before it broke. The more impossible the connection, the more I threw myself into proving it real, building castles out of fog and prayer. I saw the best in people. I held their pain like a sacred object. I told myself that I could love them into safety, into clarity, into understanding. But love alone was never enough.

It wasn't charity. It was compulsion. My ADHD brain is wired for empathy that floods, not flows. I don't have a filter for pain—I feel it all, whether it's mine or not. I can walk into a room and sense tension, sadness, longing. It enters me, bypassing logic, like static electricity I can't discharge. And because I've always felt misunderstood, I thought maybe my purpose was to understand everyone else.

And then, when it ended—as it always did—I couldn't leave the battlefield. I stood in the ruins, long after everyone else had left. I became the collector of broken wings. I would reread messages, relive conversations, recreate entire timelines in my head. I kept talking to them in silence, waiting for closure that never came. They had moved on, started new chapters, found new people. I was still frozen at the last page, mourning not just the person, but the version of myself I had created for them.

Because that's what I did. I became who they needed. I shaped myself around their fears, their dreams, their chaos. I was their healer, their anchor, their mirror, their therapist. I absorbed their pain like a sponge, while silently bleeding from wounds they never even saw. And in doing so, I lost pieces of myself. Little by little. Relationship by relationship. Until all

that remained was a patchwork of old personas and fading echoes. A version of Alessandro who had been everything to everyone, and yet still didn't know who he truly was.

And what terrifies me most—is this: maybe there never was one "true" Alessandro. Maybe I am all of them. Maybe I am none of them. A chameleon not out of vanity or manipulation, but out of a desperate need to belong, to be loved, to be seen… without being rejected.

But here's the most painful truth: I was never truly chosen. Not for who I am, but for what I could offer. And when they were healed, or soothed, or strong enough to fly on their own again, I was no longer needed. The collector of broken wings was left holding feathers and memories. And silence.

What haunts me most is the music. One song in particular—the one we used to play on Sunday mornings, with coffee, with sunlight warming bare skin, with silence and familiarity stitched into the fabric of the day. When it plays now, the lyrics don't sound the same. They hurt. Every note carves into me, exposing the layers I try so hard to bury. My memory doesn't work like a linear film—it's more like a hall of mirrors, echoing with sound and scent and touch. Ancestral, animal. Beyond reason.

Goodbyes have never felt like endings to me. They've felt like amputations. Like breathing with half a lung. I still carry each person inside me—not in a romanticised way, but in the architecture of my nervous system. I see their eyes in strangers. I hear their laughter in crowds. I still reach for them in dreams.

I now realise that some of us are so desperate to be loved, we volunteer to be useful instead. We offer care when what we really crave is connection. We perform being "easy to love" instead of asking, "Am I being loved in a way that nurtures me, too?"

I don't want to be a saviour anymore. I want to be a partner. I want to be seen not just for my insight or my kindness, but for my own flawed, shifting, radiant self. I want someone who doesn't ask me to perform, or fix, or rescue—but who sits beside me in the mess and says, "You don't have to be anything other than who you are, right now."

It's hard. After years of being the helper, the mirror, the shapeshifter, it's terrifying to say: I have needs. I have wounds. I want to be held, too. The child in me still waits by the door, believing that one day they'll return, that one day someone will stay—not for the mask, not for the version of me I crafted—but for the raw, wild, broken, beautiful me I've never quite dared to be.

But I'm trying. I am still travelling, but I am learning how to stretch my own wings. Even if they're still cracked. Even if they shake. I am learning to live in the now. Not in memory. Not in fear. But in presence. Because maybe the greatest act of love I can offer now is not healing others—but refusing to abandon myself. And maybe, just maybe, that's what healing looks like for someone like me.

Chapter 10: The Language of Sensation

There are languages that are not made of words. They are born in the silent, vibrating space between notes of music, in the profound, unspoken understanding in an animal's gaze, in the sudden, vivid bloom of a picture in the mind. For most of my life, I believed I was simply a poor student of the world's official language—the one of cold numbers, of linear instructions, of a logic that always felt alien. It was a door for which everyone else seemed to have the key, while I was left outside, fumbling with the lock.

I remember the shame of the classroom, a feeling as familiar as my own skin. Math problems were a special kind of torture. I could follow the logic of the equation, the **story** of it, but the numbers themselves were slippery, faithless things. They would swim and dance and betray me at the last moment. The answer was always wrong. It is a unique agony to understand the journey but always arrive at the wrong destination. It would be decades before I would learn the name for this ghost—dyscalculia—but in those years, it was simply proof of a fundamental flaw I felt deep in my bones.

But if the world of numbers was a locked door, then story was the key. And the first time it turned, it was in the saturated colour of a Japanese cartoon.

Her name was Pollon, a clumsy goddess-in-training on a pastel Mount Olympus. I was not a child who liked cartoons; I found them dull, a meaningless chaos of monsters fighting. But this was different. This was not noise; it was a symphony. The stories of the gods were not abstract legends; they were deeply human, a divine soap opera of jealousy, love, and folly. This cartoon didn't just entertain me; it lit a match in my brain. The pathos, the drama, the soaring emotions—I realise now, it was a feast for a mind starved of dopamine. It was the stimulus my neurodivergent brain craved, a feeling I didn't understand but instinctively pursued.

Pollon wasn't just a character; she was a revelation. So much so that my first pet, a cat, had to bear her name. He was my soul in a small, furry body. The bond was immediate, almost unnervingly deep. He was less a cat and more a familiar spirit, behaving with the loyal constancy of a dog. He would lay across my books as I struggled to study, a warm, purring weight of solidarity. At night, he had a ritual: a gentle pull on the mattress, a signal for me to lift the covers. He would slip in beside me, rest his head on my arm, and sleep through the night, a silent, steady presence in the dark.

This deep connection with Pollon was the beginning of my understanding that I spoke another language—the language of animals. It's a strange and quiet truth in my life that animals and I have always had an understanding. Even now, dogs on the street will often stop and gravitate towards me, a flicker of recognition in their eyes. It is a surreal and unspoken communion, a feeling of being seen without the need for a single word. They seem to understand a frequency in me that most humans do not.

But this gift had its shadow. I loved my cat with a fierce devotion, but I was deeply ashamed of his name. Pollon was a female character. In the world of classical studies I was entering, a world of rigid intellect and masculine history, it felt like a secret weakness. When people asked his name, I would feel a hot flush of panic. I couldn't tell them the truth. So I invented a lie. "Pollon," I would say with feigned academic authority, "was a forgotten minor god in

Greek mythology." The lie was my mask, a shield against the judgment I was sure would come. It was easier to invent a god than to admit my heart was captured by a cartoon girl.

The second key was an evolution. If Pollon opened the door to myth, **Lady Oscar** opened the door to the complexities of the human heart. Here was a story painted with a tragic, beautiful brush: the glory and sorrow of Marie Antoinette's court. But at its centre was Oscar—a woman raised as a man to fulfill her father's ambitions, a soul living between genders, between duties, between worlds. I didn't just watch her; I saw myself in her. Her story was a quiet scripture for anyone who has ever felt their identity was at odds with the role the world assigned them. It was a story of a mask, and I knew everything about masks.

Through Oscar's eyes, history stopped being a subject and became a memory. The Storming of the Bastille was not a date; it was a terrifying, heartbreaking roar of a world ending and beginning. I didn't need to memorize the facts; I had **felt** them. My brain had turned history into cinema.

This became my method. I would spend whole afternoons in a real cinema, watching the same film two, three times. It was a sanctuary, a laboratory. The first viewing was for the plot. The second was to drown in the feeling. The third was for a forensic study of the human face. I learned the subtle language of a tightening jaw, a fleeting look of disappointment, the ghost of a smile. I learned that the most important things are rarely the things that are said.

I learned to read face expressions far before than reading words.

This is the language of sensation. It is the language of the neurodivergent brain, a language that is often dismissed as daydreaming, distraction, or disorder. It is not. It is a language of deep connection, of pattern recognition, of feeling the shape of a story long before it is told. It is the language of the artist, the poet, the empath.

It is the language this book is written in.

It is the translation of a life that was not thought but felt; lived not in linear time, but in loops of layered, intense emotion. Understood not through logic, but through the visceral, cinematic recreation of its most sacred and painful scenes. This is my truth. And for anyone whose brain works in a similar way—who finds home in stories, who sees the world in pictures, who feels emotions with the force of a physical blow—know this:

You are not broken. You are a translator. You are not speaking the wrong language. You are fluent in one that the world is still learning to hear.

Chapter 11 – All or Nothing: The Sacred and the Sabotage

Love, Lust, and the Implosion of Trust

There is not halfway with me.

Not in love. Not in lust. Not in trust. I don't slide into relationships — I detonate into them. What others build slowly, I build in a flash. An hour into a conversation and I've already seen our future. I've imagined the holidays, the Sunday mornings, the smell of their shampoo on my pillow. I've already decided — this is it. They're it.

And when I trust, I do it like a child does — entirely, recklessly, without hesitation.

But here's the truth ADHD taught me: intensity is not the same as intimacy. And emotional urgency does not equal emotional safety.

When I fall, it feels sacred. Like something celestial has chosen us. Like the world outside the two of us fades to grayscale and everything vibrant, everything that matters, exists only in the magnetic space between our hands. When I'm with you, there is no one else. Not because I'm obeying a rule — but because I can't even see beyond you. I am yours. Utterly.

But when that trust cracks — even just slightly — it's like a glass cathedral shattering. Every shard tells me I was foolish to believe. Every doubt spirals into certainty. One strange look. One vague message. One shift in tone. My ADHD brain catches it all. I don't miss a beat. I'm a human lie detector. Or maybe a hallucinating one. But either way, once suspicion takes hold, it doesn't let go.

That's when everything collapses.

And that's when I sabotage.

I don’t confront. I disappear. I detach with terrifying speed. Sometimes I cheat — not out of desire, but as an act of war. A war I never declared but always prepare for. It’s like I need to prove to myself that I saw it coming. That I was in control. That if you broke the sacred, I’d burn it before you could.

This isn’t something I’m proud of. This is my illness talking. My impulsivity. My dysregulated emotions. The parts of my brain that crave justice and intensity in the same breath. I can ruin something beautiful just to feel like I wasn’t the one left behind.

Because I’ve been left before. Again, and again.

I’ve had my heart shattered by ghosts — people who smiled on Monday and disappeared by Thursday. People who said forever and meant until the next dopamine rush. I’ve been punished for my intensity. For loving too hard, too fast, too raw. I’ve been called dramatic, controlling, overwhelming.

And yet, I crave monogamy like oxygen. Not out of morality, but out of wiring. I can’t share someone I love. I can’t fragment that sacred space. I need to know I’m yours completely — mind, body, energy, gaze. If not, it all becomes meaningless.

I’ve tried to be modern, open-minded, fluid. But polyamory makes me feel disposable. A placeholder. A line in a spreadsheet of emotional logistics. And I am not a spreadsheet. I am a fire. You either dance in it with me or let me burn alone.

Sex for me has never been just physical. It’s never been just release or fun or “letting off steam.” It’s devotion. It’s identity. It’s a ritual of connection. Of annihilation. Of finding God through skin and breath and sound. It’s where I tell the truth with my body because I don’t know how to say it with words.

And maybe that’s why I’ve used sex both as a sacrament and a weapon.

When I feel betrayed, I shut down emotionally but act out physically. It’s a twisted rebellion. A scream in the dark. It’s not about pleasure. It’s about control. About regaining the upper

hand when I feel discarded. About saying: “You might have hurt me, but I still get to decide how this ends.”

It’s the kind of coping mechanism that people don’t talk about openly. Especially not in books. Especially not with the word love floating around.

But this is what ADHD looks like in love. It’s not just lateness and forgetfulness and unfinished chores. It’s this volcanic mix of loyalty and fear, of needing total connection and expecting it to dissolve. Of loving so hard that when it breaks, you become the one who breaks it.

I have loved people like hurricanes. I’ve given them all of me — my intellect, my body, my loyalty, my money, my time. I’ve loved them like they were the only air left on Earth. And they’ve walked away.

Some slowly, kindly. Some cruelly, with betrayal. And some without a word.

And every time, the same cycle: devastation, numbness, rebirth. Then another plunge — another cathedral built too fast, another temple of touch and trust. Because I don’t know how to love quietly.

I used to think this made me broken. That I was fundamentally unfit for love. But now I understand this is how my brain processes connection. I bond hard. I bond fast. And I feel loss like an amputation.

But I am learning.

Learning that love doesn’t mean losing yourself. That boundaries aren’t betrayal. That being chosen doesn’t mean you’re safe forever — and not being chosen doesn’t mean you’re worthless.

I’m learning that sabotage is a trauma response — not a character flaw.

I’m learning that trust has to begin with me.

And I’m still learning that monogamy, sacredness, and sexual devotion aren’t weaknesses. They are the language I speak. They are my truth.

So, the next time I love — and I will love again — I want it to be different.

I want to walk in, not fall. I want to see the person in front of me, not the fantasy. I want to be chosen for the messy, intense, impulsive, fiercely loyal man that I am — not for the version of me that makes them feel safe.

And when I give my trust again, I’ll give it with eyes open. With spine intact. With boundaries written in the language of self-respect.

Because I am not just the fire. I am also the light.

And I deserve a love that doesn’t need to be burned to be believed.

Chapter 12 — My First Love Was My Family: The Sacred, the Shattered, and the Unbreakable

The Mother, the Child, and the Peter Pan

Family was everything.

Before lovers, before teachers, before the world taught me how to shape-shift just to survive — there was my family. And like most first loves, it was absolute, impossible, and unfinished.

My mother: my anchor, my sun, my home.

My father: my joy and my sorrow, my first heartbreak.

And me — the child suspended between wonder and weight, learning to carry what no child should have to, because love demanded it.

My mother has always been the most sacred love of my life.

The one person who could truly see me — not always understand but always allow. In her eyes, I wasn't just good enough. I was everything. A miracle. A light. The centre of her rebuilt universe. She never asked me to be perfect — but I saw perfection in her eyes and crumbled under the weight of trying to reflect it.

She never stopped me from becoming who I was. She let me be. She encouraged everything I did. Not once did I feel like a disappointment — not because I never failed, but because her love was unconditional. I was, perhaps, her redemption. She had been denied her own wings far too early.

She lost both parents by the time she was six. Raised in a cold, loveless household with her sister — not nurtured but tolerated. Not kissed, not held, not seen. Treated not like children, but burdens. Her only job: survive until she could escape. And she did — into a marriage arranged by others. A man who adored her since childhood. My father. She tried to love him. She really did. But she never understood him. He spoke a different language — not cruel, just unreachable.

What she really longed for was something simple and radical: a home of her own, filled with the kind of love she'd never been given. So when she had children, she poured everything she had into us. Every ounce of affection, attention, emotion she'd been denied — she gave to us.

We didn't have money, but we didn't feel poor. She made us feel rich in love, rich in presence. We only noticed the lack when the outside world told us what we were missing.

She gave us the greatest gift a mother can give: belief.

She drove us for hours to the best schools, convinced that education would give us wings. She gave up everything so we could have something. And I — I internalised that sacrifice like a vow. I would make it worth it. I would succeed. I would wear the masks, play the roles, be the version of myself she could proudly present to the world. I would become the life she never had.

There's a story she used to tell when I was little — often in passing, in the way women speak about labour and pain like legends handed down. "When Alessandro was born," she would say, "I nearly died." She never meant it cruelly. It was just a fact to her. But I wasn't another mother hearing it. I was the child inside that story — with ADHD, with a sponge for a brain and a heart that felt everything. And somewhere in the tangle of memory and emotion, I began to believe that my birth had almost killed the person I loved most in the world.

So, I became her protector. Her emotional carer. Her guardian.

A child watching moods like weather, learning to read the sky in her voice. Walking on tiptoe through the storm. Not because I was afraid — but because I adored her. She was the sun and the moon and the oxygen in my lungs.

My mother has lived her whole life with bipolar II — undiagnosed for most of it. She didn't have the words for it, and neither did we. But I knew. I always knew. I could feel the shifts before they came. And I adapted. I managed. I never saw her illness as a burden. She was my mother. That was love.

I learned to mother her as much as she mothered me.

And when I began working, I tried to give her the world. Not in praise, but in presents. Designer dresses. Jewellery. Shoes. All the things the world once told her she couldn't have. I wouldn't buy for myself — I didn't care. But for her, I became the child trying to repair a broken childhood with luxury. Trying to make up for what had been stolen from her. It wasn't enough. But it was something.

But there was another family too — the extended one.

And in that family, we were second class.

My mother didn't count, and neither did we. My brother and I were the invisible ones. Cellophane kids — see-through, weightless, disposable. Our cousins were praised, given space. We had to bend, to obey. Our opinions didn't matter. Our presence was an inconvenience.

As an adult, I began entering every room with a different force — as if to declare: I exist. I matter. You will hear me now.

I had been walked over too long. And I promised myself: never again.

Not to me. Not to my mother.

In my home, one word was banned: crazy.

I forbade it.

Because I had grown up hearing it hurled like a blade at the woman I loved most.

They called her crazy because she cried. Because she broke down. Because she dared to want affection. Because she refused to disappear. They whispered it. Or shouted it. But always used it to diminish, to silence, to control.

But she wasn't crazy.

She was hurt. Brave. Broken and beautiful. Desperate for a love that didn't require shame.

So was I.

And then there was my father.

The joyful, laughing Peter Pan.

He was never sad. Never cried. Except once — when he was dying.

My father loved me, in his way. But he gave me no tools. No guidance. No map for adulthood. Everything was a game. And when you're a child, that's magic. But the problem with Peter Pan is that children grow up. They become boys. Then men. But Peter Pan never changes.

He never taught me how to say no. Or how to be responsible. We were evicted from homes. I remember the red seals from the tribunal on our front door. The toys we couldn't collect. My mother bore the burden — but we all carried the weight.

And once — when I was eight or nine — he hit me. Not out of punishment, but panic. He was falling apart. We were back living with the same aunts my mother had escaped. Decades later, as he lay dying, he asked for my forgiveness. I told him I didn't remember.

But I did. I always did.

He worried about me. Said I couldn't hold down a job. That I was unstable.

I stayed silent.

What could I say?

That the man who never taught me stability was now asking why I didn't have it?

That the man who broke every promise, who made me believe in things that never came, was wondering why I no longer believed?

That I became the liar in others' eyes because I told them what he told me — about toys, trips, holidays — only to be humiliated when they never happened?

That’s why now I can’t stand lies. I can’t even tolerate them.

Because I lived in a house where promises were made of air — and I suffocated.

And yet — even then — I loved him.

Not because he was perfect. Because he was mine.

Because I saw in him the lost boy who never got to grow up.

And I was the boy who had to grow up far too soon.

One day, I’ll see him again. Just once more.

And I’ll know how to find him — the way only sons of Peter Pans know how:

Second star to the right, and straight on ‘til morning.

Oh, Dad…

You’ll never know how much — and how deeply — I loved you.

And maybe that’s the most complex, most human truth of all:

That we can be broken by the ones we love the most…

And still, somehow, never stop loving them.

That’s the sacred part.

That’s the unbreakable thread.

That’s family.

—

Reclaiming Myself — A Love Without Permission

For a long time, I thought love meant sacrifice.

It meant shrinking so others could expand.

It meant proving — over and over — that I was good enough, smart enough, grateful enough, small enough.

But what I've come to realise — through therapy, loss, and the unbearable clarity of truth — is this:

Love doesn't ask you to disappear. Especially not a child's love.

I was never the problem.

Not too intense. Not too emotional. Not too much.

I was just a child with ADHD. A child shaped by survival.

A child trying to keep his mother alive and his father happy — even if it cost him everything.

Now, as a grown man, I am learning to love that child.

To hold him.

To whisper: You're safe now. You don't have to perform. You don't have to save anyone. You just have to be.

I am learning to mother myself — with softness, structure, gentleness, and truth.

I am learning that my sensitivity is not weakness — it's radar.

It's my gift.

The thing that makes me a storyteller. A lover. A son.

And I am learning that boundaries are not betrayal.

That saying no is not rejection.

That being seen does not mean being judged.

I carry both my parents inside me.

My mother's fire.

My father's laughter.

Their flaws. Their ghosts. Their tenderness and terror.

Their brokenness, stitched into mine.

But I carry something they didn't — or maybe didn't know how to use:

Awareness.

And with awareness, I get to choose.

I get to say: This cycle ends here.

I still love my mother more than anything. I always will.

But now — I also love myself.

Not in ego. In survival.

In healing.

In truth.

And maybe, one day, I'll look in the mirror — and not see the broken child or the perfect mask —

but someone whole.

Finally, fully…me.

Chapter 13: The Love That Almost Killed Me – Trauma Bonding, Obsession, and the ADHD Heart

There are people we don't just fall in love with.

We fall into them — like wells.

Bottomless.

Dangerous.

Beautiful, at first.

That's what it was with you.

I would have followed you through hell.

And in hell, I followed you.

I fell.

And I was trapped for months.

I told myself our love was rare, cosmic, written in fire.

And maybe, in some ways, it was — but it was also something else.

Something darker.

I was drawn to you like a flame, even as I burned.

I saw the red flags. I knew them by name.

But I kept telling myself: This is what love is supposed to feel like when it's real — intense, consuming, alive.

I believed our love was pure.

But deep down, I knew.

I knew you were a narcissist.

I knew you used me.

You broke me in ways no one else ever had or could.

You shattered my self-worth not by accident, but by design — or maybe for the sheer thrill of watching me crumble.

Even the news of my cancer didn't stop you.

On the contrary, your narrative only sharpened.

Suddenly, you were the one in crisis.

You were the victim — in an abusive relationship, so you claimed, so you swore.

Even to the police.

You wanted me gone, destroyed, annihilated.

And I always wondered why.

What was it in me that made you want to erase me?

Were you projecting your own failures?

Your shame?

Your terror of being seen?

Your addictions became mine —

not because I was weak, but because I was loyal.

I thought if I stood beside you in the darkness,

if I drank it too,

I could save you from it.

But you didn’t want saving.

You wanted company in the chaos.

And what I couldn’t understand — what I still struggle to comprehend —

is why, even knowing all of this, I couldn’t let you go.

Even after the lies.

Even after the betrayals — countless, documented, undeniable.

Even after all the evidence that you had cheated on me, manipulated me,

gaslit me to the edge of madness.

Still, I kept coming back.

Like an addict to the one drug that both kills and soothes.

Because I loved you.

More deeply than I had ever loved anyone.

And you took that love —

and used it like a weapon.

You knew you had power.

And you wielded it with surgical cruelty.

Even the end was cruel.

I saved your life.

I called your family.

I got you the help you needed.

I stepped aside so you could heal — and in doing so,

I was cut out completely.

Like I had never mattered.

No closure.

No thank you.

Just erasure.

Months passed. Then years.

But the questions stayed.

The grief never left.

And the closure you denied me — I now reclaim for myself.

And every time I walk by your apartment —

that apartment which, for me, was the temple of our love —

I feel a shiver.

Not just of pain, but of memory.

I remember the breakfasts you used to cook for me,

the way the kitchen smelled of eggs and that herbal tea I hated but drank anyway,

because you made it.

I remember the half Hanukkah we celebrated — candles lit in a clumsy row,

me pretending to know the prayers,

you, pretending not to care how broken we both were.

I remember the sex —

those nights and days where the world collapsed into skin and sweat and noise.

Where you'd pull me close and make me believe, for a fleeting second,

that I was wanted in every atom of your being.

And I believed you.

God, how I believed you.

I remember everything.

Even the things I wish I could forget.

Even the way you'd tilt your head and tell me I was crazy.

That I was seeing things that weren't there.

That it was all in my mind — always in my mind.

What was it you used to say?

Oh yes.

"The childish Alessandro. The one who throws tantrums when he doesn't get what he wants."

"The boy who never grew up. The one who blames, raises his voice, lashes out like a child."

And maybe — maybe — you were right.

I don't even know anymore.

What I do know is this:

I've questioned myself over and over.

Replayed every word, every reply, every outburst.

Held every conversation in my mind like a tape on loop,

trying to locate the moment I failed you —

or myself.

But I’ve stopped now.

Stopped trying to understand.

Stopped blaming myself.

Stopped blaming you.

I just stopped.

Because it was killing me —

again.

Even now, over a year later, I can’t look at pictures of you.

Or of us.

I’ve tried.

But my breath shortens, my chest tightens, my skin crawls with memory.

And that’s when I know: I’m not done healing.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

But I am done carrying the shame alone.

This is ADHD.

This is what it does.

It tattoos moments on your nervous system.

It stores scent, sound, and heartbreak like relics in a sacred vault.

It makes letting go feel like cutting off a limb.

It makes love feel eternal — even when it wasn't.

But this is also what ADHD can do:

It can teach you how to survive.

It can teach you how to feel deeply and still not drown.

It can teach you how to burn and still rise.

So, I leave this here — my closure.

Written not in rage,

not in bitterness,

but in tired, trembling grace.

You were my temple.

You were my lesson.

And I was yours — though you'll never admit it.

I loved you.

And maybe, in some cracked and hidden part of me, I always will.

But I choose now.

I choose me.

I choose to stop walking past your apartment.

I choose not to pick at the wound like a prayer.

I choose life — messy, lonely, beautiful life.

And that…

That is my goodbye.

—

Closure

I close my eyes now and whisper the goodbye you never gave me.

Not for you, but for me.

Because I can’t carry you anymore — not like this. Not inside my skin, not behind my ribs, not in the tight corners of my mind where your ghost still paces at night.

I kept the door open for too long.

Held the silence like a prayer.

Waited for a knock that never came.

But there’s no more waiting now.

No more hoping that this story ends differently.

You were a chapter of my life written in fire.

You burned through me — and I mistook the flames for light.

I thought the pain was proof of depth.

That suffering was the cost of love.

But love… love isn't meant to strip you to the bone and leave you begging for breath.

And yet, even in the wreckage, I can say this:

I loved you.

With the kind of love that rewires the soul and burns the edges of reality.

With the kind of love only someone like me — impulsive, craving, hyper-attuned to beauty and brokenness — could give.

But I finally understand that loving someone with all of your being doesn't mean you were meant to keep them.

I understand now that I wasn't crazy — I just had ADHD.

And this brain of mine, so quick to leap, so slow to let go, made you a galaxy.

Even as you became a black hole.

I let you go now.

Not because I stopped loving you.

But because I started loving myself.

And maybe that’s the most sacred thing I’ve learned from all of this —

That even with a mind wired for chaos, I am worthy of peace.

That even with scars in the shape of you, I still belong to myself.

That my heart, despite everything, still beats with courage.

Goodbye, my beautiful storm.

Goodbye, my longest ache.

I will carry the lesson, not the weight.

I will remember the love, not the war.

And I will walk forward — still trembling, still healing —

but finally free.

Chapter 14 – The Return to Myself

Healing isn't forgetting.

It isn't pretending the pain never existed.

It's learning how to carry memory without being consumed by it.

There are still nights when I dream of you.

Not always the painful ones.

Sometimes, it's just a flash of a look, or the ghost of your voice saying my name the way you used to when you were soft — before everything burned.

But something is changing in me.

The longing is loosening.

The grief, still heavy, is less sharp.

I no longer stop outside your building.

I no longer imagine the curtains moving.

I no longer write stories about a door opening.

Instead, I breathe.

I walk past.

I return to myself.

And in the silence left behind, something beautiful has happened.

My childhood friends — the real ones, the ones who raised me in music and magic — have come back to me.

Barbra, Judy, Liza, Raffaella, Mina, Mariah, Whitney, Celine, Julie… and Maria Callas.

Voices who knew my pain before I had words for it.

Divas who held my hand through every heartbreak, who taught me how to survive in song.

They were my companions in secret as a boy, my confidants through adolescence, my lifeline in young adulthood, and now — they are the chorus behind the man I am still becoming.

They came back.

All of them.

Not just as melodies, but as fragments of my soul I had forgotten how to hold.

They filled my nights again, not with longing, but with light.

They whispered back my dreams — the ones I abandoned while trying to love someone who couldn't love me back.

They reminded me what it felt like to want again.

To believe again.

To be again.

I don't play the playlists we made together.

I don't revisit the photos I still can't look at.

But I do play Barbra on Sunday mornings now.

I do sing with Celine in the car, loud and unapologetic.

I do let Whitney remind me I have nothing to prove, nothing to chase, nothing to fix.

These women — these friends — have always known me better than anyone.

They were my first mirrors, my first language, my first lifeline.

And they're still here.

Welcoming me back.

Piece by piece, I am returning.

Not to who I was before you — but to who I was always meant to be.

Not broken. Not unlovable. Not too much.

Just… me.

Healing didn't arrive like I thought it would.

No lightning bolt. No grand sunrise. No cinematic redemption.

It came in small, awkward steps.

In the act of making coffee without crying.

In brushing my teeth and not tasting salt from tears.

In hearing our song by accident in a café — and not leaving.

Just sitting there, heart thumping, breathing through the ache.

It started the first day I didn't search for your name.

Didn't check to see if you'd watched my stories.

Didn't wonder who you were loving now.

Didn't try to rewrite the past in my head so it hurt less.

Healing was boring at first.

Unremarkable.

Like watching paint dry in a room you didn't even want to be in.

But eventually… something shifted.

Not all at once.

But subtly.

Almost gently.

I began to notice things I hadn't seen in years.

The way light filtered through the curtains in the morning.

The sound of a child laughing on the street.

The thrill of a new idea.

The comfort of my own breath — not shallow or panicked, just there.

Present.

Mine.

I began talking to myself differently.

Softer. Kinder.

Less like a drill sergeant and more like a parent who finally forgave the child inside me for trying so hard just to survive.

I no longer needed to prove my pain was real.

Or that the love I gave wasn't wasted.

I just accepted it.

All of it.

The chaos. The tenderness. The mess. The beauty.

There were still nights I missed you.

Still flashes of memory so vivid they made me dizzy.

But I stopped turning those moments into weapons.

They became artefacts.

Sacred ruins.

Proof that I had once loved with everything I had.

And survived it.

That’s the thing about people like me —

with ADHD, with fire in our hearts and lightning in our veins.

We don’t love casually.

We don’t forget easily.

We don’t heal quickly.

But we do rise.

Again and again and again.

And this time, I rose not in defiance —

but in devotion.

To myself.

I began reclaiming all the parts of me I had abandoned.

The laughter I silenced to make you feel safe.

The desires I swallowed so I wouldn’t be too much.

The dreams I shelved because you couldn’t handle their brightness.

I picked them back up.

I started writing again.

Not to impress. Not to perform. But to breathe.

I began making space in my day for pleasure that wasn’t earned.

Sunlight on my face.

Watercolour on cheap paper.

Dancing like a lunatic to 90s pop in my kitchen.

And no one needed to see it.

It was mine.

This, I realised, was the quiet revolution:

To exist without apology.

To love myself in the aftermath.

To honour the pain, and still move toward joy.

I still stumble.

Still ache.

Still have days where grief taps me on the shoulder like an old friend.

But I don’t invite it to stay the night anymore.

I nod, acknowledge, and move on.

I no longer carry the shame of loving you.

Nor the guilt of letting go.

I understand now that I wasn’t broken.

I was wounded.

And wounds can heal.

Even in the ADHD brain —

especially in it —

there is resilience.

There is repair.

We just need to stop believing that our intensity is a flaw.

It’s not.

It’s a compass.

A fire that, once misdirected, can be turned inward —

not to burn, but to warm.

This is the beginning of something new.

Not a perfect life.

Not a romanticised recovery.

But a real one.

With scars.

And light.

I am not a victim.

I never have been.

You took so much — sometimes even what felt like my very essence —

but you could never take my resilience.

That belongs to me.

I am a phoenix.

And I have risen before.

And now, I am rising again.

More spectacular than ever.

More whole.

More mine.

Because the greater the fall,

the more magnificent the return.

And for the first time in years, I can say this without hesitation:

I am still here.

I am still learning.

And I am finally — finally — beginning to heal.

Chapter 15 Chasing the Littke Boy, the Magic I Built

I don’t know why, but every time I think of him — the little boy in front of the black-and-white television, wide-eyed, cross-legged on the floor, elbows digging into the carpet, heart open like a wound — I start to cry.

Not a weep, not a sob. It’s something quieter, more constant. A tear that knows its place, like the companion to a memory that never left. Because that boy — little Alessandro — still lives inside me, still stares up at that screen, still believes in the magic that never quite arrived.

He was three, maybe four. The room was small, dimly lit, the air filled with the faint smell of starch and soap, the metallic hum of the old TV set in the corner. And there she was: Raffaella Carrà — glittering, dazzling, dancing like a Gemini tornado, a cyclone of blonde hair and electric joy — singing Maga Maghella like she was casting a spell on him. And she did. She was his mirror. His secret co-conspirator. His flamboyant, fabulous ally.

He didn’t have the words for it then, but Raffaella was telling him: “It’s okay to be different. It’s okay to sparkle.”

And then there was Mina — divine, alien, ethereal Mina — on Studio Uno, all in white. White feather boa, white stool, white outfit, cigarette smoke curling like a ghost around her face. Singing Non gioco più, me ne vado — I’m not playing anymore, I’m leaving. He didn’t understand the meaning, not at three years old, but he felt it. God, he felt it. That strange ache of abandonment, of adult sadness, like she was singing to some future version of him that would understand far too well.

And so began his education in melancholy and melody.

He would take his mother’s records — Barbra Streisand, Judy Garland, Shirley Bassey — and play them over and over. He didn’t know what The Way We Were was about, but he knew it spoke to him. Each lyric was a lullaby for a boy who didn’t know how to sleep. Each song a fantasy for a child who couldn’t bear the real.

They told him who he was before the world could mislabel him.

He dreamed in sequins. He dreamed in tuxedos. He dreamed in English accents and drawing rooms and white-gloved elegance. The dreams were vivid, structured, full-colour antidotes to his own chaos. He created an entire life in his head — and then, astonishingly, decades later, he made that life real.

He moved to London.

He went to Royal Ascot, not just as a guest, but in the Royal Enclosure. He met the Queen. He met the Princes — William and Harry — when they were still brothers, still companions. Once, in the toilets of a polo match they were playing, he nervously blurted to Prince William, “The soap dispenser isn’t working.” William, gracious and playful, replied, “It’s all for show here,” and Alessandro laughed. And for a moment, that boy inside him — the one who watched Maga Maghella — felt seen.

He met the Duke of Edinburgh. He was invited to Windsor Castle for the 60th anniversary of the Guards Polo Club. He stood in the staterooms, surrounded by history and protocol, desperate to speak to the Duke. Another Gemini. Another misunderstood force of nature. But a man stood between them — a human embodiment of protocol — and Alessandro had to wait, had to be introduced, before he could speak. And when he finally did, it felt like crossing the threshold between fantasy and reality.

He was Eliza Doolittle. He had lived the dream. But like her, he felt like the fraud. The imposter. The poor flower girl who had stepped into a world that wasn’t hers, terrified someone would point and say, You don’t belong here. And yet, he had built it. The fairytale. The magic. He had become it. And the very thing he feared being exposed for — being a dreamer, a pretender — was what had allowed him to become extraordinary.

He danced at Elton John’s White Tiara party. A marquee in Windsor. He met Elton and his husband. He sat at a table with Bianca Jagger, Liz Hurley, Jerry Hall, Ivana Trump. He hosted parties at the Dorchester and Grosvenor House with Kim Cattrall and Stanley Tucci. He watched Mikhail Baryshnikov unveil his paintings.

He saw it all. And still, the therapist told him: “You’ve been chasing that little boy’s dream your whole life.”

And he had.

Because that little boy was never truly allowed to exist. He was misunderstood, impulsive, lost in his own world. A boy with ADHD long before anyone could name it. A boy who couldn't sit still, whose brain moved too fast, who couldn't explain why he forgot things or why he talked too much or why the world was too loud.

So he created a world he could control. A fantasy he could live inside.

But fantasy comes at a cost.

You see, he was always on. Always performing. Always spinning plates while juggling fire. Funny, yes. Witty, sharp, brilliant. He knew the perfect line. The perfect comeback. He could disarm anyone with his charm, seduce any room with his presence. He was like his father — quick, charismatic, dangerous with a smile. But he was also like his mother — sensitive, aching, cracked open by feeling. He felt everything.

And it exhausted him.

He couldn't stop. He didn't know how. He spun harder, danced faster, filled every silence with noise, every stillness with chaos. Kylie's songs weren't background music — they were a survival manual. "Spinning Around" wasn't just a bop — it was his reality.

And even when he achieved everything — the royal invitations, the celebrity dinners, the private members clubs, the applause — it didn't fill the void.

Because the little boy was still waiting in front of the black-and-white TV, holding his breath for the magic to begin.

But maybe — just maybe — the magic wasn't the destination. Maybe it was in the becoming. In the longing. In the chasing.

Because in that chase, he met people. He touched lives. He brought laughter. He made memories. He lived a thousand lives in one.

He just never gave himself permission to feel it — to truly inhabit the joy — because his mind was always on to the next mountain.

And now, older, wearier, wiser — with tears in his eyes and love in his heart — he looks back at that boy, that brave, strange, glitter-dreaming boy, and whispers:

“You did it. You lived it. And I’m proud of you.”

Because there was never a map. Never a guidebook. Just that old black-and-white screen, a white feather boa, a cigarette held between trembling fingers, and a song that said: I’m not playing anymore. I’m leaving.

But Alessandro?

He stayed.

He played.

He danced.

And for all the pain, all the struggle, all the misunderstanding — he created magic.

Real magic.

The kind that lives forever in memory and melody.

Chapter 16 “I’m Not Crazy — I’m Free”

There’s a moment — and maybe it only comes after years of spinning, striving, shape-shifting — when you stop running.

Not because you’re out of breath, but because you finally realise: there’s nowhere else to go. Nowhere outside of yourself that can give you what you’ve spent a lifetime chasing.

Not love.

Not peace.

Not permission.

That moment came to me not as a thunderclap, but as a quiet softening. A tired exhale. A whisper in the dark: You can come home now.

I had spent my life trying to become someone I wasn’t — or maybe more truthfully, trying to become someone people would accept. I was too much, too fast, too emotional. I saw too much, cared too much, fell too hard. I chased perfection, applause, adoration. I wore the mask so long I forgot it was a mask. I became a masterpiece of adaptation. A man made of mirrors.

And yet behind it all — always — was that little boy in front of the black-and-white television. Heart open. Eyes wide. Waiting for the magic to begin.

Now, after all the parties, all the heartbreaks, all the years of spinning around like my life depended on it — I finally see it:

The magic already began.

I was the magic.

ADHD didn’t steal my life. It gave me one — intense, beautiful, difficult, loud. It was the fire in my blood and the storm in my brain. It was the thing that made me sing and weep and burn and break. It was the reason I could feel ten things at once and love people like they were oxygen. It was my gift — and my battle.

And yes, I paid a price. In friendships. In relationships. In moments of loneliness so vast, I thought they’d swallow me whole. I lost people who couldn’t hold my truth. I lost time I can’t get back.

But I also gained something rare:

The courage to be seen.

This final chapter isn’t an ending — it’s a beginning. It’s where the chase ends and the becoming begins. It’s where I stand barefoot on the broken pieces of my past, not to mourn them, but to build something solid. A home inside myself.

I am not just the chaos.

I am not just the grief.

I am not just the diagnosis.

I am here. Fully. Gloriously. Defiantly.

I used to think I was too much. Now I know I was never too anything. I was just enough of everything I needed to be.

I’m not the boy pretending to be a man.

I’m the man who finally found the boy — and sat beside him.

Held his hand.

And said:

You don’t have to perform anymore. You can rest now. You’re safe.

If you’ve read this far, then maybe part of you needed to hear that too. Maybe part of you is still chasing the version of yourself someone else told you to be.

Stop.

Breathe.

Come home.

You’re not broken.

You’re not wrong.

You’re not crazy.

You’ve just got ADHD.

And now — you’re free.

Appendix A: The Grand Illusion and Greater Delusion

The ballroom at the Dorchester was a universe of my own creation, born from a week of sleepless mania. Thirty minutes before the doors opened, the silence was electric, thick with the scent of lilies and potential. This was my ritual: the final, frantic inspection, the last sweep of a general before the battle. My heart wasn't beating with excitement; it was hammering with the brutal, metallic rhythm of adrenaline and fear.

I had convinced the jewelry brand this was possible. I had charmed the gallery owners on Bond Street into a partnership. I had leveraged Baryshnikov's art to create a halo of prestige. I had done it all without them spending a penny, a magic trick of negotiation and sheer will. They thought I was a genius. They didn't know I hadn't slept. They didn't know the entire event had been a terrifying, abstract idea until seven days ago, when a wave of panic finally gave it form. Procrastination wasn't a habit; it was my muse. My mind, I knew, wasn't interested if there wasn't some kind of drama, some impossible deadline to make the creativity catch fire. The anxiety, the panic attacks—they were the fuel.

My eyes scanned the room, a human magnifying glass for flaws. I moved past the velvet ropes and the perfectly lit vitrines where the jewelry glittered like captured stars. I saw it instantly—a single napkin on table seven, folded into a bishop's mitre when it should have been a fan. A detail no one would ever notice. A detail that felt like a scream. As one of my staff rushed to fix it, I felt a tremor of control, a fleeting sense of order imposed upon chaos. Everything was immaculate. It had to be.

Then, the doors opened.

And I flipped the switch.

The boy who couldn’t open bank statements vanished. In his place stood the charming host, the witty Italian, the man who could talk about "anything of everything and nothing." I greeted guests by name, making each one feel as though they were the only person in the room.

The climax of the evening arrived under the flashbulb pops of the red carpet. There I was, standing beside Mikhail Baryshnikov himself. He turned to me, his famous eyes holding a genuine respect. "The way this has been put together," he said, his voice low and appreciative, "it's more than an event. It is a piece of skilled work in its own right."

A laugh erupted from me, loud and real. Because as he said :"skilled work," my mind flashed to a memory from just eight days prior: me, in my flat at 3 a.m., staring at a blank page, realizing with a surge of pure terror that I hadn't even compiled a guest list.

But in that moment, laughing with Baryshnikov, the terror was gone, replaced by a dizzying, brilliant joy. I was gliding through the crowd, a whirlwind of air kisses and shared laughter. I found myself chatting with Stanley Tucci about his passion for Italy and its food. "The simplicity is what's so hard to get right," he said, and I knew exactly what he meant. I leaned in conspiratorially. "If you ever make Spaghetti alla Nerano," I told him, “The secret isn't just the provolone. You have to fry the zucchini in batches until they are almost burnt, then let them marinate in their own steam. That's what creates the cream." He looked at me, intrigued,

and we were just two men talking about pasta, the performance so natural I almost believed it myself.

Later, I was drawn into a circle with Kim Cattrall and Bianca Jagger. Bianca was reminiscing about Studio 54, and her stories of the seventies were legendary. "Oh, Studio 54," I said, my eyes lighting up. "I have my own story about that place." They both leaned in, captivated.

"This was much later, maybe twenty years ago," I began. "I was much younger then, and I know I would turn eyes, a realisation I only achieved when it was too late, and I wasn't so young anymore. My family was visiting me in New York City, and it was my mother's birthday. I wanted to give her nothing but the best, so I took them to see **Cabaret**—my favourite show—which had turned the entire Studio 54 into a proper cabaret club, with round tables surrounding the stage. Of course, I couldn't afford it. It took huge sacrifices. But it didn't matter. What mattered was making my mother proud, making my family happy. The bills would come later. Like Scarlett O'Hara, I decided I'd think about it tomorrow. After all, tomorrow is another day—a sentence I've used to justify a lifetime of procrastination."

I continued, "We had a table right at the front. The whole show, the Master of Ceremonies was looking at me, flirting with his eyes and his movements, and I was flirting right back. At the end, when the cast came out for their well-deserved applause, he looked directly at me, grinned, and said, 'Oh, what the hell!' He came down off the stage, took my hand, and pulled me up to dance with him."

Their eyes were wide. "I couldn't believe it," I said, the memory still vivid. "Me, the little boy who'd listen to Liza Minnelli's records over and over in his bedroom in Italy, was now on stage at Studio 54, dancing with the Master of Ceremonies in front of a standing ovation!" I looked at Bianca, my smile wide and genuine. "So, you see," I concluded, "I can say I actually danced on Broadway too in my life."

The laughter that followed was warm and loud. Kim Cattrall was shaking her head in disbelief. In that moment, surrounded by them, little Alessandro felt his dream finally come true. I saw myself from the outside—this man, at the center of it all—and thought of the small boy who learned about the world through a screen. Now, the who's who of London high society was here, and they were all here because I had made the magic happen.

But then the limelights went down.

The last of the town cars whispered away from the curb, and the magic dissolved into the cold night air. The dopamine and adrenaline that had fueled my performance for a week didn't just fade; it was leached from my system, leaving an emptiness so vast it felt like an abyss. The silence descended. The nothing. For an ADHD mind that has just surfed a tsunami of stimulation, this sudden void is not peace. It is the poison that powers the depression.

In the ringing silence of the empty ballroom, I wasn't the successful host anymore. I was back in front of that black-and-white television. I saw the dazzling, almost frantic glitter of Raffaella Carrà and the impossible sophistication of Mina, singing through a haze of cigarette smoke held in her iconic mouthpiece. She seemed to be singing only for him, for the little boy who felt everything. The glitz, the glamour, the untouchable joy—he was desperate to feel it, to capture it, to become it.

And here I was, having done it. I had touched the dream. Yet, as the lights went out at the Dorchester, I was left with the same feeling as that child: a hollow, aching solitude and the bitter taste of a happiness that was just a performance. The magic was gone, and little Alessandro was still there, in the dark, seeking a happiness that never truly came.

Hours later, I returned to my flat, the adrenaline finally gone, leaving only the buzzing exhaustion. I dropped my keys on the pile of mail, the sound muffled by the sheer volume of paper. The tuxedo felt like a costume. The praise from the party echoed in the silence, but it couldn't fill it. There was no sense of triumph. There was only the quiet terror of the aftermath. I had delivered. I had made it. But the magician was spent, the trick was over, and I was left alone with the one thing I couldn’t charm, couldn’t negotiate with, and couldn’t control: the paralyzing weight of a life deferred. I stared at the unopened letters, each one a monument to my own chaos, and understood the terrifying truth of my gift. I could create magic for the world, but I couldn’t seem to save myself.

Part 1: The Strategy – Forging the Key

It began, as my best plans often did, with a quiet moment of observation. As a humble boy from Naples now navigating the world of high jewelry and luxury retail in London, I knew I needed a new stage, a new way of connecting with clients that was truthful to who I was. I studied the multimillionaires I was meant to serve—these titans from Russia, from the Middle East, who had built empires through sheer force of will. I saw their esteem for their own status and hard work, but I also looked deeper, for the craving that lay beneath. I understood that what drew them to this country, beyond the elite schools for their children, was the one thing their immense wealth could not manufacture: access to the mystique of the British Royal Family.

That was the key. To give them a taste of that exclusivity, to make them feel part of an inner sanctum in this famously classist, monarchical society, would be invaluable. London's power structure was built around its private members' clubs, fortresses of legacy and status. I knew then that I had to do anything in my power to become a member.

I convinced my company that this was a necessary investment. They agreed to sponsor me, and so the campaign began. It took time, of course. For each of the major clubs I targeted—Annabelle's, Lulu's, and The Arts Club—you needed to be sponsored by two existing members of high standing. I pulled triggers. I met the right people, deployed the Italian charm, and made my case. And they sponsored me. Within a few months, I received the membership cards for all three.

But being in the club wasn't the endgame; it was merely the opening move. I had to be remembered. I had to build a persona of power, an illusion so seamless it became reality. I would go to one of the clubs almost every night, dining alone if I had to. I would chat with the waiters, the sommeliers, the maître d's, learning their names and making sure they learned mine. It was a ritual. Soon, I no longer needed to reserve a table. A nod at the door was all it took. "Mr. Grassini, a pleasure," they would say, guiding me to my usual spot, my preferred wine appearing before I asked.

That was the performance, and this was its purpose. I would invite a potential client to dine with me—a billionaire who, despite his fortune, could never get past the front door on his own. With me, he could. We would enter like royalty. They would greet me by name, and by extension, they would greet my guest with the same deference. We would sit at our table, and perhaps at the next table would be Tom Cruise, or a minor royal holding court. For my clients, this was El Dorado. I was giving them precisely what they wanted, and in return, they gave me what I needed: the sales. It was a mutual understanding between businessmen.

But this was not a trick. It was not manipulation. It was an illusion built on a foundation of absolute truth. I have always been lied to, have always been promised things that never arrived, and I despised that trait in my father. I became his opposite. If I talked, it was because I knew, and if I knew, it was because I could deliver. These men, these millionaires, could read right through a puppet; they knew a real person when they saw one. My honesty was my greatest asset. Within the theatre I had created, my word was my bond, and trust was everything. And it was this reputation that would eventually lead me past the doors of London's clubs, and into the grounds of Windsor itself.

Part 2: Liza Doolittle at Court

There are moments in life when you realise you haven't simply entered a room — you've crossed a threshold. And yet no one notices. No fanfare. No spotlight. Just a quiet shift in atmosphere, as if the air itself has acknowledged that you now belong.

That threshold, for me, was Windsor.

After months perfecting my presence in the golden triangle of Mayfair's private members' clubs — Annabel's, Lulu's, and The Arts Club — I had begun to understand the deeper architecture of British power. It wasn't just about luxury. It was about lineage. Ritual. Terrain. And there was one place where all of it converged, wrapped in silent prestige and pastoral grace: the Guards Polo Club.

Founded by His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh and set inside the grounds of Windsor Great Park, the Guards Polo Club wasn't merely exclusive. It was sacred. Not just a polo ground, but a royal theatre — where power was not shouted, but whispered on horseback. To become a member there wasn't just a social elevation. It was a rite of passage.

And so, as I had done with the clubs in London, I studied. I observed. I applied. And, eventually, I was accepted.

Every Sunday, I would drive there with Vesuvio, my golden Labrador — my gentle, loyal companion and my living talisman. Not in a Fiat. Those days were gone. I arrived in a Land Rover, the same model the Queen herself would drive through the grounds, side by side with Prince Philip, to watch the matches. It wasn't about mimicry. It was about fluency. The right gesture, the right silhouette, the right silence — all of it said: I understand where I am. I understand how this works.

And I did. Not because I had been born into it, but because I had earned it, learned it, built it — brick by invisible brick.

I would park among the Bentleys and Aston Martins without flinching. I knew the staff by name, and they knew mine. The guards nodded. The members smiled. I was no longer a visitor. I was part of the scene. Quietly. Strategically. Absolutely.

But watching had never been enough for me.

From the very first match I attended, I was spellbound. The sport was like nothing I'd ever seen — the thunder of hooves against the manicured turf, the swift choreography of man and beast, the raw elegance of it all. Polo wasn't just a game. It was a code. A language. And I had to speak it.

I decided I would learn to play.

It began as a casual inquiry — a private lesson, nothing too ambitious. I arrived early, suited up, nerves hidden behind charm. I picked up the mallet instinctively with my left hand.

The instructor — a seasoned man with a military posture and the half-smile of someone used to delivering unwelcome truths — looked at me.

"Are you left-handed?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, still hopeful.

“Then I’m afraid you can’t play polo,” he said flatly. “Polo is played only with the right hand.”

The words fell like a hammer. Not because of what they were, but because of what they echoed. That ancient, familiar sound: No. You can’t. You’re not allowed here.

It was as if the gate had been slammed shut again — the same gate I’d watched close as a child when our home was sealed by a judge, when my father’s promises evaporated, when my toys disappeared and never returned. That boy was still inside me, and he knew the weight of being told that something was not for him.

But I’ve never accepted “no” as an end. For me, it’s a beginning. A dare. A fuse.

I went home burning. I began researching obsessively. Somewhere, somehow, someone must have a solution. And then I found it — a training programme near York called From Zero to Hero. Two weeks. Full immersion. Horses, mallets, bruises, and sweat. A baptism.

I packed my bags, took Vesuvio and my mother — the one person who had always believed in me — and we drove north. The landscape shifted, and so did I.

It was brutal. Every morning began with the saddle and ended in aching silence. I had to retrain my body to use a hand that felt foreign and clumsy. I dropped the mallet more times than I could count. I missed every ball for days. My muscles screamed. My ego shrank. But my resolve never wavered.

And slowly, inch by inch, it began to change.

One morning, under grey Yorkshire skies, I swung — and hit. The mallet connected. The ball flew. It was a small moment, but for me it was a symphony. It wasn’t just a ball. It was proof.

I had done it. I had taught my body to defy the rule.

I returned to Windsor not as a guest or observer, but as a player. I didn’t need to announce it. I didn’t need applause. My presence on the field was enough. My silence was my crown.

And then, during one of the summer matches, I looked across the field and saw them: Prince William and Prince Harry, mounted, galloping across the pitch with that effortless grace that only birth can confer. A few metres away, seated in the royal enclosure, was the Queen herself.

And there I was — a man born in a working-class flat in Naples, who once couldn’t afford a home, whose childhood was ruptured by absence and shame — standing on the same grass. Holding the same mallet. Playing the same game.

In that moment, I didn’t feel like an imposter.

I felt seen. Not by them. By him. The little boy inside me. The one who had survived it all.

And for once, he wasn’t watching from the sidelines.

He was finally part of the game.

Chapter Z: An Impostor at Court

And then came the day I stepped beyond even the most elaborate illusion — and into something I could never have staged.

It was at Coworth Park Hotel, not far from Windsor and the Royal Ascot grounds — a place I would often visit with my dog, Vesuvio. That day, I had been invited by Audi, and a driver arrived at my Chelsea flat to collect me in the latest model — sleek, understated, the embodiment of curated power. It all felt like something out of a scene I'd written for myself — a perfect ascent. We arrived at Coworth for a polo match. Not just any match. Prince William and Prince Harry were playing.

During the break in play, I excused myself and headed toward the restrooms. And it was there — in the most unlikely of places — that I found myself face to face with both Princes.

There was only one sink, and there they were, side by side, laughing, splashing water at each other like schoolboys. There was no entourage, no press, no rehearsed smiles. Just two brothers, in their crisp whites, pushing each other playfully with that unguarded intimacy you only ever see between siblings who trust each other completely.

I stood frozen, not out of reverence, but astonishment. What do you say when history walks in beside you and starts washing its hands?

I tried to speak, and what came out was:

"The soap dispenser's not working."

Prince William turned to me, grinned, and said with the dry warmth only the British have mastered:

"Well, it's all for show here."

And we all laughed — genuinely. No ceremony, no awkwardness. Just three men and a broken dispenser.

What struck me more than the surrealism was their humanness. It was only a week after Prince George had been born. And here was the future King of England, elbow-deep in water, chuckling with his brother, completely unaware of the impact this moment would have on a stranger watching him.

There was so much I wanted to say. I wanted to tell him how his story had moved me. How his wife's courage, his brother's vulnerability, and his own quiet dignity had helped me feel less alone. I wanted to speak of her.

Princess Diana.

I never met her, but I've felt her presence all my life.

From the first time I saw her on television as a child, I was transfixed. She wasn't acting like royalty — she was redefining it. She didn't dominate a room; she opened it. She didn't claim perfection; she embodied truth.

She became a beacon for those of us who struggled in silence. She spoke openly about depression, bulimia, loneliness, and the unbearable weight of pretending. She didn't just wear

crowns — she wore pain, and turned it into compassion. In a world of polished facades, she made rawness regal.

And for those of us who were also wearing masks, trying to fit into worlds that weren't built for us — she was our lighthouse.

She hugged children with AIDS when others recoiled. She walked through minefields to show the world that no one is expendable. She took the wounds that palace walls tried to hide and offered them back to the people as gifts of understanding.

In my darkest hours — when I felt unlovable, unanchored, invisible — I would remember her. Not because she was perfect. But because she wasn't, and didn't pretend to be. She was grace in grief. Strength in softness.

And if Prince William, or Prince Harry, should ever read this — I hope they know that their mother wasn't just beloved. She was a sanctuary. For so many of us. She saved lives with nothing more than honesty and presence. If this book ever reaches her son — if he remembers that day in the restroom when a stranger pointed out a broken soap dispenser — I want him to know: his mother was a queen to those who had no crowns. And for me, in a time when I had no compass, she was the north.

The Princess of Hearts.

Not lost.

Never forgotten.

Always loved.

I wish I could have told her that.

But maybe, through this page, I finally am.

Part 3 – The Duke and the Portrait

The invitation came like a spark from a dream that had waited patiently all my life to be lived. It was the 60th anniversary of the Guards Polo Club, the very club founded by His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh. In honour of the occasion, the Duke himself had decided to host a private reception at Windsor Castle — exclusively for club members.

I was one of them.

This was no gala for the masses, no spectacle for cameras or column inches. It was quiet, regal, deeply British — a gathering where lineage and loyalty spoke louder than fame. And I, Alessandro Grassini, the boy from Naples who had once stared at royal family trees like they were fairy tales, was on the list.

I brought a guest — one of my dearest friends, and also one of my most cherished clients. She was, in every sense, royalty in her own right: a Dubai-born woman of high lineage, a Gemini like me, and coincidentally, like the Duke himself. She was dazzling. Younger than me, radiant with life, dressed in a summer gown that shimmered with colour and chaos, draped in every jewel I had ever sold her. She wore them that evening as a tribute to me — and in doing so, she made the entire room hers. Heads turned. She didn't just arrive. She entered.

I picked her up in Holland Park, where she lived, and we were driven by Audi's latest model — not an Uber, not a black cab — but with ceremony and care. I remember gazing out the window as we approached Windsor. I was nervous and light-headed. I wasn't just entering a place; I was crossing into something sacred. I had studied this place for years — not just its stone and history, but its bloodline, its rituals. I had once owned a massive printout of the British Royal Family tree, something I would read obsessively as a child, tracing names and family crests as if decoding a secret I somehow belonged to. Now I was walking into it.

Windsor Castle itself was both less and more than I expected. We didn't enter through the grand ceremonial archways you see in films or postcards — no, it was a side entrance, tucked and restrained, almost monastic. We climbed a long staircase, subdued and unceremonious, and at the bottom we surrendered our mobile phones. No pictures were allowed. There was only one official photographer, and any photo we wanted would need to be requested later. The memory, it seemed, had to live in the mind — not on a screen.

Inside, however, was another world entirely. The state reception room opened before us like a stage that had waited decades for its next act. Tall ceilings, impossibly polished floors, floral arrangements that spoke of ancient wealth and refined taste. And then, like clockwork, he entered.

The Duke of Edinburgh.

He moved through the crowd with measured grace — not stiff, but certainly regal. A man who had been photographed so many times he no longer noticed flashes that weren't there. He smiled, chatted, paused, listened. My eyes followed him, my feet almost moved of their own accord. But every time I tried to approach, there was this one man — a shadow, a silent wall — who always seemed to block my path. At first I was irritated. This man had no idea how much I needed this moment, how much it meant to me.

What I hadn't realised — what the little boy from Naples, the one who memorised family trees but missed the living rules of royal protocol — didn't know, was that I couldn't simply approach a royal. I had to be introduced. The man who had been standing between us wasn't trying to obstruct me. He was the gatekeeper. And finally, sensing my sincerity, my eagerness, perhaps even my harmless obsession, he turned to me and asked gently, "Would you like to speak to His Royal Highness?"

I nodded, breath caught in my chest.

He asked my name, and the name of the guest I had brought. Then he turned and performed the necessary magic: "Your Royal Highness, may I present Mr. Alessandro Grassini and his guest."

And there I was. Face to face with a man whose titles filled pages, but whose gaze was human. Curious. Warm.

He asked about Naples. About polo. About horses. I spoke — not nervously, not awkwardly, but with the kind of poise born only from someone who had rehearsed this moment in the theatre of his imagination for years. I spoke of polo like it had been my lifelong pursuit, when only months before I had first picked up a mallet and been told I could never play. He was gracious. Interested. Amused, perhaps, by my passion.

He showed us through the state dining room. It was already dressed for some grand future event — vast arrangements of silver vases and candelabra adorned the table. It was breath-taking. But what truly stole my breath was the painting above the fireplace: Queen Victoria.

She loomed like a guardian over the room, and for a moment, I felt I wasn't just in the presence of a Duke — I was in conversation with the past. All those hours spent tracing her name on family trees, dreaming of royal lineage, of thrones and traditions, they collapsed into this one moment.

And yet, right there, in that room — I felt like an imposter.

Like a liar. A fraud. A DooLittle in disguise.

I was the boy who didn't speak English, the boy from a modest Neapolitan family who sometimes had money and, most often, didn't. My parents worked hard — harder than the world ever gave them credit for. I was the boy who dissociated, who created imaginary kingdoms inside his head to survive the reality outside his window. And here I was — disassociating again, surrounded by nobles and tapestries and tapestries of history, half-floating in disbelief.

When I was a teenager, I had that family tree poster above my desk — a huge, printed lineage of the British royal family. Every time I lifted my head from my studies, I looked up at that chart. I would dream: of Henry VIII and his doomed wives, of Anne Boleyn and the tower, of Richard the Lionheart and the Crusades, of Elizabeth I and her lonely majesty, of Mary, Bloody Mary, and Mary Queen of Scots, with her tragic grace and terrible destiny.

And now I was breathing the same air. Walking the same corridors. Inhabiting — if only for a moment — the fantasy that had once protected me from the ache of reality.

I felt like Eliza Doolittle. Not for her accent, but for her defiance. For her willingness to try. I had no beauty, no crown. But I had stubbornness. I had resilience. I had carved a path with bare hands and trembling hope.

And for a fleeting moment — I was part of history.

But even then, part of me was terrified. My English — was it good enough? My grammar — would it fail me mid-sentence? Would I say something absurd, some working-class Neapolitan version of "bloomin' 'ell", and shatter the illusion?

The Prince was too elegant, too measured for vulgarity. We were different generations. Different galaxies.

Still, I feared being found out. Not because I had lied — but because I had dared to believe I belonged.

And then, like every fairytale I've ever lived, the curtain came down.

After the champagne, after the bows and thank-yous, after the car had dropped us off, I was back in my little flat. My friend returned to her world of privilege, and I returned to Vesuvio, my Labrador, and the quiet thrum of solitude.

That's the thing about dreams. When they end, you fall.

The buzz of the event lingered for a moment — that exquisite flash of dopamine. But soon, it was gone. And the crash that followed felt almost unbearable. I had done it. I had walked among royalty, shaken the hand of a prince. But the voice inside me — the one that lives in the ADHD mind — whispered, "What's next?"

There was no time to linger in victory. I was already planning the next impossibility. Because that's the truth of how my brain works. For someone with ADHD, "no" isn't a dead end. It's an invitation to climb over the wall. I had never had much money. I had no birthright to these circles. But I had curiosity. I had will. I had the refusal to accept limits.

And I had always dared.

Because when you spend a lifetime not fitting in, you learn to remake the world until it fits you.

And so I stood there, before Queen Victoria's portrait, and thought, I made it.

But in the back of my mind, another voice whispered, Did I really?

And perhaps, that's the real truth I took with me that day — not a photo, not a souvenir, but a truth I hadn't expected. For all my studies, for all the hours spent poring over royal family trees and imagining their lives like they were gods, I had never once considered the most human thing of all:

That they were just like me.

Flawed. Passionate. Frightened. Carrying skeletons in tailored suits. They were not divine. They were not untouchable. They were born into duty, into myth, into performance — just as I had learned to perform, to become what the world needed me to be.

That day, I finally understood: they had nothing more than I had. And maybe, in some ways, I had more — because I had to fight to be there.

And I thought of Diana. I'm sure she felt it. That ache of unbelonging. That mask of grace worn to hide the roar of doubt. But I also wondered — what about the others? Had William, Harry, Charles — had they ever looked in the mirror and thought, They'll find me out. They'll realise I'm not enough. I'm a fraud.?

That terrifying, choking fear — of being seen, but not accepted — is not reserved for the broken or the poor. It's a universal wound. And for those who live under the world's gaze, it becomes unbearable.

And so that was the lesson. The moment I had waited my whole life for didn't prove I was less than them. It taught me that no one is more than anyone else.

And maybe — just maybe — I had belonged all along.

Letter to My Father: The Peter Pan Who Was My First Heartbreak

Dear Dad,

You were my first hero.

Not a perfect one, not even a reliable one — but the kind that glowed from the inside out. You lit up rooms with laughter, with charm, with brilliant ideas that dazzled people, even if the follow-through never came. You had the soul of Peter Pan and the mind of a visionary, and yet, somehow, we were always just one step away from collapse. From eviction. From silence. From shame.

And yet I loved you.

You were misunderstood, not malicious. Never cruel — except perhaps in your absence, in your promises that turned into vanishing acts. You partnered with the wrong people, trusted too easily, dreamed too big without securing the ground beneath your feet. And because of that, there were years I lived with nothing. Debts, threats, eviction letters, the fear of picking up the phone. I remember the weight of unpaid bills, of dreams that turned into burdens on my mother's back — and mine. We lost homes because of you. And I lost a sense of home inside myself for a long, long time.

But I never stopped loving you.

Because you never stopped loving us — just not always in the way we needed.

You were the father who could never say no, and so I believed you. Every time. That the bike would come, the toy, the trip, the promise. I believed you, and I told the world, proudly, innocently — only to have to hide, lie, and shrink when the truth didn't arrive. I stopped trusting the world, Dad. And worse — I stopped trusting myself.

For that, I forgive you. But please understand: that forgiveness took a lifetime.

Because that little boy, the one who waited at the window, still lives inside me. The one who turned shame into imagination. Who turned hunger into sparkle. Who turned fear into performance. That boy loved you more than anything — and he couldn't hate you, no matter how much it hurt.

Because you made me laugh like no one else ever has. God, the laughs.

After all these years, what I miss most is the sound of us laughing together. No words needed. Just that shared spark in our eyes, that secret language between father and son. A look, a grin, a knowing. You gave me that.

And I took it with me.

I became, in many ways, the man you wanted to be. I built the shows, the events, the dreams — but I made sure someone paid for them. I was careful. Strategic. I didn't leave others to pick up the bill. And even though I don't have children of my own, I carried the burden you didn't: I kept a roof over my head. I created homes — beautiful ones — because you taught me what it feels like to lose them. I nested in every space I touched, turned every flat into a sanctuary, because I was terrified of ever being homeless again.

Your recklessness became my responsibility. Your chaos became my control.

And yet… you were so loved.

Even after you were gone, people came to me — people I didn't know — telling me how you had helped them, quietly, generously, without ever mentioning it to us. You gave so much. You just didn't know how to give to yourself — or how to stay.

Your ending was brutal. That sudden collapse, the surgery that stole your legs, the wound that never closed. I was in London when it happened. You were my age now. And suddenly, you couldn't walk. I rushed home. I gave up my life for ten months. I worked in the restaurant — your restaurant — the one I hated as a child.

It was hot like hell. It was July and August in Naples, nearly 40 degrees outside, and I was standing by the grill making sandwiches and burgers, working until three in the morning — just like you and mum used to. Then I'd come home, and there you were, in that awful bed we'd turned your bedroom into, like a hospital ward. I'd sit beside you, keeping you company because you couldn't sleep.

And sometimes, at night, you needed transfusions. I remember, with my partner at the time, hopping on buses and rushing from hospital to hospital, pleading, banging on doors, demanding blood. I remember going mad with desperation, knowing that blood meant life. And when we finally got it, I would sit up all night, making sure the transfusion didn't clot, that every drop entered your veins — because that was what kept you alive. That was what kept you with me.

And I never saw that as a sacrifice. I did it with all my love. I would do it again, a thousand times, because you were — and still are — my hero.

There were only two times in my life I ever lied to you. Just two.

The first was when you were dying and you asked me if I remembered that day — that terrible day when you beat me as a child, without reason. And I said I didn't remember. But I did. Every second of it. ADHD remembers in colours, in pain, in sound. But I chose to lie to protect you. Because you were asking for forgiveness with tears in your eyes. Because you had a month left to live.

And the second time I lied was when I promised I would take you to London — to show you the city I had chosen to live in. We both knew that wasn't going to happen. Your body couldn't make it. But that lie… that lie was sacred. In our crazy little world, it kept the hope alive. It gave us something to hold on to. I don't regret it.

Those were the only two lies I ever told you.

And you? You lied to me so many times. It was almost your nature. It wasn't cruel. It was compulsive — like a child trying not to be caught. That Peter Pan inside you, so terrified of being discovered. Of being seen for who he really was. But Dad, at the end — we did discover you. We saw you. We understood. And we were still there.

Even after you left us with enormous debts, even after Mum and I had to work ourselves raw just to save the last family home — the one you and Mum, with a lifetime of sacrifices, managed to buy — even then, we stayed. We carried you. We carried your legacy.

You said you were worried about me — that I wasn't stable, that I didn't have a job. But you were projecting, Dad. I have been many things — wild, impulsive, emotional — but never homeless. Never lost. You showed me how to survive, and I did.

You taught me to love cinema, to adore 007. And guess what? I went to a James Bond premiere at the Royal Albert Hall — walked the red carpet. You weren't there, but you were. You were beside me. That night was for you.

You always said yes, even when you couldn't deliver. But you said yes with your eyes, your laughter, your belief in me. And that belief stayed. I was told by customers that you used to talk about me all the time, with pride in your eyes. That you believed I would do great things.

And I have. With all my flaws, all my mistakes — I have. Because I'm your son.

And Dad, I never told you this, but I know you carried your own wounds. You were bullied as a child for being overweight, and I know that marked you. I think that was your deepest trauma. And maybe because of that, when I came out to you as gay — you didn't flinch. You didn't hesitate. You just smiled. You accepted me more fully, more freely, than I had ever accepted myself. That moment changed me. You didn't ask questions. You didn't shame me. You just loved me. The same way you always did — without conditions, without judgment.

You and Mum were the greatest gifts I could've asked for. Because of your struggles, because of your pain — in your own singular, imperfect, human ways — you both learned not to judge. But to accept. And that saved me. You accepted me and all my extravagance, all my flair, all my over-the-top ways — because you loved me. Because you saw me. You gave me the one thing I craved most in the world: to be known, and still loved.

And now that I am your age, now that I too am facing illness — cancer, like you — I understand things differently. I understand that the body breaks, but the spirit doesn't have to. You smiled through pain. You laughed through loss. You never gave up your inner child. You showed me there is another way to face sorrow — through joy, through absurdity, through the innocence of a Peter Pan who never really grew up.

You never grew up, Dad. And in a way, neither have I. But I've learned from your story. I've rewritten parts of it. And I carry you with me — not as a wound, but as a flame.

You were my father. My friend. My chaos. My compass.

I hope you're proud of who I became.

I'll keep laughing. For both of us.

With all my love,

Your son

Appendix B: When the White Tiara Fell — and I Rose Without It

A Memoir of Glamour, Grief, and the Quietest Victory

I'd say that all my life, I felt compelled to help others — because I was helped when I needed it the most.

I lived in New York during the early '90s. All through that decade, I watched friends die of AIDS. Men who had danced with me, kissed me, loved me, held me — withered in hospital beds while the world turned away. I lost so many that I stopped counting. I stopped allowing myself to count. So I made a silent promise: if I made it through, if I ever found power, I'd use it. I'd give back.

And I did.

I made sure every company I worked for gave money to AIDS charities. I convinced luxury brands to support causes they'd never dared speak about before. I used my creativity, my charisma, my fire — all of it, undiagnosed ADHD included — to open doors that weren't meant for people like me.

Then one day, I saw the invitation: Elton John's annual White Tiara Ball.

A table cost a fortune. But I convinced the company I was working with at the time to sponsor it. Not for publicity. Not for ego. But because it was time. Because I had earned my seat. Because I wanted to stand in the presence of memory and say: I am still here. I didn't forget them.

The night arrived.

I got dressed in my flat, excitement and fear fizzing in my veins. I took a car with clients and colleagues. We drove through the English countryside until we reached his estate. Elton's house rose out of the landscape like something from a fairytale — but bigger. Louder. More extravagant. There was a grand marquee in the garden, filled with round tables and white roses and heart-shaped neon lights. The whole thing pulsed like a living memory.

Before the dinner, they played a short film — scenes from the early years of the AIDS crisis: children dying. Men in hospice. Fear. Loss. Defiance. I sat in silence, tears running down my face. No one at the table noticed. Or if they did, they didn't speak.

Because I was still performing.

At my table were people I'd seen only in magazines. Jerry Hall, luminous and statuesque, wore an ivory silk gown that shimmered with the kind of grace only a woman who's seen it all and survived it all can wear. At one point, she leaned over and said in her honeyed drawl, "Darlin', it's the kind of party where you just hope the tiara doesn't slip off while you're dancing."

I raised my glass and replied, "If it does, I'll be the first to catch it — and maybe wear it for a minute."

We laughed.

Across from us sat Ivana Trump, regal and theatrical, her blonde mane coiffed to perfection, her Italian lover at her side. She looked at the menu and sighed, "I hope they serve something with real flavour. These charity menus can be so... polite."

Jerry quipped, "As long as there's dessert, I forgive everything."

And I added, "If there's no glitter, I'm starting a revolution."

And there it was — the mask. Witty, dazzling, charming Alex. The host. The jester. The boy who made everyone feel more fabulous by being even more fabulous himself.

But inside, I wasn't laughing.

Inside, I felt like a fraud. Because no matter how high I climbed, part of me always believed I didn't belong. I knew the truth: my bank account wasn't like theirs. My childhood wasn't like theirs. My ghosts weren't like theirs. But another truth also emerged that night — one I didn't expect.

They were just as broken. Just as haunted. Maybe more.

Later in the evening, Chris Martin performed. He wore white trainers — I remember them vividly. At one point, he invited the crowd to join him on a small stage near Elton's table, and people surged forward. I found myself up there too, suddenly, somehow, with my arm around him and his around me, both of us jumping in rhythm while he sang. He was much taller than me, but in that moment, I didn't care. We were shouting lyrics into the air. Hundreds of people bounced with us, and for a moment, it felt like joy.

And then something even stranger happened. I started talking to Grace Jones.

Yes. Grace Jones.

Ageless. Statuesque. A goddess of pure presence. She looked at me with those otherworldly eyes, and I don't even remember what I said — probably something ridiculous. But I made her laugh. And then we were kissing.

Me. A gay man. French kissing Grace Jones.

It was surreal. Hilarious. Gorgeous. Human. She tasted like defiance.

I didn't tell anyone at the table what the night really meant. Not Jerry. Not Ivana. Not Grace.

But I knew.

That night was mine. My private rebellion. My prayer in sequins. My kiss blown to the stars.

And underneath it all — it was ADHD.

Not the cliché version people still joke about. But the truth of it.

The emotional dysregulation that made me cry through dinner, silently, unseen. The impulsivity that made me kiss Grace Jones mid-conversation without thinking. The performative masking that let me entertain billionaires while breaking inside. The hyperfocus that let me recall every face from the AIDS crisis like a slideshow on my soul. The sensory overload — lights, sound, lace, glitter, pressure — all crashing over me like a wave.

And above all, the unbearable injustice.

People with ADHD are allergic to injustice. It doesn't wash off. It burns. And AIDS — to me — was the greatest injustice of my youth.

People didn't die because they were sick. They died because they were shamed. Because they were queer. Because the world chose silence over empathy.

And I carry that injustice in my blood.

That night, under chandeliers and laughter, I claimed a tiny victory. A reclamation. A moment of survival, stitched into the fabric of a costume ball.

But it didn't end there.

Years later, after all the glitter had faded, I found myself in another kind of war. Trapped in an abusive relationship.

And when I reached out for help — when I needed saving — the very LGBTQ+ organisations built on the legacy of men like me, funded by balls like that one, born from the ashes of AIDS — they failed me.

Galop. The Gaia Centre. They turned me away. Because my abuser had registered first. They called it a conflict of interest.

They didn't investigate. They didn't ask deeper questions. They simply dropped me.

I, who had spent decades fighting, organising, giving. I, who had lost lovers and friends. I was discarded like a second-class citizen.

And for someone with ADHD, that kind of injustice is unbearable.

We don't forget. We don't "move on." We fight.

But at first, I broke.

I was ashamed. I was terrified. I was not believed.

And I tried to take my life. Four times. In ten months.

Because I truly thought I had been erased.

But something in me — the same fire that got me to that tiara night, that got me through the '90s, that let me perform when I was breaking — that part of me refused to die.

I failed at dying. And so I began to live again.

With rage. With truth. With purpose.

Because a neurodivergent mind — even at its lowest — doesn't forget its cause.

Now, I fight. Not just for me. For all of us.

For the silenced. For the broken. For the "too much." For the unmasked.

I don't need their validation anymore. I don't need to be believed by gatekeepers.

I need to hold them accountable.

And I will.

Because people with ADHD may stumble. We may get overwhelmed. We may burn out. But we rise. We remember. We fight.

And now, I fight for you.

The one reading this who has never been heard. The one who cries in secret. The one who burns for justice but doesn't know how to begin.

Begin with this.

You are not broken.[SEP]You are not crazy.[SEP]You are fire.[SEP]And I see you.

Because when the white tiara finally fell,[SEP]I rose without it.

Part 1: The Strategy – Forging the Key

It began, as my best plans often did, with a quiet moment of observation. As a humble boy from Naples now navigating the world of high jewellery and luxury retail in London, I knew I needed a new stage, a new way of connecting with clients that was truthful to who I was. I studied the multimillionaires I was meant to serve—these titans from Russia, from the Middle East, who had built empires through sheer force of will. I saw their esteem for their own status and hard work, but I also looked deeper, for the craving that lay beneath. I understood that what drew them to this country, beyond the elite schools for their children, was the one thing their immense wealth could not manufacture: access to the mystique of the British Royal Family.

That was the key. To give them a taste of that exclusivity, to make them feel part of an inner sanctum in this famously classist, monarchical society, would be invaluable. London's power structure was built around its private members' clubs, fortresses of legacy and status. I knew then that I had to do anything in my power to become a member.

I convinced my company that this was a necessary investment. They agreed to sponsor me, and so the campaign began. It took time, of course. For each of the major clubs I targeted—Annabelle's, Lulu's, and The Arts Club—you needed to be sponsored by two existing members of high standing. I pulled triggers. I met the right people, deployed the Italian charm, and made my case. And they sponsored me. Within a few months, I received the membership cards for all three.

But being in the club wasn't the endgame; it was merely the opening move. I had to be remembered. I had to build a persona of power, an illusion so seamless it became reality. I would go to one of the clubs almost every night, dining alone if I had to. I would chat with the waiters, the sommeliers, the maître d's, learning their names and making sure they learned mine. It was a ritual. Soon, I no longer needed to reserve a table. A nod at the door was all it took. "Mr. Grassini, a pleasure," they would say, guiding me to my usual spot, my preferred wine appearing before I asked.

That was the performance, and this was its purpose. I would invite a potential client to dine with me—a billionaire who, despite his fortune, could never get past the front door on his own. With me, he could. We would enter like royalty. They would greet me by name, and by extension, they would greet my guest with the same deference. We would sit at our table, and perhaps at the next table would be Tom Cruise, or a minor royal holding court. For my clients, this was El Dorado. I was giving them precisely what they wanted, and in return, they gave me what I needed: the sales. It was a mutual understanding between businessmen.

But this was not a trick. It was not manipulation. It was an illusion built on a foundation of absolute truth. I have always been lied to, have always been promised things that never arrived, and I despised that trait in my father. I became his opposite. If I talked, it was because I knew, and if I knew, it was because I could deliver. These men, these millionaires, could read right through a puppet; they knew a real person when they saw one. My honesty was my greatest asset. Within the theatre I had created, my word was my bond, and trust was everything. And it was this reputation that would eventually lead me past the doors of London's clubs, and into the grounds of Windsor itself.

Part 2: Liza Doolittle at Court

There are moments in life when you realise you haven't simply entered a room — you've crossed a threshold. And yet no one notices. No fanfare. No spotlight. Just a quiet shift in atmosphere, as if the air itself has acknowledged that you now belong.

That threshold, for me, was Windsor.

After months perfecting my presence in the golden triangle of Mayfair's private members' clubs — Annabel's, Lulu's, and The Arts Club — I had begun to understand the deeper architecture of British power. It wasn't just about luxury. It was about lineage. Ritual. Terrain. And there was one place where all of it converged, wrapped in silent prestige and pastoral grace: the Guards Polo Club.

Founded by His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh and set inside the grounds of Windsor Great Park, the Guards Polo Club wasn't merely exclusive. It was sacred. Not just a polo ground, but a royal theatre — where power was not shouted, but whispered on horseback. To become a member there wasn't just a social elevation. It was a rite of passage.

And so, as I had done with the clubs in London, I studied. I observed. I applied. And, eventually, I was accepted.

Every Sunday, I would drive there with Vesuvio, my golden Labrador — my gentle, loyal companion and my living talisman. Not in a Fiat. Those days were gone. I arrived in a Land Rover, the same model the Queen herself would drive through the grounds, side by side with Prince Philip, to watch the matches. It wasn't about mimicry. It was about fluency. The right gesture, the right silhouette, the right silence — all of it said: I understand where I am. I understand how this works.

And I did. Not because I had been born into it, but because I had earned it, learned it, built it — brick by invisible brick.

I would park among the Bentleys and Aston Martins without flinching. I knew the staff by name, and they knew mine. The guards nodded. The members smiled. I was no longer a visitor. I was part of the scene. Quietly. Strategically. Absolutely.

But watching had never been enough for me.

From the very first match I attended, I was spellbound. The sport was like nothing I'd ever seen — the thunder of hooves against the manicured turf, the swift choreography of man and beast, the raw elegance of it all. Polo wasn't just a game. It was a code. A language. And I had to speak it.

I decided I would learn to play.

It began as a casual inquiry — a private lesson, nothing too ambitious. I arrived early, suited up, nerves hidden behind charm. I picked up the mallet instinctively with my left hand.

The instructor — a seasoned man with a military posture and the half-smile of someone used to delivering unwelcome truths — looked at me.

"Are you left-handed?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, still hopeful.

“Then I’m afraid you can’t play polo,” he said flatly. “Polo is played only with the right hand.”

The words fell like a hammer. Not because of what they were, but because of what they echoed. That ancient, familiar sound: No. You can’t. You’re not allowed here.

It was as if the gate had been slammed shut again — the same gate I’d watched close as a child when our home was sealed by a judge, when my father’s promises evaporated, when my toys disappeared and never returned. That boy was still inside me, and he knew the weight of being told that something was not for him.

But I’ve never accepted “no” as an end. For me, it’s a beginning. A dare. A fuse.

I went home burning. I began researching obsessively. Somewhere, somehow, someone must have a solution. And then I found it — a training programme near York called From Zero to Hero. Two weeks. Full immersion. Horses, mallets, bruises, and sweat. A baptism.

I packed my bags, took Vesuvio and my mother — the one person who had always believed in me — and we drove north. The landscape shifted, and so did I.

It was brutal. Every morning began with the saddle and ended in aching silence. I had to retrain my body to use a hand that felt foreign and clumsy. I dropped the mallet more times than I could count. I missed every ball for days. My muscles screamed. My ego shrank. But my resolve never wavered.

And slowly, inch by inch, it began to change.

One morning, under grey Yorkshire skies, I swung — and hit. The mallet connected. The ball flew. It was a small moment, but for me it was a symphony. It wasn’t just a ball. It was proof.

I had done it. I had taught my body to defy the rule.

I returned to Windsor not as a guest or observer, but as a player. I didn’t need to announce it. I didn’t need applause. My presence on the field was enough. My silence was my crown.

And then, during one of the summer matches, I looked across the field and saw them: Prince William and Prince Harry, mounted, galloping across the pitch with that effortless grace that only birth can confer. A few metres away, seated in the royal enclosure, was the Queen herself.

And there I was — a man born in a working-class flat in Naples, who once couldn’t afford a home, whose childhood was ruptured by absence and shame — standing on the same grass. Holding the same mallet. Playing the same game.

In that moment, I didn’t feel like an imposter.

I felt seen. Not by them. By him. The little boy inside me. The one who had survived it all.

And for once, he wasn’t watching from the sidelines.

He was finally part of the game.

Chapter Z: An Impostor at Court

And then came the day I stepped beyond even the most elaborate illusion — and into something I could never have staged.

It was at Coworth Park Hotel, not far from Windsor and the Royal Ascot grounds — a place I would often visit with my dog, Vesuvio. That day, I had been invited by Audi, and a driver arrived at my Chelsea flat to collect me in the latest model — sleek, understated, the embodiment of curated power. It all felt like something out of a scene I'd written for myself — a perfect ascent. We arrived at Coworth for a polo match. Not just any match. Prince William and Prince Harry were playing.

During the break in play, I excused myself and headed toward the restrooms. And it was there — in the most unlikely of places — that I found myself face to face with both Princes.

There was only one sink, and there they were, side by side, laughing, splashing water at each other like schoolboys. There was no entourage, no press, no rehearsed smiles. Just two brothers, in their crisp whites, pushing each other playfully with that unguarded intimacy you only ever see between siblings who trust each other completely.

I stood frozen, not out of reverence, but astonishment. What do you say when history walks in beside you and starts washing its hands?

I tried to speak, and what came out was:

"The soap dispenser's not working."

Prince William turned to me, grinned, and said with the dry warmth only the British have mastered:

"Well, it's all for show here."

And we all laughed — genuinely. No ceremony, no awkwardness. Just three men and a broken dispenser.

What struck me more than the surrealism was their humanness. It was only a week after Prince George had been born. And here was the future King of England, elbow-deep in water, chuckling with his brother, completely unaware of the impact this moment would have on a stranger watching him.

There was so much I wanted to say. I wanted to tell him how his story had moved me. How his wife's courage, his brother's vulnerability, and his own quiet dignity had helped me feel less alone. I wanted to speak of her.

Princess Diana.

I never met her, but I've felt her presence all my life.

From the first time I saw her on television as a child, I was transfixed. She wasn't acting like royalty — she was redefining it. She didn't dominate a room; she opened it. She didn't claim perfection; she embodied truth.

She became a beacon for those of us who struggled in silence. She spoke openly about depression, bulimia, loneliness, and the unbearable weight of pretending. She didn't just wear

crowns — she wore pain and turned it into compassion. In a world of polished facades, she made rawness regal.

And for those of us who were also wearing masks, trying to fit into worlds that weren't built for us — she was our lighthouse.

She hugged children with AIDS when others recoiled. She walked through minefields to show the world that no one is expendable. She took the wounds that palace walls tried to hide and offered them back to the people as gifts of understanding.

In my darkest hours — when I felt unlovable, unanchored, invisible — I would remember her. Not because she was perfect. But because she wasn't and didn't pretend to be. She was grace in grief. Strength in softness.

And if Prince William, or Prince Harry, should ever read this — I hope they know that their mother wasn't just beloved. She was a sanctuary. For so many of us. She saved lives with nothing more than honesty and presence. If this book ever reaches her son — if he remembers that day in the restroom when a stranger pointed out a broken soap dispenser — I want him to know: his mother was a queen to those who had no crowns. And for me, in a time when I had no compass, she was the north.

The Princess of Hearts.

Not lost.

Never forgotten.

Always loved.

I wish I could have told her that.

But maybe, through this page, I finally am.

Part 3 – The Duke and the Portrait

The invitation came like a spark from a dream that had waited patiently all my life to be lived. It was the 60th anniversary of the Guards Polo Club, the very club founded by His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh. In honour of the occasion, the Duke himself had decided to host a private reception at Windsor Castle — exclusively for club members.

I was one of them.

This was no gala for the masses, no spectacle for cameras or column inches. It was quiet, regal, deeply British — a gathering where lineage and loyalty spoke louder than fame. And I, Alessandro Grassini, the boy from Naples who had once stared at royal family trees like they were fairy tales, was on the list.

I brought a guest — one of my dearest friends, and also one of my most cherished clients. She was, in every sense, royalty in her own right: a Dubai-born woman of high lineage, a Gemini like me, and coincidentally, like the Duke himself. She was dazzling. Younger than me, radiant with life, dressed in a summer gown that shimmered with colour and chaos, draped in every jewel I had ever sold her. She wore them that evening as a tribute to me — and in doing so, she made the entire room hers. Heads turned. She didn't just arrive. She entered.

I picked her up in Holland Park, where she lived, and we were driven by Audi's latest model — not an Uber, not a black cab — but with ceremony and care. I remember gazing out the window as we approached Windsor. I was nervous and light-headed. I wasn't just entering a place; I was crossing into something sacred. I had studied this place for years — not just its stone and history, but its bloodline, its rituals. I had once owned a massive printout of the British Royal Family tree, something I would read obsessively as a child, tracing names and family crests as if decoding a secret, I somehow belonged to. Now I was walking into it.

Windsor Castle itself was both less and more than I expected. We didn't enter through the grand ceremonial archways you see in films or postcards — no, it was a side entrance, tucked and restrained, almost monastic. We climbed a long staircase, subdued and unceremonious, and at the bottom we surrendered our mobile phones. No pictures were allowed. There was only one official photographer, and any photo we wanted would need to be requested later. The memory, it seemed, had to live in the mind — not on a screen.

Inside, however, was another world entirely. The state reception room opened before us like a stage that had waited decades for its next act. Tall ceilings, impossibly polished floors, floral arrangements that spoke of ancient wealth and refined taste. And then, like clockwork, he entered.

The Duke of Edinburgh.

He moved through the crowd with measured grace — not stiff, but certainly regal. A man who had been photographed so many times he no longer noticed flashes that weren't there. He smiled, chatted, paused, listened. My eyes followed him; my feet almost moved of their own accord. But every time I tried to approach, there was this one man — a shadow, a silent wall — who always seemed to block my path. At first I was irritated. This man had no idea how much I needed this moment, how much it meant to me.

What I hadn't realised — what the little boy from Naples, the one who memorised family trees but missed the living rules of royal protocol — didn't know, was that I couldn't simply approach a royal. I had to be introduced. The man who had been standing between us wasn't trying to obstruct me. He was the gatekeeper. And finally, sensing my sincerity, my eagerness, perhaps even my harmless obsession, he turned to me and asked gently, "Would you like to speak to His Royal Highness?"

I nodded; breath caught in my chest.

He asked my name, and the name of the guest I had brought. Then he turned and performed the necessary magic: "Your Royal Highness, may I present Mr. Alessandro Grassini and his guest."

And there I was. Face to face with a man whose titles filled pages, but whose gaze was human. Curious. Warm.

He asked about Naples. About polo. About horses. I spoke — not nervously, not awkwardly, but with the kind of poise born only from someone who had rehearsed this moment in the theatre of his imagination for years. I spoke of polo like it had been my lifelong pursuit, when only months before I had first picked up a mallet and been told I could never play. He was gracious. Interested. Amused, perhaps, by my passion.

He showed us through the state dining room. It was already dressed for some grand future event — vast arrangements of silver vases and candelabra adorned the table. It was breath-taking. But what truly stole my breath was the painting above the fireplace: Queen Victoria.

She loomed like a guardian over the room, and for a moment, I felt I wasn't just in the presence of a Duke — I was in conversation with the past. All those hours spent tracing her name on family trees, dreaming of royal lineage, of thrones and traditions, they collapsed into this one moment.

And yet, right there, in that room — I felt like an imposter.

Like a liar. A fraud. A DooLittle in disguise.

I was the boy who didn't speak English, the boy from a modest Neapolitan family who sometimes had money and, most often, didn't. My parents worked hard — harder than the world ever gave them credit for. I was the boy who dissociated, who created imaginary kingdoms inside his head to survive the reality outside his window. And here I was — disassociating again, surrounded by nobles and tapestries and tapestries of history, half-floating in disbelief.

When I was a teenager, I had that family tree poster above my desk — a huge, printed lineage of the British royal family. Every time I lifted my head from my studies, I looked up at that chart. I would dream of Henry VIII and his doomed wives, of Anne Boleyn and the tower, of Richard the Lionheart and the Crusades, of Elizabeth I and her lonely majesty, of Mary, Bloody Mary, and Mary Queen of Scots, with her tragic grace and terrible destiny.

And now I was breathing the same air. Walking the same corridors. Inhabiting — if only for a moment — the fantasy that had once protected me from the ache of reality.

I felt like Eliza Doolittle. Not for her accent, but for her defiance. For her willingness to try. I had no beauty, no crown. But I had stubbornness. I had resilience. I had carved a path with bare hands and trembling hope.

And for a fleeting moment — I was part of history.

But even then, part of me was terrified. My English — was it good enough? My grammar — would it fail me mid-sentence? Would I say something absurd, some working-class Neapolitan version of "bloomin' 'ell", and shatter the illusion?

The Prince was too elegant, too measured for vulgarity. We were different generations. Different galaxies.

Still, I feared being found out. Not because I had lied — but because I had dared to believe I belonged.

And then, like every fairytale I've ever lived, the curtain came down.

After the champagne, after the bows and thank-yous, after the car had dropped us off, I was back in my little flat. My friend returned to her world of privilege, and I returned to Vesuvio, my Labrador, and the quiet thrum of solitude.

That's the thing about dreams. When they end, you fall.

The buzz of the event lingered for a moment — that exquisite flash of dopamine. But soon, it was gone. And the crash that followed felt almost unbearable. I had done it. I had walked among royalty, shaken the hand of a prince. But the voice inside me — the one that lives in the ADHD mind — whispered, "What's next?"

There was no time to linger in victory. I was already planning the next impossibility. Because that's the truth of how my brain works. For someone with ADHD, "no" isn't a dead end. It's an invitation to climb over the wall. I had never had much money. I had no birthright to these circles. But I had curiosity. I had will. I had the refusal to accept limits.

And I had always dared.

Because when you spend a lifetime not fitting in, you learn to remake the world until it fits you.

And so I stood there, before Queen Victoria's portrait, and thought, I made it.

But in the back of my mind, another voice whispered, Did I really?

And perhaps, that's the real truth I took with me that day — not a photo, not a souvenir, but a truth I hadn't expected. For all my studies, for all the hours spent poring over royal family trees and imagining their lives like they were gods, I had never once considered the most human thing of all:

That they were just like me.

Flawed. Passionate. Frightened. Carrying skeletons in tailored suits. They were not divine. They were not untouchable. They were born into duty, into myth, into performance — just as I had learned to perform, to become what the world needed me to be.

That day, I finally understood, they had nothing more than I had. And maybe, in some ways, I had more — because I had to fight to be there.

And I thought of Diana. I'm sure she felt it. That ache of unbelonging. That mask of grace worn to hide the roar of doubt. But I also wondered — what about the others? Had William, Harry, Charles — had they ever looked in the mirror and thought, they'll find me out. They'll realise I'm not enough. I'm a fraud.?

That terrifying, choking fear — of being seen, but not accepted — is not reserved for the broken or the poor. It's a universal wound. And for those who live under the world's gaze, it becomes unbearable.

And so that was the lesson. The moment I had waited my whole life for didn't prove I was less than them. It taught me that no one is more than anyone else.

And maybe — just maybe — I had belonged all along.

Letter to My Father: The Peter Pan Who Was My First Heartbreak

Dear Dad,

You were my first hero.

Not a perfect one, not even a reliable one — but the kind that glowed from the inside out. You lit up rooms with laughter, with charm, with brilliant ideas that dazzled people, even if the follow-through never came. You had the soul of Peter Pan and the mind of a visionary, and yet, somehow, we were always just one step away from collapse. From eviction. From silence. From shame.

And yet I loved you.

You were misunderstood, not malicious. Never cruel — except perhaps in your absence, in your promises that turned into vanishing acts. You partnered with the wrong people, trusted too easily, dreamed too big without securing the ground beneath your feet. And because of that, there were years I lived with nothing. Debts, threats, eviction letters, the fear of picking up the phone. I remember the weight of unpaid bills, of dreams that turned into burdens on my mother's back — and mine. We lost homes because of you. And I lost a sense of home inside myself for a long, long time.

But I never stopped loving you.

Because you never stopped loving us — just not always in the way we needed.

You were the father who could never say no, and so I believed you. Every time. That the bike would come, the toy, the trip, the promise. I believed you, and I told the world, proudly, innocently — only to have to hide, lie, and shrink when the truth didn't arrive. I stopped trusting the world, Dad. And worse — I stopped trusting myself.

For that, I forgive you. But please understand that forgiveness took a lifetime.

Because that little boy, the one who waited at the window, still lives inside me. The one who turned shame into imagination. Who turned hunger into sparkle. Who turned fear into performance. That boy loved you more than anything — and he couldn't hate you, no matter how much it hurt.

Because you made me laugh like no one else ever has. God, the laughs.

After all these years, what I miss most is the sound of us laughing together. No words needed. Just that shared spark in our eyes, that secret language between father and son. A look, a grin, a knowing. You gave me that.

And I took it with me.

I became, in many ways, the man you wanted to be. I built the shows, the events, the dreams — but I made sure someone paid for them. I was careful. Strategic. I didn't leave others to pick up the bill. And even though I don't have children of my own, I carried the burden you didn't: I kept a roof over my head. I created homes — beautiful ones — because you taught me what it feels like to lose them. I nested in every space I touched, turned every flat into a sanctuary, because I was terrified of ever being homeless again.

Your recklessness became my responsibility. Your chaos became my control.

And yet… you were so loved.

Even after you were gone, people came to me — people I didn't know — telling me how you had helped them, quietly, generously, without ever mentioning it to us. You gave so much. You just didn't know how to give to yourself — or how to stay.

Your ending was brutal. That sudden collapse, the surgery that stole your legs, the wound that never closed. I was in London when it happened. You were my age now. And suddenly, you couldn't walk. I rushed home. I gave up my life for ten months. I worked in the restaurant — your restaurant — the one I hated as a child.

It was hot like hell. It was July and August in Naples, nearly 40 degrees outside, and I was standing by the grill making sandwiches and burgers, working until three in the morning — just like you and mum used to. Then I'd come home, and there you were, in that awful bed we'd turned your bedroom into, like a hospital ward. I'd sit beside you, keeping you company because you couldn't sleep.

And sometimes, at night, you needed transfusions. I remember, with my partner at the time, hopping on buses and rushing from hospital to hospital, pleading, banging on doors, demanding blood. I remember going mad with desperation, knowing that blood meant life. And when we finally got it, I would sit up all night, making sure the transfusion didn't clot, that every drop entered your veins — because that was what kept you alive. That was what kept you with me.

And I never saw that as a sacrifice. I did it with all my love. I would do it again, a thousand times, because you were — and still are — my hero.

There were only two times in my life I ever lied to you. Just two.

The first was when you were dying and you asked me if I remembered that day — that terrible day when you beat me as a child, without reason. And I said I didn't remember. But I did. Every second of it. ADHD remembers in colours, in pain, in sound. But I chose to lie to protect you. Because you were asking for forgiveness with tears in your eyes. Because you had a month left to live.

And the second time I lied was when I promised I would take you to London — to show you the city I had chosen to live in. We both knew that wasn't going to happen. Your body couldn't make it. But that lie… that lie was sacred. In our crazy little world, it kept the hope alive. It gave us something to hold on to. I don't regret it.

Those were the only two lies I ever told you.

And you? You lied to me so many times. It was almost your nature. It wasn't cruel. It was compulsive — like a child trying not to be caught. That Peter Pan inside you, so terrified of being discovered. Of being seen for who he really was. But Dad, at the end — we did discover you. We saw you. We understood. And we were still there.

Even after you left us with enormous debts, even after Mum and I had to work ourselves raw just to save the last family home — the one you and Mum, with a lifetime of sacrifices, managed to buy — even then, we stayed. We carried you. We carried your legacy.

You said you were worried about me — that I wasn't stable, that I didn't have a job. But you were projecting, Dad. I have been many things — wild, impulsive, emotional — but never homeless. Never lost. You showed me how to survive, and I did.

You taught me to love cinema, to adore 007. And guess what? I went to a James Bond premiere at the Royal Albert Hall — walked the red carpet. You weren't there, but you were. You were beside me. That night was for you.

You always said yes, even when you couldn't deliver. But you said yes with your eyes, your laughter, your belief in me. And that belief stayed. I was told by customers that you used to talk about me all the time, with pride in your eyes. That you believed I would do great things.

And I have. With all my flaws, all my mistakes — I have. Because I'm your son.

And Dad, I never told you this, but I know you carried your own wounds. You were bullied as a child for being overweight, and I know that marked you. I think that was your deepest trauma. And maybe because of that, when I came out to you as gay — you didn't flinch. You didn't hesitate. You just smiled. You accepted me more fully, more freely, than I had ever accepted myself. That moment changed me. You didn't ask questions. You didn't shame me. You just loved me. The same way you always did — without conditions, without judgment.

You and Mum were the greatest gifts I could've asked for. Because of your struggles, because of your pain — in your own singular, imperfect, human ways — you both learned not to judge. But to accept. And that saved me. You accepted me and all my extravagance, all my flair, all my over-the-top ways — because you loved me. Because you saw me. You gave me the one thing I craved most in the world: to be known and still loved.

And now that I am your age, now that I too am facing illness — cancer, like you — I understand things differently. I understand that the body breaks, but the spirit doesn't have to. You smiled through pain. You laughed through loss. You never gave up your inner child. You showed me there is another way to face sorrow — through joy, through absurdity, through the innocence of a Peter Pan who never really grew up.

You never grew up, Dad. And in a way, neither have I. But I've learned from your story. I've rewritten parts of it. And I carry you with me — not as a wound, but as a flame.

You were my father. My friend. My chaos. My compass.

I hope you're proud of who I became.

I'll keep laughing. For both of us.

With all my love,

Your son

Appendix B: When the White Tiara Fell — and I Rose Without It

A Memoir of Glamour, Grief, and the Quietest Victory

I'd say that all my life, I felt compelled to help others — because I was helped when I needed it the most.

I lived in New York during the early '90s. All through that decade, I watched friends die of AIDS. Men who had danced with me, kissed me, loved me, held me — withered in hospital beds while the world turned away. I lost so many that I stopped counting. I stopped allowing myself to count. So I made a silent promise: if I made it through, if I ever found power, I'd use it. I'd give back.

And I did.

I made sure every company I worked for gave money to AIDS charities. I convinced luxury brands to support causes they'd never dared speak about before. I used my creativity, my charisma, my fire — all of it, undiagnosed ADHD included — to open doors that weren't meant for people like me.

Then one day, I saw the invitation: Elton John's annual White Tiara Ball.

A table cost a fortune. But I convinced the company I was working with at the time to sponsor it. Not for publicity. Not for ego. But because it was time. Because I had earned my seat. Because I wanted to stand in the presence of memory and say: I am still here. I didn't forget them.

The night arrived.

I got dressed in my flat, excitement and fear fizzing in my veins. I took a car with clients and colleagues. We drove through the English countryside until we reached his estate. Elton's house rose out of the landscape like something from a fairytale — but bigger. Louder. More extravagant. There was a grand marquee in the garden, filled with round tables and white roses and heart-shaped neon lights. The whole thing pulsed like a living memory.

Before the dinner, they played a short film — scenes from the early years of the AIDS crisis: children dying. Men in hospice. Fear. Loss. Defiance. I sat in silence, tears running down my face. No one at the table noticed. Or if they did, they didn't speak.

Because I was still performing.

At my table were people I'd seen only in magazines. Jerry Hall, luminous and statuesque, wore an ivory silk gown that shimmered with the kind of grace only a woman who's seen it all and survived it all can wear. At one point, she leaned over and said in her honeyed drawl, "Darlin', it's the kind of party where you just hope the tiara doesn't slip off while you're dancing."

I raised my glass and replied, "If it does, I'll be the first to catch it — and maybe wear it for a minute."

We laughed.

Across from us sat Ivana Trump, regal and theatrical, her blonde mane coiffed to perfection, her Italian lover at her side. She looked at the menu and sighed, “I hope they serve something with real flavour. These charity menus can be so... polite.”

Jerry quipped, “As long as there’s dessert, I forgive everything.”

And I added, “If there’s no glitter, I’m starting a revolution.”

And there it was — the mask. Witty, dazzling, charming Alex. The host. The jester. The boy who made everyone feel more fabulous by being even more fabulous himself.

But inside, I wasn’t laughing.

Inside, I felt like a fraud. Because no matter how high I climbed, part of me always believed I didn’t belong. I knew the truth: my bank account wasn’t like theirs. My childhood wasn’t like theirs. My ghosts weren’t like theirs. But another truth also emerged that night — one I didn’t expect.

They were just as broken.

Just as haunted.

Maybe more.

Later in the evening, Chris Martin performed. He wore white trainers — I remember them vividly. At one point, he invited the crowd to join him on a small stage near Elton’s table, and people surged forward. I found myself up there too, suddenly, somehow, with my arm around him and his around me, both of us jumping in rhythm while he sang. He was much taller than me, but in that moment, I didn’t care. We were shouting lyrics into the air. Hundreds of people bounced with us, and for a moment, it felt like joy.

And then something even stranger happened. I started talking to Grace Jones.

Yes. Grace Jones.

Ageless. Statuesque. A goddess of pure presence. She looked at me with those otherworldly eyes, and I don’t even remember what I said — probably something ridiculous. But I made her laugh. And then we were kissing.

Me. A gay man. French kissing Grace Jones.

It was surreal. Hilarious. Gorgeous. Human.

She tasted like defiance.

I didn’t tell anyone at the table what the night really meant.

Not Jerry. Not Ivana. Not Grace.

But I knew.

That night was mine.

My private rebellion.

My prayer in sequins.

My kiss blown to the stars.

And underneath it all — it was ADHD.

Not the cliché version people still joke about.

But the truth of it.

The emotional dysregulation that made me cry through dinner, silently, unseen.

The impulsivity that made me kiss Grace Jones mid-conversation without thinking.

The performative masking that let me entertain billionaires while breaking inside.

The hyperfocus that let me recall every face from the AIDS crisis like a slideshow on my soul.

The sensory overload — lights, sound, lace, glitter, pressure — all crashing over me like a wave.

And above all, the unbearable injustice.

People with ADHD are allergic to injustice. It doesn't wash off. It burns.

And AIDS — to me — was the greatest injustice of my youth.

People didn't die because they were sick.

They died because they were shamed.

Because they were queer.

Because the world chose silence over empathy.

And I carry that injustice in my blood.

That night, under chandeliers and laughter, I claimed a tiny victory.

A reclamation.

A moment of survival, stitched into the fabric of a costume ball.

But it didn't end there.

Years later, after all the glitter had faded, I found myself in another kind of war.

Trapped in an abusive relationship.

And when I reached out for help — when I needed saving — the very LGBTQ+ organisations built on the legacy of men like me, funded by balls like that one, born from the ashes of AIDS — they failed me.

Galop. The Gaia Centre.

They turned me away.

Because my abuser had registered first.

They called it a conflict of interest.

They didn't investigate.

They didn't ask deeper questions.

They simply dropped me.

I, who had spent decades fighting, organising, giving.

I, who had lost lovers and friends.

I was discarded like a second-class citizen.

And for someone with ADHD, that kind of injustice is unbearable.

We don’t forget.

We don’t “move on.”

We fight.

But at first, I broke.

I was ashamed.

I was terrified.

I was not believed.

And I tried to take my life.

Four times.

In ten months.

Because I truly thought I had been erased.

But something in me — the same fire that got me to that tiara night, that got me through the ’90s, that let me perform when I was breaking — that part of me refused to die.

I failed at dying.

And so, I began to live again.

With rage.

With truth.

With purpose.

Because a neurodivergent mind — even at its lowest — doesn’t forget its cause.

Now, I fight.

Not just for me.

For all of us.

For the silenced.

For the broken.

For the “too much.”

For the unmasked.

I don’t need their validation anymore.

I don’t need to be believed by gatekeepers.

I need to hold them accountable.

And I will.

Because people with ADHD may stumble.

We may get overwhelmed.

We may burn out.

But we rise.

We remember.

We fight.

And now, I fight for you.

The one reading this who has never been heard.

The one who cries in secret.

The one who burns for justice but doesn’t know how to begin.

Begin with this.

You are not broken.

You are not crazy.

You are fire.

And I see you.

Because when the white tiara finally fell,

I rose without it.

Appendix C – Capri: The Siren, the Storm, and the Circle That Closed

Capri is not an island. It is a siren.

She calls to you not with song, but with silence—deep, blue, sun-struck silence that drowns all sound beyond her shores. And once you arrive, you stop hearing the world outside. Time stretches. Memory blurts. What mattered yesterday becomes irrelevant. What hurts you fades into the salt air. You are hers.

She seduces you without permission. And she does not easily let you go.

I lived on that island not as a visitor, but as a man entrusted with building a kingdom of stone, silk, and crocodile skin: a Gucci flagship on Via Camerelle. For nearly eight months I became part of Capri—her mornings, her pulse, her people. I rose before the sun and worked until it sank back behind the cliffs. I ate with the fishermen. I danced with the wind. I shouted into the sea.

And I listened.

To the stories. To the silence. To her.

Capri, for all her beauty, is not a gentle mistress. She has a complicated past. She's not just myth and lemon trees and linen shirts. She's also the echo of empires, scandals, and secrets carved into stone. She holds the ghosts of emperors and the shadows of millionaires.

Above her cliffs, the ruins of Villa Jovis still rest—Tiberius's imperial retreat. It was here, history tells us, that the Roman emperor ruled from exile, surrounded by debauchery and paranoia, flinging enemies from cliffs. But I often wondered… was he really mad? Or had he, too, simply fallen under the island's spell? Had he, too, believed that the world beyond the water no longer mattered?

And then there were the Krupps. The German industrialists who left their imprint not through politics, but paths—literally. Via Krupp, the winding, almost impossibly elegant path carved into the cliffside like a ribbon of stone, was commissioned by Friedrich Alfred Krupp. He loved the island, but the island did not always love him back. Whispers of scandal—affairs with local boys—led to disgrace. And so he left. But the path remains. Beautiful. Wounded.

Every stone in Capri has a memory. Every step has a price.

And yet, I was in love.

With the people most of all. The ones I worked with. My staff. My team. My heart.

They were not just sales assistants or cleaners or stockists. They were family. And as I've said before, I looked after my pips. I always have. I fought for them like a lion. Because I was them. I had scrubbed floors. I had carried trays. I had smiled through pain. And I would never, ever let them be treated as anything less than equal.

So when those above me—regional managers, executives who floated in for two days and then disappeared—treated them like servants, my blood boiled. The ADHD mind is

hypersensitive to injustice. I don't just see it. I feel it. In my skin. In my teeth. I can't stay silent.

And I didn't.

I fought. I roared. I told the truth too loudly, too often. I defended every one of them.

And in the end, it cost me.

I was asked to leave—gently, of course, as always in luxury. Diplomatically. I could resign quietly or be dismissed.

So I resigned.

I gathered my team in the boutique. I looked at them—these women and men who had given everything—and I lied. I told them it was time. That I had other projects waiting. That I had to return to London.

And they cried.

Tears rolled silently down cheeks. I saw the pain in their eyes. I saw how they looked at me—not just as a manager, but as a protector. A brother. A father. I saw the heartbreak. And I felt my own.

Because it was not my choice. Because I had been punished for doing the right thing. Again.

Like Vesuvius erupting without warning, I had exploded—raw, principled, furious. And as always, it was me who paid the price.

But even in defeat, I had won something far more valuable than a promotion or a salary.

I had won them.

Their trust. Their admiration. Their love. And no title could ever compare.

I remember walking through the alleyways of Capri alone after that. Watching the sea shimmer with that impossible turquoise light. Knowing I would have to leave. But not wanting to. Capri had taken me in. She had shown me her soul. I had lived as one of her sons. Not as a visitor. Not as a conqueror.

I had belonged.

And now, I had to say goodbye.

But Capri wasn't finished with me.

Years later—during the strange, surreal pause of COVID—fate circled back.

Just before the second lockdown, I met a man who would change me.

Let’s call him Mr. T.

He was tall, sophisticated, fluent in more languages than I could count. A man of elegance and history, with kind eyes and a sharp mind. He moved between Milan, Paris, and Capri—his soul scattered like stardust across Europe. But what made him extraordinary was not his charm or his clothes or his culture.

It was this: he loved me for who I was.

Not the mask. Not the performer. Not the charismatic host at Windsor or the charming boutique director.

He loved me.

The messy me. The impulsive me. The creative, explosive, exhausted, wounded, ADHD me.

And as the pandemic crept back across Italy, Mr. T invited me to stay with him in his family’s house in Capri.

What he didn’t realise—what I didn’t tell him right away—was that the house he brought me to was once Mariah Carey’s.

Yes. The same house she stayed in when she recorded albums on the island. The same house where, years before, I had written her a note on Gucci paper, invited her to our store, and watched her light up the night.

And now, I was sleeping in that house.

Cooking in that kitchen.

Lying awake under those same ceilings, with a new kind of peace.

It was like a circle closing—perfectly, silently, impossibly.

There, in that house, with Mr. T, I found something I had never felt before: rest.

Not sleep. Not escape. But real, emotional rest. I didn’t have to entertain. I didn’t have to shine. I didn’t have to perform. I could cry. I could cook. I could collapse. I could be held.

Capri had brought me full circle.

From ambition to exhaustion. From devotion to loss. From heartbreak to healing.

And when I walked through Via Camerelle again, hand in hand with Mr. T, I didn’t feel like a ghost anymore. I felt human. Whole. Seen.

The island hadn’t betrayed me. She had simply tested me. And in the end, she had brought me home.

Capri is the siren. The storm. The sanctuary.

She sings to the broken and the brilliant.

And if you're lucky—if you listen—she shows you who you really are.

Coda – The Island That Holds the Moon

The second lockdown should have broken me. The first nearly did—trapped in a flat in London, pacing like a caged tiger, dopamine-starved and sunlight-deprived. But the second? The second I spent in Capri.

Not in fantasy. In geography. In heart. In myth.

Mr. T and I walked the island. Ten walks. Ten pilgrimages. The Fortini in Anacapri, winding like ancient veins. We hiked from the cliffs down to Lo Capo, where the stone pier jutted into solitude and the waves whispered more than language ever could.

One day, we ventured to Villa Lysis—the opium-scented sanctuary built by Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, a man who fled scandal in Paris and sought beauty and boys on this island of sirens.

There, Mr. T asked me: "Have you seen the bronze statue?"

We walked slowly through the gardens, past the ionic columns and the view of the Faraglioni, until we reached it: the barefoot boy, cast in bronze, gazing eternally out to sea. The locals say he was Fersen's lover, or muse, or perhaps just a memory made flesh. No plaque explains him. But Capri doesn't explain anything. It seduces, it suggests, and it holds.

Villa Lysis wasn't just a villa. It was an altar to forbidden desire, hidden pain, and a love that defied time. I stood there in the fog of December humidity, overwhelmed by beauty and melancholy, and I thought: This island keeps every secret. But it shares them, too, if you walk slowly enough.

From there we descended, through tangled paths that felt more rainforest than Mediterranean. The rocks were wet, the air thick. Mr. T danced down like a goat, laughing. I stumbled behind, breathless, aching, but alive. We reached Lo Capo, lay on the stone, and watched the tide shimmer under a moonless sky. There were no tourists. Just the sea, and us.

And we talked.

About everything and nothing. About art, Brazil, God, desire, betrayal, jewellery, history, perfume, memory. Our love was new but ancient, simple but true. There were no masks between us. No need for performance. Just presence.

And in Capri, presence is the most precious thing.

Capri. They say the name comes from Kapros, meaning wild boar. Others say it comes from the Greek Kapros or the Latin Capraeae, "goat island." But I don't believe either.

I believe it comes from incanto—the Italian for enchantment. Because that's what it does. It enchants.

It is not volcanic like Ischia or Procida. It rose from limestone, shaped by wind and wave, not eruption. And yet, it erupts something inside you. A longing. A fury. A peace. A memory that never happened but feels like it did.

From the ruins of Villa Jovis, you can see the whole island. That was Tiberius's seat. A place of exile, of paranoia, of pleasure. Some say he killed lovers by throwing them from the cliffs. Others say he simply went mad from too much solitude. I wonder if he too fell in love with the island—and forgot there was a world outside it. Capri does that. It unhooks you from time. It traps you in beauty. And what a lovely trap it is.

One night, Mr. T took me to Villa Malaparte, built by Curzio Malaparte, the author of La Pelle. The villa juts into the sea like a red dagger. From above, it looks like a falchion, a blade pointing toward the Faraglioni. The view from the terrace is not just a view—it's a statement. There, Malaparte wrote his truths about war, fascism, flesh. Truths soaked in irony and blood. And we slept there one night. Just once. But I still dream of it.

Another night, we dined at a restaurant carved into the cliffs, known only to those who live on the island. The path is lit only by the moon, and when it is full—when the Capo di Luna glows red over the sea—dining there is like floating through a dream directed by Fellini.

There were few tables. No noise. The moon lit the waves like fire. We ate simply—grilled fish, lemons, white wine. And yet, it was a feast fit for eternity. That is what ADHD gives you, sometimes. Not just intensity—but clarity. The ability to absorb beauty in unbearable amounts. To never forget.

I took my mother there later. Just the two of us. I needed to build a memory. For when she would forget. For when I would be alone.

Capri has a memory longer than time.

The Gift of Mr. T, the Spirit of Brazil

With Mr. T, the journey didn't end in Capri. It continued—and deepened—in Brazil.

He gave me not just his heart, but his country. And in Brazil, everything is alive.

We travelled together—through cities and silence, through the green breath of the rainforest, through small towns that looked like whispers on the map but opened like symphonies when you arrived. We explored only a fraction of it, yet I felt as if I had tasted an entire new way of being. I still ache to return. There is so much more to see. So much more to learn. So much more to feel.

In the north, during the rainy season, we drove a rented Fiat Uno through the backroads near Cavalcante and Santa Bárbara—a region sacred with waterfalls, over six hundred of them, cascading like Earth's tears of joy. It was raw and wild, and one afternoon we got stuck in the mud, tyres spinning helplessly, trapped in red earth. We laughed. Then worried. Then surrendered.

And then they came.

Locals from the distant village—people who had nothing to gain—came barefoot through the rain. Covered in clay and kindness, they threw themselves into the mud just to help us. No reward asked. No complaint. Just quiet solidarity.

That moment taught me more than a thousand luxury events ever could.

Brazil reminded me of what Western civilisation has forgotten: That to help another is sacred. That kindness is not currency. That community is not a hashtag—it is a heartbeat.

We stayed in a remote area near a Buddhist retreat created by one of Mr. T's cousins—a space of silence and renewal, where people came to meditate and reconnect with something older than themselves. That's where I was meant to experience ayahuasca for the first time.

We talked about it often—how it opens the self, purges pain, reconnects you with Earth and with ancestors. But when the moment came… I couldn't. I was afraid. Of what I'd see. Of who I'd become. I regret not doing it. Maybe one day I still will. Maybe I needed to learn, first, that not everything sacred requires surrender.

But that place… that land… that memory… it still changed me. Even without the medicine.

Mr. T taught me about Iemanjá, the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the sea, celebrated like a Virgin Mary with a crown of waves. Every 2nd of February, the beaches fill with people in white, offering flowers and gratitude. They thank her for protection, for fertility, for the mercy of the ocean. They dance. They cry. They float candles into the dark.

It's Catholicism and Africa. Spirit and salt. A living mythology.

And once again, my ADHD mind, wired for wonder, absorbed it all like gold.

And then there was my birthday.

I've always provided for others. Always been the giver. And I've never really had a proper birthday. Not like the ones I imagined as a child, eyes wide with longing, hoping to be celebrated. Seen.

But Mr. T gave me that.

On 13 June—Saint Anthony's Day, the day of the lost things found—he gave me the celebration I never dared to ask for.

A party in the old Mariah Carey house in Capri, now his. Tiered cake. Flowers. Light. Laughter. The music of joy. It was everything I'd never received, delivered all at once with grace. And for once, I didn't have to earn it.

I just had to receive.

He spoiled me in a way that didn't diminish me. It restored me.

And then, of course, my ADHD did what it often does: it sabotaged the very thing it loved most. The fear of being loved. The inability to hold it without doubting it. We fought. We ended.

But love doesn't always end.

We're talking again now. After the silence, the distance, the terrible things said in pain. And even if we never go back to what we had, I need to say it here, clearly, honestly:

Mr. T, you have always been my heart. You are the person I have loved most deeply. You are the person I have cared for most fully. And you gave me the rarest gift of all: The feeling of being loved for who I am, not who I pretend to be.

For that, I will always be grateful.

Poem: The Island That Took My Name

Capri is not an island. She is an oath, whispered in marble. She is the wet stone under your feet and the memory of a kiss that never happened.

She is the siren who does not sing— only watches, as you drown in light.

She does not love you. She devours you gently. And when you are gone, she leaves your soul folded in a fig tree for someone else to find.

In her, I was performer and protector, lover and liar, manager and magician.

I left the boutique. But I never left the island.

Because she took my name and hid it in her cliffs. And some nights, when the moon bleeds over the sea, I hear her whisper:

You are mine. And I remember.

Appendix A: The Grand Illusion and even Greater Delusion

The ballroom at the Dorchester was a universe of my own creation, born from a week of sleepless mania. Thirty minutes before the doors opened, the silence was electric, thick with the scent of lilies and potential. This was my ritual: the final, frantic inspection, the last sweep of a general before the battle. My heart wasn't beating with excitement; it was hammering with the brutal, metallic rhythm of adrenaline and fear. I had convinced the jewelry brand this was possible. I had charmed the gallery owners on Bond Street into a partnership. I had leveraged Baryshnikov's art to create a halo of prestige. I had done it all without them spending a penny, a magic trick of negotiation and sheer will. They thought I was a genius. They didn't know I hadn't slept. They didn't know the entire event had been a terrifying, abstract idea until seven days ago, when a wave of panic finally gave it form. Procrastination wasn't a habit; it was my muse. My mind, I knew, wasn't interested if there wasn't some kind of drama, some impossible deadline to make the creativity catch fire. The anxiety, the panic attacks—they were the fuel. My eyes scanned the room, a human magnifying glass for flaws. I moved past the velvet ropes and the perfectly lit vitrines where the jewelry glittered like captured stars. I saw it instantly—a single napkin on table seven, folded into a bishop's mitre when it should have been a fan. A detail no one would ever notice. A detail that felt like a scream. As one of my staff rushed to fix it, I felt a tremor of control, a fleeting sense of order imposed upon chaos. Everything was immaculate. It had to be.

Then, the doors opened.

And I flipped the switch.

The boy who couldn’t open bank statements vanished. In his place stood the charming host, the witty Italian, the man who could talk about "anything of everything and nothing." I greeted guests by name, making each one feel as though they were the only person in the room.

The climax of the evening arrived under the flashbulb pops of the red carpet. There I was, standing beside Mikhail Baryshnikov himself. He turned to me, his famous eyes holding a genuine respect. "The way this has been put together," he said, his voice low and appreciative, "it's more than an event. It is a piece of skilled work in its own right." A laugh erupted from me, loud and real. Because as he said "skilled work," my mind flashed to a memory from just eight days prior: me, in my flat at 3 a.m., staring at a blank page, realizing with a surge of pure terror that I hadn't even compiled a guest list. But in that moment, laughing with Baryshnikov, the terror was gone, replaced by a dizzying, brilliant joy.

I was gliding through the crowd, a whirlwind of air kisses and shared laughter. I found myself chatting with Stanley Tucci about his passion for Italy and its food. "The simplicity is what's so hard to get right," he said, and I knew exactly what he meant. I leaned in conspiratorially. "If you ever make Spaghetti alla Nerano," I told him, "the secret isn't just the provolone. You have to fry the zucchini in batches until they are almost burnt, then let them marinate in their own steam. That's what creates the cream." He looked at me, intrigued, and we were just two men talking about pasta, the performance so natural I almost believed it myself.

Later, I was drawn into a circle with Kim Cattrall and Bianca Jagger. Bianca was reminiscing about Studio 54, and her stories of the seventies were legendary. "Oh, Studio 54," I said, my eyes lighting up. "I have my own story about that place." They both leaned in, captivated.

"This was much later, maybe twenty years ago," I began. "I was much younger then, and I know I would turn eyes, a realisation I only achieved when it was too late and I wasn't so young anymore. My family was visiting me in New York City, and it was my mother's birthday. I wanted to give her nothing but the best, so I took them to see Cabaret—my favourite show—which had turned the entire Studio 54 into a proper cabaret club, with round tables surrounding the stage. Of course, I couldn't afford it. It took huge sacrifices. But it didn't matter. What mattered was making my mother proud, making my family happy. The bills would come later. Like Scarlett O'Hara, I decided I'd think about it tomorrow. After all, tomorrow is another day—a sentence I've used to justify a lifetime of procrastination."

I continued, "We had a table right at the front. The whole show, the Master of Ceremonies was looking at me, flirting with his eyes and his movements, and I was flirting right back. At the end, when the cast came out for their well-deserved applause, he looked directly at me, grinned, and said, 'Oh, what the hell!' He came down off the stage, took my hand, and pulled me up to dance with him." Their eyes were wide. "I couldn't believe it," I said, the memory still vivid. "Me, the little boy who'd listen to Liza Minnelli's records over and over in his bedroom in Italy, was now on stage at Studio 54, dancing with the Master of Ceremonies in front of a standing ovation!" I looked at Bianca, my smile wide and genuine. "So, you see," I concluded, "I can say I actually danced on Broadway too in my life." The laughter that followed was warm and loud. Kim Cattrall was shaking her head in disbelief.

In that moment, surrounded by them, little Alessandro felt his dream finally come true. I saw myself from the outside—this man, at the center of it all—and thought of the small boy who learned about the world through a screen. Now, the who's who of London high society was here, and they were all here because I had made the magic happen.

But then the limelights went down. The last of the town cars whispered away from the curb, and the magic dissolved into the cold night air. The dopamine and adrenaline that had fueled my performance for a week didn't just fade; it was leached from my system, leaving an emptiness so vast it felt like an abyss. The silence descended. The nothing. For an ADHD mind that has just surfed a tsunami of stimulation, this sudden void is not peace. It is the poison that powers the depression.

In the ringing silence of the empty ballroom, I wasn't the successful host anymore. I was back in front of that black-and-white television. I saw the dazzling, almost frantic glitter of Raffaella Carrà and the impossible sophistication of Mina, singing through a haze of cigarette smoke held in her iconic mouthpiece. She seemed to be singing only for him, for the little boy who felt everything. The glitz, the glamour, the untouchable joy—he was desperate to feel it, to capture it, to become it. And here I was, having done it. I had touched the dream. Yet, as the lights went out at the Dorchester, I was left with the same feeling as that child: a hollow, aching solitude and the bitter taste of a happiness that was just a performance. The magic was gone, and little Alessandro was still there, in the dark, seeking a happiness that never truly came.

Hours later, I returned to my flat, the adrenaline finally gone, leaving only the buzzing exhaustion. I dropped my keys on the pile of mail, the sound muffled by the sheer volume of

paper. The tuxedo felt like a costume. The praise from the party echoed in the silence, but it couldn't fill it. There was no sense of triumph. There was only the quiet terror of the aftermath. I had delivered. I had made it. But the magician was spent, the trick was over, and I was left alone with the one thing I couldn't charm, couldn't negotiate with, and couldn't control: the paralyzing weight of a life deferred. I stared at the unopened letters, each one a monument to my own chaos, and understood the terrifying truth of my gift. I could create magic for the world, but I couldn't seem to save myself.

Part 1: The Strategy – Forging the Key

It began, as my best plans often did, with a quiet moment of observation. As a humble boy from Naples now navigating the world of high jewellery and luxury retail in London, I knew I needed a new stage, a new way of connecting with clients that was truthful to who I was. I studied the multimillionaires I was meant to serve—these titans from Russia, from the Middle East, who had built empires through sheer force of will. I saw their esteem for their own status and hard work, but I also looked deeper, for the craving that lay beneath. I understood that what drew them to this country, beyond the elite schools for their children, was the one thing their immense wealth could not manufacture: access to the mystique of the British Royal Family. That was the key. To give them a taste of that exclusivity, to make them feel part of an inner sanctum in this famously classist, monarchical society, would be invaluable. London's power structure was built around its private members' clubs, fortresses of legacy and status. I knew then that I had to do anything in my power to become a member. I convinced my company that this was a necessary investment. They agreed to sponsor me, and so the campaign began.

It took time, of course. For each of the major clubs I targeted—Annabelle's, Lulu's, and The Arts Club—you needed to be sponsored by two existing members of high standing. I pulled triggers. I met the right people, deployed the Italian charm, and made my case. And they sponsored me. Within a few months, I received the membership cards for all three.

But being in the club wasn't the endgame; it was merely the opening move. I had to be remembered. I had to build a persona of power, an illusion so seamless it became reality. I would go to one of the clubs almost every night, dining alone if I had to. I would chat with the waiters, the sommeliers, the maître d's, learning their names and making sure they learned mine. It was a ritual. Soon, I no longer needed to reserve a table. A nod at the door was all it took. "Mr. Grassini, a pleasure," they would say, guiding me to my usual spot, my preferred wine appearing before I asked. That was the performance, and this was its purpose. I would invite a potential client to dine with me—a billionaire who, despite his fortune, could never get past the front door on his own. With me, he could. We would enter like royalty. They would greet me by name, and by extension, they would greet my guest with the same deference. We would sit at our table, and perhaps at the next table would be Tom Cruise, or a minor royal holding court. For my clients, this was El Dorado. I was giving them precisely what they wanted, and in return, they gave me what I needed: the sales. It was a mutual understanding between businessmen.

But this was not a trick. It was not manipulation. It was an illusion built on a foundation of absolute truth. I have always been lied to, have always been promised things that never arrived, and I despised that trait in my father. I became his opposite. If I talked, it was because I knew, and if I knew, it was because I could deliver. These men, these millionaires, could read right through a puppet; they knew a real person when they saw one. My honesty

was my greatest asset. Within the theatre I had created, my word was my bond, and trust was everything. And it was this reputation that would eventually lead me past the doors of London's clubs, and into the grounds of Windsor itself.

Part 2: Liza Doolittle at Court

There are moments in life when you realise you haven't simply entered a room — you've crossed a threshold. And yet no one notices. No fanfare. No spotlight. Just a quiet shift in atmosphere, as if the air itself has acknowledged that you now belong.

That threshold, for me, was Windsor.

After months perfecting my presence in the golden triangle of Mayfair's private members' clubs — Annabel's, Lulu's, and The Arts Club — I had begun to understand the deeper architecture of British power. It wasn't just about luxury. It was about lineage. Ritual. Terrain. And there was one place where all of it converged, wrapped in silent prestige and pastoral grace: the Guards Polo Club. Founded by His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh and set inside the grounds of Windsor Great Park, the Guards Polo Club wasn't merely exclusive. It was sacred. Not just a polo ground, but a royal theatre — where power was not shouted, but whispered on horseback. To become a member there wasn't just a social elevation. It was a rite of passage. And so, as I had done with the clubs in London, I studied. I observed. I applied. And, eventually, I was accepted.

Every Sunday, I would drive there with Vesuvio, my golden Labrador — my gentle, loyal companion and my living talisman. Not in a Fiat. Those days were gone. I arrived in a Land Rover, the same model the Queen herself would drive through the grounds, side by side with Prince Philip, to watch the matches. It wasn't about mimicry. It was about fluency. The right gesture, the right silhouette, the right silence — all of it said: I understand where I am. I understand how this works. And I did. Not because I had been born into it, but because I had earned it, learned it, built it — brick by invisible brick. I would park among the Bentleys and Aston Martins without flinching. I knew the staff by name, and they knew mine. The guards nodded. The members smiled. I was no longer a visitor. I was part of the scene. Quietly. Strategically. Absolutely.

But watching had never been enough for me. From the very first match I attended, I was spellbound. The sport was like nothing I'd ever seen — the thunder of hooves against the manicured turf, the swift choreography of man and beast, the raw elegance of it all. Polo wasn't just a game. It was a code. A language. And I had to speak it.

I decided I would learn to play.

It began as a casual inquiry — a private lesson, nothing too ambitious. I arrived early, suited up, nerves hidden behind charm. I picked up the mallet instinctively with my left hand. The instructor — a seasoned man with a military posture and the half-smile of someone used to delivering unwelcome truths — looked at me. "Are you left-handed?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, still hopeful.

"Then I'm afraid you can't play polo," he said flatly. "Polo is played only with the right hand."

The words fell like a hammer. Not because of what they were, but because of what they echoed. That ancient, familiar sound: No. You can't. You're not allowed here. It was as if the gate had been slammed shut again — the same gate I'd watched close as a child when our home was sealed by a judge, when my father's promises evaporated, when my toys disappeared and never returned. That boy was still inside me, and he knew the weight of being told that something was not for him.

But I've never accepted "no" as an end. For me, it's a beginning. A dare. A fuse.

I went home burning. I began researching obsessively. Somewhere, somehow, someone must have a solution. And then I found it — a training programme near York called From Zero to Hero. Two weeks. Full immersion. Horses, mallets, bruises, and sweat. A baptism.

I packed my bags, took Vesuvio and my mother — the one person who had always believed in me — and we drove north. The landscape shifted, and so did I.

It was brutal. Every morning began with the saddle and ended in aching silence. I had to retrain my body to use a hand that felt foreign and clumsy. I dropped the mallet more times than I could count. I missed every ball for days. My muscles screamed. My ego shrank. But my resolve never wavered.

And slowly, inch by inch, it began to change. One morning, under grey Yorkshire skies, I swung — and hit. The mallet connected. The ball flew. It was a small moment, but for me it was a symphony. It wasn't just a ball. It was proof. I had done it. I had taught my body to defy the rule.

I returned to Windsor not as a guest or observer, but as a player. I didn't need to announce it. I didn't need applause. My presence on the field was enough. My silence was my crown.

And then, during one of the summer matches, I looked across the field and saw them: Prince William and Prince Harry, mounted, galloping across the pitch with that effortless grace that only birth can confer. A few metres away, seated in the royal enclosure, was the Queen herself. And there I was — a man born in a working-class flat in Naples, who once couldn't afford a home, whose childhood was ruptured by absence and shame — standing on the same grass. Holding the same mallet. Playing the same game.

In that moment, I didn't feel like an imposter.

I felt seen. Not by them. By him. The little boy inside me. The one who had survived it all. And for once, he wasn't watching from the sidelines. He was finally part of the game.

Chapter Z: An Impostor at Court

And then came the day I stepped beyond even the most elaborate illusion — and into something I could never have staged. It was at Coworth Park Hotel, not far from Windsor and the Royal Ascot grounds — a place I would often visit with my dog, Vesuvio. That day, I had been invited by Audi, and a driver arrived at my Chelsea flat to collect me in the latest model — sleek, understated, the embodiment of curated power. It all felt like something out of a scene I'd written for myself — a perfect ascent.

We arrived at Coworth for a polo match. Not just any match. Prince William and Prince Harry were playing.

During the break in play, I excused myself and headed toward the restrooms. And it was there — in the most unlikely of places — that I found myself face to face with both Princes. There was only one sink, and there they were, side by side, laughing, splashing water at each other like schoolboys. There was no entourage, no press, no rehearsed smiles. Just two brothers, in their crisp whites, pushing each other playfully with that unguarded intimacy you only ever see between siblings who trust each other completely.

I stood frozen, not out of reverence, but astonishment. What do you say when history walks in beside you and starts washing its hands? I tried to speak, and what came out was: "The soap dispenser's not working."

Prince William turned to me, grinned, and said with the dry warmth only the British have mastered: "Well, it's all for show here." And we all laughed — genuinely. No ceremony, no awkwardness. Just three men and a broken dispenser.

What struck me more than the surrealism was their humanness. It was only a week after Prince George had been born. And here was the future King of England, elbow-deep in water, chuckling with his brother, completely unaware of the impact this moment would have on a stranger watching him.

There was so much I wanted to say. I wanted to tell him how his story had moved me. How his wife's courage, his brother's vulnerability, and his own quiet dignity had helped me feel less alone.

I wanted to speak of her.

Princess Diana.

I never met her, but I've felt her presence all my life. From the first time I saw her on television as a child, I was transfixed. She wasn't acting like royalty — she was redefining it. She didn't dominate a room; she opened it. She didn't claim perfection; she embodied truth. She became a beacon for those of us who struggled in silence. She spoke openly about depression, bulimia, loneliness, and the unbearable weight of pretending. She didn't just wear crowns — she wore pain, and turned it into compassion. In a world of polished facades, she made rawness regal. And for those of us who were also wearing masks, trying to fit into worlds that weren't built for us — she was our lighthouse. She hugged children with AIDS when others recoiled. She walked through minefields to show the world that no one is expendable. She took the wounds that palace walls tried to hide and offered them back to the people as gifts of understanding.

In my darkest hours — when I felt unlovable, unanchored, invisible — I would remember her. Not because she was perfect. But because she wasn't, and didn't pretend to be. She was grace in grief. Strength in softness.

And if Prince William, or Prince Harry, should ever read this — I hope they know that their mother wasn't just beloved. She was a sanctuary. For so many of us. She saved lives with nothing more than honesty and presence.

If this book ever reaches her son — if he remembers that day in the restroom when a stranger pointed out a broken soap dispenser — I want him to know: his mother was a queen to those who had no crowns. And for me, in a time when I had no compass, she was the north. The Princess of Hearts. Not lost. Never forgotten. Always loved.

I wish I could have told her that. But maybe, through this page, I finally am.

Part 3 – The Duke and the Portrait

The invitation came like a spark from a dream that had waited patiently all my life to be lived. It was the 60th anniversary of the Guards Polo Club, the very club founded by His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh. In honour of the occasion, the Duke himself had decided to host a private reception at Windsor Castle — exclusively for club members. I was one of them. This was no gala for the masses, no spectacle for cameras or column inches. It was quiet, regal, deeply British — a gathering where lineage and loyalty spoke louder than fame. And I, Alessandro Grassini, the boy from Naples who had once stared at royal family trees like they were fairy tales, was on the list.

I brought a guest — one of my dearest friends, and also one of my most cherished clients. She was, in every sense, royalty in her own right: a Dubai-born woman of high lineage, a Gemini like me, and coincidentally, like the Duke himself. She was dazzling. Younger than me, radiant with life, dressed in a summer gown that shimmered with colour and chaos, draped in every jewel I had ever sold her. She wore them that evening as a tribute to me — and in doing so, she made the entire room hers. Heads turned. She didn't just arrive. She entered.

I picked her up in Holland Park, where she lived, and we were driven by Audi's latest model — not an Uber, not a black cab — but with ceremony and care. I remember gazing out the window as we approached Windsor. I was nervous and light-headed. I wasn't just entering a place; I was crossing into something sacred. I had studied this place for years — not just its stone and history, but its bloodline, its rituals. I had once owned a massive printout of the British Royal Family tree, something I would read obsessively as a child, tracing names and family crests as if decoding a secret I somehow belonged to. Now I was walking into it.

Windsor Castle itself was both less and more than I expected. We didn't enter through the grand ceremonial archways you see in films or postcards — no, it was a side entrance, tucked and restrained, almost monastic. We climbed a long staircase, subdued and unceremonious, and at the bottom we surrendered our mobile phones. No pictures were allowed. There was only one official photographer, and any photo we wanted would need to be requested later. The memory, it seemed, had to live in the mind — not on a screen.

Inside, however, was another world entirely. The state reception room opened before us like a stage that had waited decades for its next act. Tall ceilings, impossibly polished floors, floral arrangements that spoke of ancient wealth and refined taste. And then, like clockwork, he entered.

The Duke of Edinburgh.

He moved through the crowd with measured grace — not stiff, but certainly regal. A man who had been photographed so many times he no longer noticed flashes that weren't there.

He smiled, chatted, paused, listened. My eyes followed him, my feet almost moved of their own accord. But every time I tried to approach, there was this one man — a shadow, a silent wall — who always seemed to block my path. At first I was irritated. This man had no idea how much I needed this moment, how much it meant to me. What I hadn't realised — what the little boy from Naples, the one who memorised family trees but missed the living rules of royal protocol — didn't know, was that I couldn't simply approach a royal. I had to be introduced. The man who had been standing between us wasn't trying to obstruct me. He was the gatekeeper. And finally, sensing my sincerity, my eagerness, perhaps even my harmless obsession, he turned to me and asked gently, "Would you like to speak to His Royal Highness?"

I nodded, breath caught in my chest. He asked my name, and the name of the guest I had brought. Then he turned and performed the necessary magic: "Your Royal Highness, may I present Mr. Alessandro Grassini and his guest."

And there I was. Face to face with a man whose titles filled pages, but whose gaze was human. Curious. Warm.

He asked about Naples. About polo. About horses. I spoke — not nervously, not awkwardly, but with the kind of poise born only from someone who had rehearsed this moment in the theatre of his imagination for years. I spoke of polo like it had been my lifelong pursuit, when only months before I had first picked up a mallet and been told I could never play. He was gracious. Interested. Amused, perhaps, by my passion.

He showed us through the state dining room. It was already dressed for some grand future event — vast arrangements of silver vases and candelabra adorned the table. It was breath-taking. But what truly stole my breath was the painting above the fireplace: Queen Victoria. She loomed like a guardian over the room, and for a moment, I felt I wasn't just in the presence of a Duke — I was in conversation with the past. All those hours spent tracing her name on family trees, dreaming of royal lineage, of thrones and traditions, they collapsed into this one moment.

And yet, right there, in that room — I felt like an imposter. Like a liar. A fraud. A DooLittle in disguise. I was the boy who didn't speak English, the boy from a modest Neapolitan family who sometimes had money and, most often, didn't. My parents worked hard — harder than the world ever gave them credit for. I was the boy who dissociated, who created imaginary kingdoms inside his head to survive the reality outside his window. And here I was — disassociating again, surrounded by nobles and tapestries and tapestries of history, half-floating in disbelief.

When I was a teenager, I had that family tree poster above my desk — a huge, printed lineage of the British royal family. Every time I lifted my head from my studies, I looked up at that chart. I would dream: of Henry VIII and his doomed wives, of Anne Boleyn and the tower, of Richard the Lionheart and the Crusades, of Elizabeth I and her lonely majesty, of Mary, Bloody Mary, and Mary Queen of Scots, with her tragic grace and terrible destiny. And now I was breathing the same air. Walking the same corridors. Inhabiting — if only for a moment — the fantasy that had once protected me from the ache of reality.

I felt like Eliza Doolittle. Not for her accent, but for her defiance. For her willingness to try. I had no beauty, no crown. But I had stubbornness. I had resilience. I had carved a path with bare hands and trembling hope. And for a fleeting moment — I was part of history.

But even then, part of me was terrified. My English — was it good enough? My grammar — would it fail me mid-sentence? Would I say something absurd, some working-class Neapolitan version of "bloomin' 'ell", and shatter the illusion? The Prince was too elegant, too measured for vulgarity. We were different generations. Different galaxies. Still, I feared being found out. Not because I had lied — but because I had dared to believe I belonged.

And then, like every fairytale I've ever lived, the curtain came down. After the champagne, after the bows and thank-yous, after the car had dropped us off, I was back in my little flat. My friend returned to her world of privilege, and I returned to Vesuvio, my Labrador, and the quiet thrum of solitude.

That's the thing about dreams. When they end, you fall. The buzz of the event lingered for a moment — that exquisite flash of dopamine. But soon, it was gone. And the crash that followed felt almost unbearable. I had done it. I had walked among royalty, shaken the hand of a prince. But the voice inside me — the one that lives in the ADHD mind — whispered, "What's next?" There was no time to linger in victory. I was already planning the next impossibility. Because that's the truth of how my brain works. For someone with ADHD, "no" isn't a dead end. It's an invitation to climb over the wall. I had never had much money. I had no birthright to these circles. But I had curiosity. I had will. I had the refusal to accept limits. And I had always dared. Because when you spend a lifetime not fitting in, you learn to remake the world until it fits you.

And so I stood there, before Queen Victoria's portrait, and thought, I made it. But in the back of my mind, another voice whispered, Did I really? And perhaps, that's the real truth I took with me that day — not a photo, not a souvenir, but a truth I hadn't expected. For all my studies, for all the hours spent poring over royal family trees and imagining their lives like they were gods, I had never once considered the most human thing of all: That they were just like me. Flawed. Passionate. Frightened. Carrying skeletons in tailored suits. They were not divine. They were not untouchable. They were born into duty, into myth, into performance — just as I had learned to perform, to become what the world needed me to be. That day, I finally understood: they had nothing more than I had. And maybe, in some ways, I had more — because I had to fight to be there.

And I thought of Diana. I'm sure she felt it. That ache of unbelonging. That mask of grace worn to hide the roar of doubt. But I also wondered — what about the others? Had William, Harry, Charles — had they ever looked in the mirror and thought, They'll find me out. They'll realise I'm not enough. I'm a fraud.? That terrifying, choking fear — of being seen, but not accepted — is not reserved for the broken or the poor. It's a universal wound. And for those who live under the world's gaze, it becomes unbearable.

And so that was the lesson. The moment I had waited my whole life for didn't prove I was less than them. It taught me that no one is more than anyone else. And maybe — just maybe — I had belonged all along.

Letter to My Father: The Peter Pan Who Was My First Heartbreak

Dear Dad,

You were my first hero. Not a perfect one, not even a reliable one — but the kind that glowed from the inside out. You lit up rooms with laughter, with charm, with brilliant ideas that dazzled people, even if the follow-through never came. You had the soul of Peter Pan and the mind of a visionary, and yet, somehow, we were always just one step away from collapse. From eviction. From silence. From shame.

And yet I loved you.

You were misunderstood, not malicious. Never cruel — except perhaps in your absence, in your promises that turned into vanishing acts. You partnered with the wrong people, trusted too easily, dreamed too big without securing the ground beneath your feet. And because of that, there were years I lived with nothing. Debts, threats, eviction letters, the fear of picking up the phone. I remember the weight of unpaid bills, of dreams that turned into burdens on my mother's back — and mine. We lost homes because of you. And I lost a sense of home inside myself for a long, long time.

But I never stopped loving you.

Because you never stopped loving us — just not always in the way we needed. You were the father who could never say no, and so I believed you. Every time. That the bike would come, the toy, the trip, the promise. I believed you, and I told the world, proudly, innocently — only to have to hide, lie, and shrink when the truth didn't arrive. I stopped trusting the world, Dad. And worse — I stopped trusting myself.

For that, I forgive you. But please understand: that forgiveness took a lifetime. Because that little boy, the one who waited at the window, still lives inside me. The one who turned shame into imagination. Who turned hunger into sparkle. Who turned fear into performance. That boy loved you more than anything — and he couldn't hate you, no matter how much it hurt.

Because you made me laugh like no one else ever has. God, the laughs. After all these years, what I miss most is the sound of us laughing together. No words needed. Just that shared spark in our eyes, that secret language between father and son. A look, a grin, a knowing. You gave me that. And I took it with me.

I became, in many ways, the man you wanted to be. I built the shows, the events, the dreams — but I made sure someone paid for them. I was careful. Strategic. I didn't leave others to pick up the bill. And even though I don't have children of my own, I carried the burden you didn't: I kept a roof over my head. I created homes — beautiful ones — because you taught me what it feels like to lose them. I nested in every space I touched, turned every flat into a sanctuary, because I was terrified of ever being homeless again. Your recklessness became my responsibility. Your chaos became my control.

And yet… you were so loved. Even after you were gone, people came to me — people I didn't know — telling me how you had helped them, quietly, generously, without ever mentioning it to us. You gave so much. You just didn't know how to give to yourself — or how to stay.

Your ending was brutal. That sudden collapse, the surgery that stole your legs, the wound that never closed. I was in London when it happened. You were my age now. And suddenly, you couldn't walk. I rushed home. I gave up my life for ten months. I worked in the restaurant — your restaurant — the one I hated as a child. It was hot like hell. It was July and August in Naples, nearly 40 degrees outside, and I was standing by the grill making sandwiches and burgers, working until three in the morning — just like you and mum used to. Then I'd come home, and there you were, in that awful bed we'd turned your bedroom into, like a hospital ward. I'd sit beside you, keeping you company because you couldn't sleep. And sometimes, at night, you needed transfusions. I remember, with my partner at the time, hopping on buses and rushing from hospital to hospital, pleading, banging on doors, demanding blood. I remember going mad with desperation, knowing that blood meant life. And when we finally got it, I would sit up all night, making sure the transfusion didn't clot, that every drop entered your veins — because that was what kept you alive. That was what kept you with me.

And I never saw that as a sacrifice. I did it with all my love. I would do it again, a thousand times, because you were — and still are — my hero.

There were only two times in my life I ever lied to you. Just two. The first was when you were dying and you asked me if I remembered that day — that terrible day when you beat me as a child, without reason. And I said I didn't remember. But I did. Every second of it. ADHD remembers in colours, in pain, in sound. But I chose to lie to protect you. Because you were asking for forgiveness with tears in your eyes. Because you had a month left to live.

And the second time I lied was when I promised I would take you to London — to show you the city I had chosen to live in. We both knew that wasn't going to happen. Your body couldn't make it. But that lie… that lie was sacred. In our crazy little world, it kept the hope alive. It gave us something to hold on to. I don't regret it.

Those were the only two lies I ever told you.

And you? You lied to me so many times. It was almost your nature. It wasn't cruel. It was compulsive — like a child trying not to be caught. That Peter Pan inside you, so terrified of being discovered. Of being seen for who he really was. But Dad, at the end — we did discover you. We saw you. We understood. And we were still there. Even after you left us with enormous debts, even after Mum and I had to work ourselves raw just to save the last family home — the one you and Mum, with a lifetime of sacrifices, managed to buy — even then, we stayed. We carried you. We carried your legacy.

You said you were worried about me — that I wasn't stable, that I didn't have a job. But you were projecting, Dad. I have been many things — wild, impulsive, emotional — but never homeless. Never lost. You showed me how to survive, and I did.

You taught me to love cinema, to adore 007. And guess what? I went to a James Bond premiere at the Royal Albert Hall — walked the red carpet. You weren't there, but you were. You were beside me. That night was for you.

You always said yes, even when you couldn't deliver. But you said yes with your eyes, your laughter, your belief in me. And that belief stayed. I was told by customers that you used to talk about me all the time, with pride in your eyes. That you believed I would do great things. And I have. With all my flaws, all my mistakes — I have. Because I'm your son.

And Dad, I never told you this, but I know you carried your own wounds. You were bullied as a child for being overweight, and I know that marked you. I think that was your deepest trauma. And maybe because of that, when I came out to you as gay — you didn't flinch. You didn't hesitate. You just smiled. You accepted me more fully, more freely, than I had ever accepted myself. That moment changed me. You didn't ask questions. You didn't shame me. You just loved me. The same way you always did — without conditions, without judgment.

You and Mum were the greatest gifts I could've asked for. Because of your struggles, because of your pain — in your own singular, imperfect, human ways — you both learned not to judge. But to accept. And that saved me. You accepted me and all my extravagance, all my flair, all my over-the-top ways — because you loved me. Because you saw me. You gave me the one thing I craved most in the world: to be known, and still loved.

And now that I am your age, now that I too am facing illness — cancer, like you — I understand things differently. I understand that the body breaks, but the spirit doesn't have to. You smiled through pain. You laughed through loss. You never gave up your inner child. You showed me there is another way to face sorrow — through joy, through absurdity, through the innocence of a Peter Pan who never really grew up. You never grew up, Dad. And in a way, neither have I. But I've learned from your story. I've rewritten parts of it. And I carry you with me — not as a wound, but as a flame. You were my father. My friend. My chaos. My compass.

I hope you're proud of who I became. I'll keep laughing. For both of us.

With all my love,

Your son

Appendix B: When the White Tiara Fell — and I Rose Without It

A Memoir of Glamour, Grief, and the Quietest Victory

I'd say that all my life, I felt compelled to help others — because I was helped when I needed it the most.

I lived in New York during the early '90s. All through that decade, I watched friends die of AIDS. Men who had danced with me, kissed me, loved me, held me — withered in hospital beds while the world turned away. I lost so many that I stopped counting. I stopped allowing myself to count. So I made a silent promise: if I made it through, if I ever found power, I'd use it. I'd give back.

And I did.

I made sure every company I worked for gave money to AIDS charities. I convinced luxury brands to support causes they'd never dared speak about before. I used my creativity, my charisma, my fire — all of it, undiagnosed ADHD included — to open doors that weren't meant for people like me.

Then one day, I saw the invitation: Elton John's annual White Tiara Ball.

A table cost a fortune. But I convinced the company I was working with at the time to sponsor it. Not for publicity. Not for ego. But because it was time. Because I had earned my seat. Because I wanted to stand in the presence of memory and say: I am still here. I didn't forget them.

The night arrived.

I got dressed in my flat, excitement and fear fizzing in my veins. I took a car with clients and colleagues. We drove through the English countryside until we reached his estate. Elton's house rose out of the landscape like something from a fairytale — but bigger. Louder. More extravagant. There was a grand marquee in the garden, filled with round tables and white roses and heart-shaped neon lights. The whole thing pulsed like a living memory.

Before the dinner, they played a short film — scenes from the early years of the AIDS crisis: children dying. Men in hospice. Fear. Loss. Defiance. I sat in silence, tears running down my face. No one at the table noticed. Or if they did, they didn't speak.

Because I was still performing.

At my table were people I'd seen only in magazines. Jerry Hall, luminous and statuesque, wore an ivory silk gown that shimmered with the kind of grace only a woman who's seen it all and survived it all can wear. At one point, she leaned over and said in her honeyed drawl, "Darlin', it's the kind of party where you just hope the tiara doesn't slip off while you're dancing."I raised my glass and replied, "If it does, I'll be the first to catch it — and maybe wear it for a minute."

We laughed.

Across from us sat Ivana Trump, regal and theatrical, her blonde mane coiffed to perfection, her Italian lover at her side. She looked at the menu and sighed, "I hope they serve something with real flavour. These charity menus can be so... polite."Jerry quipped, "As long as there's dessert, I forgive everything."And I added, "If there's no glitter, I'm starting a revolution."

And there it was — the mask. Witty, dazzling, charming Alex. The host. The jester. The boy who made everyone feel more fabulous by being even more fabulous himself.

But inside, I wasn't laughing.

Inside, I felt like a fraud. Because no matter how high I climbed, part of me always believed I didn't belong. I knew the truth: my bank account wasn't like theirs. My childhood wasn't like theirs. My ghosts weren't like theirs. But another truth also emerged that night — one I didn't expect.

They were just as broken.

Just as haunted.

Maybe more.

Later in the evening, Chris Martin performed. He wore white trainers — I remember them vividly. At one point, he invited the crowd to join him on a small stage near Elton's table, and people surged forward. I found myself up there too, suddenly, somehow, with my arm around him and his around me, both of us jumping in rhythm while he sang. He was much taller than me, but in that moment, I didn't care. We were shouting lyrics into the air. Hundreds of people bounced with us, and for a moment, it felt like joy.

And then something even stranger happened. I started talking to Grace Jones.

Yes. Grace Jones.

Ageless. Statuesque. A goddess of pure presence. She looked at me with those otherworldly eyes, and I don't even remember what I said — probably something ridiculous. But I made her laugh. And then we were kissing.

Me. A gay man. French kissing Grace Jones.

It was surreal. Hilarious. Gorgeous. Human.She tasted like defiance.

I didn't tell anyone at the table what the night really meant.Not Jerry. Not Ivana. Not Grace.

But I knew.

That night was mine. My private rebellion.My prayer in sequins.My kiss blown to the stars.

And underneath it all — it was ADHD.

Not the cliché version people still joke about.

But the truth of it.

The emotional dysregulation that made me cry through dinner, silently, unseen.

The impulsivity that made me kiss Grace Jones mid-conversation without thinking.

The performative masking that let me entertain billionaires while breaking inside.

The hyperfocus that let me recall every face from the AIDS crisis like a slideshow on my soul.

The sensory overload — lights, sound, lace, glitter, pressure — all crashing over me like a wave.

And above all, the unbearable injustice.

People with ADHD are allergic to injustice. It doesn't wash off. It burns.And AIDS — to me — was the greatest injustice of my youth.

People didn't die because they were sick. They died because they were shamed.Because they were queer.Because the world chose silence over empathy.

And I carry that injustice in my blood.

That night, under chandeliers and laughter, I claimed a tiny victory.A reclamation.A moment of survival, stitched into the fabric of a costume ball.

But it didn't end there.

Years later, after all the glitter had faded, I found myself in another kind of war.Trapped in an abusive relationship.

And when I reached out for help — when I needed saving — the very LGBTQ+ organisations built on the legacy of men like me, funded by balls like that one, born from the ashes of AIDS — they failed me.

Galop. The Gaia Centre. They turned me away.Because my abuser had registered first.They called it a conflict of interest.

They didn't investigate. They didn't ask deeper questions. They simply dropped me.

I, who had spent decades fighting, organising, giving.I, who had lost lovers and friends.I was discarded like a second-class citizen.

And for someone with ADHD, that kind of injustice is unbearable.

We don't forget. We don't "move on." We fight.

But at first, I broke.

I was ashamed.I was terrified.I was not believed.

And I tried to take my life. Four times. In ten months.

Because I truly thought I had been erased.

But something in me — the same fire that got me to that tiara night, that got me through the '90s, that let me perform when I was breaking — that part of me refused to die.

I failed at dying. And so I began to live again.

With rage.With truth.With purpose.

Because a neurodivergent mind — even at its lowest — doesn't forget its cause.

Now, I fight. Not just for me.For all of us.

For the silenced.For the broken.For the "too much."For the unmasked.

I don't need their validation anymore. I don't need to be believed by gatekeepers.

I need to hold them accountable.

And I will.

Because people with ADHD may stumble.We may get overwhelmed.We may burn out.But we rise.We remember.We fight.

And now, I fight for you.

The one reading this who has never been heard.The one who cries in secret.The one who burns for justice but doesn’t know how to begin.

Begin with this.

You are not broken.You are not crazy.You are fire.And I see you.

Because when the white tiara finally fell,I rose without it.

Appendix C – Capri: The Siren, the Storm, and the Circle That Closed

Capri is not an island.

It is a siren.

She calls to you not with song, but with silence—deep, blue, sun-struck silence that drowns all sound beyond her shores. And once you arrive, you stop hearing the world outside. Time stretches. Memory blurts. What mattered yesterday becomes irrelevant. What hurts you fades into the salt air. You are hers.

She seduces you without permission. And she does not easily let you go.

I lived on that island not as a visitor, but as a man entrusted with building a kingdom of stone, silk, and crocodile skin: a Gucci flagship on Via Camerelle. For nearly eight months I became part of Capri—her mornings, her pulse, her people. I rose before the sun and worked until it sank back behind the cliffs. I ate with the fishermen. I danced with the wind. I shouted into the sea.

And I listened.

To the stories.

To the silence.

To her.

Capri, for all her beauty, is not a gentle mistress. She has a complicated past. She's not just myth and lemon trees and linen shirts. She's also the echo of empires, scandals, and secrets carved into stone. She holds the ghosts of emperors and the shadows of millionaires.

Above her cliffs, the ruins of Villa Jovis still rest—Tiberius's imperial retreat. It was here, history tells us, that the Roman emperor ruled from exile, surrounded by debauchery and paranoia, flinging enemies from cliffs. But I often wondered… was he really mad? Or had he, too, simply fallen under the island's spell? Had he, too, believed that the world beyond the water no longer mattered?

And then there were the Krupps. The German industrialists who left their imprint not through politics, but paths—literally. Via Krupp, the winding, almost impossibly elegant path carved into the cliffside like a ribbon of stone, was commissioned by Friedrich Alfred Krupp. He loved the island, but the island did not always love him back. Whispers of scandal—affairs with local boys—led to disgrace. And so he left. But the path remains. Beautiful. Wounded.

Every stone in Capri has a memory. Every step has a price.

And yet, I was in love.

With the people most of all. The ones I worked with. My staff. My team. My heart.

They were not just sales assistants or cleaners or stockists. They were family. And as I've said before, I looked after my pips. I always have. I fought for them like a lion. Because I was them. I had scrubbed floors. I had carried trays. I had smiled through pain. And I would never, ever let them be treated as anything less than equal.

So when those above me—regional managers, executives who floated in for two days and then disappeared—treated them like servants, my blood boiled. The ADHD mind is hypersensitive to injustice. I don't just see it. I feel it. In my skin. In my teeth. I can't stay silent.

And I didn't.

I fought. I roared. I told the truth too loudly, too often. I defended every one of them.

And in the end, it cost me.

I was asked to leave—gently, of course, as always in luxury. Diplomatically. I could resign quietly or be dismissed.

So I resigned.

I gathered my team in the boutique. I looked at them—these women and men who had given everything—and I lied. I told them it was time. That I had other projects waiting. That I had to return to London.

And they cried.

Tears rolled silently down cheeks. I saw the pain in their eyes. I saw how they looked at me—not just as a manager, but as a protector. A brother. A father. I saw the heartbreak. And I felt my own.

Because it was not my choice. Because I had been punished for doing the right thing. Again.

Like Vesuvius erupting without warning, I had exploded—raw, principled, furious. And as always, it was me who paid the price.

But even in defeat, I had won something far more valuable than a promotion or a salary.

I had won them.

Their trust. Their admiration. Their love. And no title could ever compare.

I remember walking through the alleyways of Capri alone after that. Watching the sea shimmer with that impossible turquoise light. Knowing I would have to leave. But not wanting to. Capri had taken me in. She had shown me her soul. I had lived as one of her sons. Not as a visitor. Not as a conqueror.

I had belonged.

And now, I had to say goodbye.

But Capri wasn't finished with me.

Years later—during the strange, surreal pause of COVID—fate circled back.

Just before the second lockdown, I met a man who would change me.

Let's call him Mr. T.

He was tall, sophisticated, fluent in more languages than I could count. A man of elegance and history, with kind eyes and a sharp mind. He moved between Milan, Paris, and Capri—his soul scattered like stardust across Europe. But what made him extraordinary was not his charm or his clothes or his culture.

It was this: he loved me for who I was.

Not the mask. Not the performer. Not the charismatic host at Windsor or the charming boutique director.

He loved me.

The messy me. The impulsive me. The creative, explosive, exhausted, wounded, ADHD me.

And as the pandemic crept back across Italy, Mr. T invited me to stay with him in his family's house in Capri.

What he didn't realise—what I didn't tell him right away—was that the house he brought me to was once Mariah Carey's.

Yes. The same house she stayed in when she recorded albums on the island. The same house where, years before, I had written her a note on Gucci paper, invited her to our store, and watched her light up the night.

And now, I was sleeping in that house.

Cooking in that kitchen.

Lying awake under those same ceilings, with a new kind of peace.

It was like a circle closing—perfectly, silently, impossibly.

There, in that house, with Mr. T, I found something I had never felt before: rest.

Not sleep. Not escape. But real, emotional rest. I didn't have to entertain. I didn't have to shine. I didn't have to perform. I could cry. I could cook. I could collapse. I could be held.

Capri had brought me full circle.

From ambition to exhaustion.

From devotion to loss.

From heartbreak to healing.

And when I walked through Via Camerelle again, hand in hand with Mr. T, I didn't feel like a ghost anymore. I felt human. Whole. Seen.

The island hadn't betrayed me. She had simply tested me. And in the end, she had brought me home.

Capri is the siren. The storm. The sanctuary.

She sings to the broken and the brilliant.

And if you're lucky—if you listen—she shows you who you really are.

Coda – The Island That Holds the Moon

The second lockdown should have broken me.

The first nearly did—trapped in a flat in London, pacing like a caged tiger, dopamine-starved and sunlight-deprived. But the second? The second I spent in Capri.

Not in fantasy. In geography. In heart. In myth.

Mr. T and I walked the island. Ten walks. Ten pilgrimages.

The Fortini in Anacapri, winding like ancient veins. We hiked from the cliffs down to Lo Capo, where the stone pier jutted into solitude and the waves whispered more than language ever could.

One day, we ventured to Villa Lysis—the opium-scented sanctuary built by Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, a man who fled scandal in Paris and sought beauty and boys on this island of sirens.

There, Mr. T asked me: "Have you seen the bronze statue?"

We walked slowly through the gardens, past the ionic columns and the view of the Faraglioni, until we reached it: the barefoot boy, cast in bronze, gazing eternally out to sea. The locals say he was Fersen's lover, or muse, or perhaps just a memory made flesh. No plaque explains him. But Capri doesn't explain anything. It seduces, it suggests, and it holds.

Villa Lysis wasn't just a villa. It was an altar to forbidden desire, hidden pain, and a love that defied time. I stood there in the fog of December humidity, overwhelmed by beauty and melancholy, and I thought: This island keeps every secret. But it shares them, too, if you walk slowly enough.

From there we descended, through tangled paths that felt more rainforest than Mediterranean. The rocks were wet, the air thick. Mr. T danced down like a goat, laughing. I stumbled behind, breathless, aching, but alive. We reached Lo Capo, lay on the stone, and watched the tide shimmer under a moonless sky. There were no tourists. Just the sea, and us.

And we talked.

About everything and nothing. About art, Brazil, God, desire, betrayal, jewellery, history, perfume, memory. Our love was new but ancient, simple but true. There were no masks between us. No need for performance. Just presence.

And in Capri, presence is the most precious thing.

Capri.

They say the name comes from Kapros, meaning wild boar.

Others say it comes from the Greek Kapros or the Latin Capraeae, “goat island.”

But I don’t believe either.

I believe it comes from incanto—the Italian for enchantment.

Because that’s what it does. It enchants.

It is not volcanic like Ischia or Procida. It rose from limestone, shaped by wind and wave, not eruption. And yet, it erupts something inside you. A longing. A fury. A peace. A memory that never happened but feels like it did.

From the ruins of Villa Jovis, you can see the whole island. That was Tiberius’s seat. A place of exile, of paranoia, of pleasure. Some say he killed lovers by throwing them from the cliffs. Others say he simply went mad from too much solitude. I wonder if he too fell in love with the island—and forgot there was a world outside it. Capri does that. It unhooks you from time. It traps you in beauty. And what a lovely trap it is.

One night, Mr. T took me to Villa Malaparte, built by Curzio Malaparte, the author of La Pelle. The villa juts into the sea like a red dagger. From above, it looks like a falchion, a blade pointing toward the Faraglioni. The view from the terrace is not just a view—it’s a statement. There, Malaparte wrote his truths about war, fascism, flesh. Truths soaked in irony and blood. And we slept there one night. Just once. But I still dream of it.

Another night, we dined at a restaurant carved into the cliffs, known only to those who live on the island. The path is lit only by the moon, and when it is full—when the Capo di Luna glows red over the sea—dining there is like floating through a dream directed by Fellini.

There were few tables. No noise. The moon lit the waves like fire. We ate simply—grilled fish, lemons, white wine. And yet, it was a feast fit for eternity. That is what ADHD gives you, sometimes. Not just intensity—but clarity. The ability to absorb beauty in unbearable amounts. To never forget.

I took my mother there later. Just the two of us. I needed to build a memory. For when she would forget. For when I would be alone.

Capri has a memory longer than time.

The Gift of Mr. T, the Spirit of Brazil

With Mr. T, the journey didn't end in Capri. It continued—and deepened—in Brazil.

He gave me not just his heart, but his country. And in Brazil, everything is alive.

We travelled together—through cities and silence, through the green breath of the rainforest, through small towns that looked like whispers on the map but opened like symphonies when you arrived. We explored only a fraction of it, yet I felt as if I had tasted an entire new way of being. I still ache to return. There is so much more to see. So much more to learn. So much more to feel.

In the north, during the rainy season, we drove a rented Fiat Uno through the backroads near Cavalcante and Santa Bárbara—a region sacred with waterfalls, over six hundred of them, cascading like Earth's tears of joy. It was raw and wild, and one afternoon we got stuck in the mud, tyres spinning helplessly, trapped in red earth. We laughed. Then worried. Then surrendered.

And then they came.

Locals from the distant village—people who had nothing to gain—came barefoot through the rain. Covered in clay and kindness, they threw themselves into the mud just to help us. No reward asked. No complaint. Just quiet solidarity.

That moment taught me more than a thousand luxury events ever could.

Brazil reminded me of what Western civilisation has forgotten:

That to help another is sacred. That kindness is not currency. That community is not a hashtag—it is a heartbeat.

We stayed in a remote area near a Buddhist retreat created by one of Mr. T's cousins—a space of silence and renewal, where people came to meditate and reconnect with something older than themselves. That's where I was meant to experience ayahuasca for the first time.

We talked about it often—how it opens the self, purges pain, reconnects you with Earth and with ancestors. But when the moment came… I couldn't. I was afraid. Of what I'd see. Of who I'd become. I regret not doing it. Maybe one day I still will. Maybe I needed to learn, first, that not everything sacred requires surrender.

But that place… that land… that memory… it still changed me. Even without the medicine.

Mr. T taught me about Iemanjá, the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the sea, celebrated like a Virgin Mary with a crown of waves. Every 2nd of February, the beaches fill with people in white, offering flowers and gratitude. They thank her for protection, for fertility, for the mercy of the ocean. They dance. They cry. They float candles into the dark.

It's Catholicism and Africa. Spirit and salt. A living mythology.

And once again, my ADHD mind, wired for wonder, absorbed it all like gold.

And then there was my birthday.

I've always provided for others. Always been the giver.

And I've never really had a proper birthday. Not like the ones I imagined as a child, eyes wide with longing, hoping to be celebrated. Seen.

But Mr. T gave me that.

On 13 June—Saint Anthony's Day, the day of the lost things found—he gave me the celebration I never dared to ask for.

A party in the old Mariah Carey house in Capri, now his. Tiered cake. Flowers. Light. Laughter. The music of joy. It was everything I'd never received, delivered all at once with grace. And for once, I didn't have to earn it.

I just had to receive.

He spoiled me in a way that didn't diminish me. It restored me.

And then, of course, my ADHD did what it often does: it sabotaged the very thing it loved most. The fear of being loved. The inability to hold it without doubting it. We fought. We ended.

But love doesn't always end.

We're talking again now. After the silence, the distance, the terrible things said in pain. And even if we never go back to what we had, I need to say it here, clearly, honestly:

Mr. T, you have always been my heart.

You are the person I have loved most deeply.

You are the person I have cared for most fully.

And you gave me the rarest gift of all:

The feeling of being loved for who I am, not who I pretend to be.

For that, I will always be grateful.

Poem: The Island That Took My Name

Capri is not an island.

She is an oath, whispered in marble.

She is the wet stone under your feet

and the memory of a kiss that never happened.

She is the siren who does not sing—

only watches,

as you drown in light.

She does not love you.

She devours you gently.

And when you are gone,

she leaves your soul folded in a fig tree

for someone else to find.

In her, I was performer and protector,

lover and liar,

manager and magician.

I left the boutique.

But I never left the island.

Because she took my name

and hid it in her cliffs.

And some nights,

when the moon bleeds over the sea,

I hear her whisper:

You are mine.

And I remember.

Final Reflection – The Hundred Lives of Mr. Grassini]

And now, so must you.

Because this is where the masks fall. The glitter dries. The applause fades. The lights go out. And what remains is the question I have run from all my life: *Who was I when nobody was watching?*

For fifty-four years, I danced around that question. I answered with outfits, business cards, generosity, seduction, jewels, stories, aliases, countries, collapses, reinventions, and above all—silence. Because I didn't know. I didn't know why I couldn't follow through on things that others found easy. Why my moods stormed like Vesuvius. Why I sabotaged the love I craved. Why stillness felt like death. Why even joy exhausted me. I didn't know.

And then I was diagnosed.

ADHD, they said. Dyslexia. Dyscalculia. A trifecta of difference wrapped in charm, panic, creativity, and chaos.

I used to hate labels. They felt like cages. But this one? This one felt like a key.

Not because it changed me. But because it *explained* me.

I am not cured. I don't want to be. There is no cure for being made of lightning. There is only understanding, and perhaps the mercy of no longer blaming yourself for the weather.

I don't write this to teach anyone. I don't write this to sell some magic trick to "manage" your brain. I don't write to fix anything.

I write to *claim* it.

To say: this is my brain. This is my life. And I have lived it. Not halfway. Not politely. Not in grayscale. But in all the colours that existence offers—some dazzling, some devastating.

And I am still standing.

At times, I crawl. But I have never stood still.

Because something inside me refused to.

Some would call it survival instinct. Others would call it madness. I call it Roberta's voice, saying: "Mr. Grassini, with you one never gets bored." I call it divine rebellion. I call it the sacred refusal to be silenced or simplified.

And so I lived. A hundred lives. Maybe a thousand.

I've been the boy with eczema and no words.
I've been the man in Windsor Castle pouring champagne for kings.
I've been the lover, the liar, the left-behind.
I've been the giver of everything, the receiver of too little.

I've been the artist who forgot to eat.
I've been the seller of diamonds who couldn't afford a meal.
I've been the son who lied to protect his father from the truth.
I've been the boy who sang in St. Paul's and wept because magic had gone missing.
I've been the miracle maker and the mess.
I've been me.

And I have learned, finally, that none of these lives cancel the others. They *are* the others. I am not one version. I am all of them.

Like Heraclitus said—*panta rhei.* Everything flows. You cannot step into the same river twice. The same man cannot even step into *himself* twice. Because we are always becoming. Always breaking and re-forming.

And this—this has been my river.

I didn't know that ADHD had shaped every current. I didn't know that the inattention was really hyper-attention to something others didn't see. I didn't know that the impulsive shopping wasn't about greed, but about panic and needing to feel alive. I didn't know that the burnouts weren't because I was lazy, but because I had given everything until I had nothing left. I didn't know that masking was not performance—it was survival.

But now I know.

I know that perfectionism is the child of shame. That silence is the sibling of rage. That rejection sensitivity is not weakness, but a scar from a thousand unseen wounds.

And I know that love—true love—often came too late or too loud or too wrong. But when it was real, I ruined it not because I didn't care, but because I cared too much, and didn't know how to *hold* it without squeezing it to death.

I know now that I am not broken. I was never broken. I was never too much. I was *just enough*—for the right people, in the right moments, when I wasn't trying to contort myself into a template that was never made for me.

This book is not a manual. It's not a cure. It's a coronation.

It's me, finally crowning my difference instead of hiding it.

It's me saying: *Yes. I am not normal. Thank God.*

Because the "not normal" has dreamed things that "normal" could never imagine. Has loved with a ferocity that would terrify most. Has suffered, yes—mutilatingly so. But has *lived*. Not half-alive. Not comfortably numb. But *truly*. With open wounds and open arms.

And if my body now fails me—if, like my father, I have to go—then let this be the record.

Let it be said that Alessandro Grassini lived. Truly, madly, deeply. That he tried. That he gave. That he burned. That he wept. That he laughed so hard the sea could hear it.

Let it be said that he carried his difference like a torch, even when it singed him.

Let it be said that this book is not a goodbye. It is a testimony.

To every boy mocked at school.
To every girl silenced by shame.
To every adult who still wonders what is "wrong" with them—
There is nothing wrong with you. There never was.

The wrongness lies with a world that demands we all behave like machines—efficient, emotionless, uniform.

But we are not machines. We are stars. We are hurricanes. We are snowflakes that never replicate.

And one day, perhaps, the word "different" will be meaningless—because people will finally understand that sameness is the real illusion. That beauty lies in deviation.

Until then, I ask you: don't suffer in silence like I did. Don't wait fifty years to say, "This is me."

Speak. Scream. Write. Dance. Fight. Be heard.

Because when bullies are done with one victim, they move to the next. Don't give them your power. They never deserved it.

You have a voice. Use it.

You are not wrong. You are just...*you*.

And that is the holiest thing you can be.

As for me—this is my life. Not perfect. Not cured. But *claimed*.

I adapted for too long. To survive. To be accepted. To be loved.

Now, I reclaim what was always mine. The right to be different. The right to be difficult. The right to be dazzling. The right to fail and to rise and to fall again.

I don't expect everyone to understand. That's not the goal.

But if anything I've written has helped *one* person feel seen—then it was all worth it.

If it has comforted *one* lonely heart, whispered *you are not crazy*, shown *you are not alone*, then that is enough.

This has been my fight. My voice. My gift.

And now—it is yours.

Carry it forward.

Epilogue – We Were Never Crazy

I didn't need a diagnosis to be real.

I needed it to give a name to what I had already lived.

Not for the world.

Not for the system.

Not for medicine or approval or labels.

I needed it for myself.

And for my mother.

Because too many times, we were told we were wrong, mad, broken.

Too many times, we almost believed it.

But we were never crazy.

We were just misunderstood.

We were just uncontrolled.

And that is something society—especially one drunk on religion, power, and obedience—has never liked.

I am not unfinished.

I am not waiting to be completed, fixed, or corrected.

I am more whole than most people will ever be.

Because I have burned and lived and questioned.

Because I have cried at the sound of a song and raged like a volcano when silenced.

Because I never fitted in—because I never wanted to.

They call people like me neurodivergent.

That word helps.

But I do not need it to define myself.

I refuse to be boxed, indexed, sanitised.

I refuse to be reduced to anything that fits someone else's idea of "normal."

Because what is normal?

A straight line? A quiet room? A beige existence with no fire and no collapse?

Normal is what frightened people say when they want control.

When they want to erase the mystery and the mess and the magic from the world.

We were not made to be normal.

We were made to feel, to create, to rebel, to explode.

Like artists. Like poets. Like the ones who don't comply.

Like my mother, who survived being called crazy and raised me to feel everything.

Like me, who survived the silence and the shame and chose, finally, to speak.

The title stays:

I'm Not Crazy, I've Just Got ADHD.

Because it's not just a statement. It's a sword.

I am finished. I am defined. I am divine.

Not despite my difference. Because of it.

And I will not apologise for the thunder in my bones ever again.

Final Note and Dedication

For every person who ever felt they were too much, too loud, too different — this book is for you.

For every soul who built a fantasy to survive reality, who sparkled to be seen, who kept dancing even when the music stopped — I see you. I honour you.

But most of all, this is for her.

To my mother —

The Barbra, the Liza, the Judy, the Mina, the Raffaella.

The Kylie. The Celine. The Whitney.

The woman who was Jane Fonda in spirit and in beauty, all her life.

Fierce like Barbarella, gracious like a queen.

The most extraordinary woman I've ever known.

She didn't need to say the words.

She saw me — always — with those loving, understanding eyes.

She let me be. And because she did, I became.

For every room that didn't understand me — she was the one who did.

For every time I felt alone — she was my constant.

For every fight I fought — she stood beside me.

Wherever I go in this world, I carry her with me.

Her strength.

Her elegance.

Her fight.

Her love.

Mamma — you are my first magic. My forever home.

Thank you for everything you were.

Everything you are.

And everything you taught me to believe I could be.