TWO OF US

STORY BY *Nicole Partridge* | PHOTOGRAPH BY *Janie Barrett*

<u>Claudia Luca, 31,</u> was diagnosed with a rare condition as a baby which left her unable to conceive children naturally. Her mum <u>Antonietta Di Maggio, 54,</u> volunteered as a surrogate and gave birth to her own grandson.

ANTONIETTA: I always knew Claudia would be a great mother. As a little girl she was so caring and nurturing. When I was pregnant with her brother and had morning sickness, Claudia, who was only three, looked at me with her big brown eyes and said, "Mummy sick?"

But like me, she has an assertive side. I have fond memories of Claudia wearing my heels and lipstick, then directing all her cousins to sit cross-legged on the floor while she pretended to be their teacher.

When it came time to explain to her why she'd been having blood tests and ultrasounds every year, it was like an arrow to my heart. How do you tell an 11-year-old she was born without a uterus?

The teen years were tough for Claudia. She knew she was different to her friends. To her credit, she never said, "I'm never going to have children" – she was such a trooper.

When Claudia met and married Sonny, I put my "Dr Google" hat on and researched everything from overseas adoption to commercial surrogacy, which we learnt was illegal in NSW.

Claudia's sister then offered to be a surrogate, but after being diagnosed with diabetes was advised against it. That's when I thought, "I will carry Claudia's baby."

At first, Claudia and Sonny laughed and made a comment about my age, but agreed to see the specialists who eventually gave me the all clear. After each insemination of Claudia's eggs and Sonny's sperm, we'd wait 10 days for the results. IVF was a roller-coaster, but Claudia's courage kept me going.

Shortly after our fourth attempt, we got the news we had been praying for – it was positive. That's when reality set in. I thought, "Oh my God, I'm 52 and I'm pregnant."

Claudia's bossy side kicked in. Over the nine months of my pregnancy Claudia would call me everyday and ask, "What are you doing Mum?" I'd say something like "sweeping", and she'd get cranky and say, "Why are you sweeping, doctors said you should be resting!" She was so protective.

I told Claudia everything that was going on. Claudia even downloaded an app on her phone so she could monitor her baby.

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In May 2015, I went in for the induction. Claudia sat at my bedside for the whole 19 hours. At one point I had a massive contraction. Claudia said, "Are you sure that was a contraction, Mum?" I rolled my eyes. "Yes Claudia, I've had three children – I know what a contraction feels like."

At 2.30am, my beautiful grandson was born. Sonny and Claudia cut the cord and shortly afterwards gave him a bottle.

On the day we left the hospital, I watched them push the pram out to the car park. That's when my husband nudged me and said, "<u>You</u> have given your daughter the greatest gift of all – motherhood."

CLAUDIA: Mum would have done anything for us kids. She came to all our sporting events, volunteered in the canteen, escorted us on school excursions and returned our library books on time. Mum hated the idea of us kids being stressed about anything.

I never really knew what was wrong with me until I was in fifth grade. Mum and Dad came into my room, sat on my bed and opened a book on puberty. She said, "Claudia, you'll read about things in this book that are not going to happen to you." She told me I wouldn't get a period and might never have children.

I cried and Mum cried with me, and then I got angry with God for making me like this. For a young Italian girl surrounded by cousins who had "big fat Italian weddings" and lots of babies, this news was devastating. Mum just kept saying, "I am so sorry Claudia." I think in a way, she blamed herself.

I struggled as a teenager. One time after hearing the girls at school talk about their periods I came home angry, screamed at the family and stormed into my room.

Mum and Dad had always spoken to me about adoption. Working in a day-care centre, I knew I could love a child that wasn't mine. Surrogacy was another option, but other than my sister, I had no one else to carry my baby.

One night after dinner Mum and Dad came over. Dad said, "Claudia, your mother and I have something to tell you." Then Mum said, "Claudia, please let me have your baby." At first I thought she might be too old. My next thought was, What if something happened to her? Our doctors assured us it would be okay.

With three failed attempts, I wondered if I was ever going to have a child who would call me "mummy". After the fourth attempt, the specialist rang to say, "I have some good news Claudia – your mum's pregnant!"

Over the nine months we spoke every day and saw each other as often as we could – my job was to ensure she got lots of rest, which was hard for Mum as she's such an on-the-go person. When she when into labour, it was a role reversal. For 30 years, Mum had been supporting me and now it was my turn to support her. I cheered her on: "You're doing great!"

Luciano, which means "the light" in Italian, was born naturally. I said a quiet prayer of thanks to God and to Mum.

This experience made me love and respect her even more. I have come to understand where she was coming from all those years – like her, I would do anything for my child. ∎