

RISE

The Abused Child of the Phoenix
A True Story

LIVIA YORK

RISE: the abused child of the phoenix

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The mark of
responsible forestry



For my darling Daniela

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You are here with me, I can feel you, you are guiding my hand, you've often said, "Mum, you're the one with words." How right you are ... my brain is crowded with things to say. I am sad that I can't see or touch you, but rest assured that I can feel your touch, to make me smile like you always did. Now, you are looking after me as if I am your child ...

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FOREWORD

In the 16th century the island of Sardinia, which is situated in the Mediterranean with Spain to the west, France to the north, Italy to the east, and North Africa to the south, came under Spanish occupation.

In yet another skirmish for the control of the township of Quartu Sant' Elena between the locals and the Spanish soldiers, most of the Spaniards were killed. One of them was called De Mura, and he had his wife and his sixteen-year-old son with him. At his death his family was imprisoned.

Some years later at his mother's death, the young man was freed to return to Spain. With no family to go back to, he was granted permission to remain on the island. He eventually married a local girl, and that's when my mother's family tree began. Over the centuries the name 'De Mura' became 'Mura'.

All I know about my father is his name. He was an only son born in Pescara Abruzzi, on Italy's mainland. His ancestry was Greek-Roman and he was named after a fearless soldier, Achille.

Dear reader, I am seventy-three years old. Inspired by three extraordinary women of my family, I invite you to take a journey into my family's history. You will travel with me through three continents in eighty years to experience all that life can bring: struggle, pain, and sorrow; acceptance, laughter, and triumphs; and most of all, love, shared and forever enduring, sometimes lost but always optimistic.

From 1889, my family's story is not unlike millions of others', but it combines many strong and unique personalities of men and

women who contributed to the colourful events that have enriched my family's history.

I will tell you about my Grandmother Rosa—the fascinating story of a fourteen-year-old bride on her wedding day. A girl who endured great hardship in a foreign land and died at the age of thirty-two while giving birth to her seventh child.

You will get to know my beloved mother, a self-taught and fearless classic beauty, and her many emotional scars from losing two mothers. You will learn of her being a suffragette, and of her heartbreak over losing the men she loved under horrific circumstances. Of how she struggled through two world wars, of becoming homeless, and how she rebuilt her life: like a phoenix rising from the ashes. You will experience the recounting of saucy stories she witnessed while she was working and living in palatial homes with Italian aristocracy. Of why she travelled to a faraway land, and why, when I was thirteen years old, she left me back in Italy to be cared for by the nuns.

You will go back in history to learn about my Roman heritage and my connection to Livia Drusilla, Emperor Augustus's wife. You will experience my happy youth at boarding school, my encounter with Pope Pius XII, of my stay with relatives that set the course of my life. Of the night when my innocence was stolen! And of finding out, much to my bewilderment, that I was to become a single mother at the age of sixteen, just nine months after arriving in Australia. I will tell you about my feelings of guilt, of betrayal, of mental and physical abuse in my violent marriage of convenience. Of my son, who at the age of eleven would become my rock and stand by me when I made the biggest decision of my life.

But mainly the inspiration for telling you my family story comes from my beloved daughter.

At the age of fifty-one, after three years of agonising pain, my mysteriously enigmatic daughter departed on her eternal journey, leaving me asking why ... why! When our bond was so strong and we could read each other's minds ... why did I not read the signs! Why did she leave without me!

My daughter Daniela was just like me but different, and much like these words of mine she was full of contradictions. My lovely

daughter was not very talkative where as I could talk until the cows came home. She knew that Mother Nature had gifted me with the ability to retain strong memories. Ten days before she left this world she told me, “Mum, of the two of us, you’re the one with words. Use them to honour our family.”

I recall my happy childhood from the age of three, as well as the many stories about our ancestors that my mother, the great storyteller, passed on to me. But most importantly Mother Nature has gifted me with what I consider to be a strong sense of self, an awareness of being number one, and of the importance of doing the right thing by me first in order to do the right thing by others.

As you progress in your reading you will either laugh or cry, depending on how closely you relate to the events I describe. One way or another it’s guaranteed to stir your emotions. I will start my family’s story by telling you about me first, re-living the day when I forgot to replace the cap on the tube of toothpaste and the paste flowed out uncontrollably.

I will allow my memories to flow just like it ...

CHAPTER ONE

The Beginning of My Memory Bank

I was born in Roma Italy on the ninth of July 1942 while WWII was raging throughout Europe. My mother named me Livia Maria Eleonora. Later you will learn why for the first thirty-four years I carried my mother's family name, Mura.

The war in Italy officially ended on the eighth of May 1945 and my first recollection of being 'me' was two months later on my third birthday, the ninth of July 1945. That hot July day was full of happy events that have coloured the rest of my life.

I vividly recall Mum dressing me in a pretty dress with matching culottes. For days I had watched her cut one of her long dresses and spend many hours sewing the material by hand to make me a dress just like hers. The dress was white with blue flowers, and it was gathered at the waist and tied at the back in a big bow, with a blue band at the skirt edge, and short frilly sleeves. She combed my hair in plaits, tying them up high on my head with a ribbon to match the dress. Calling me by my nickname she said: 'Boboo, you now have a crown just like a princess!' She then placed on my feet the only pair of sandals I owned, which I had outgrown, and to ensure the sandals wouldn't hurt me she picked me up with a swift scoop of her right arm.

"I don't want you to get tired before we get to Auntie Virginia's home," she said. "The roads are still damaged and full of debris. I don't want you to trip and hurt yourself." I felt just like a princess in the queen's arms.

On the way we walked through a flower market in Roma called Campo di Fiori, or Field of Flowers, where hundreds of people were

bargaining with the stall keepers who were shouting loudly about the lower cost of their beautiful flowers. The scent from hundreds of flowers was wafting through the air, and I was on Mum's arms when a street photographer stopped us. He gave me a gold star on a stick that spun with the wind and asked Mum if he could take our picture, because in his words, we were a picture of beauty.

Mum then bought a small bunch of flowers for me to carry. The flowers' scent made me sneeze so much that it made Mum laugh to the point where she could no longer carry me, and she lowered me onto the pavement.

On that very hot day, it felt as if we had walked for hours, but I soon forgot all about it when we arrived at Auntie Virginia's home. The home was full of happy people who made a big fuss of our arrival. They had come to celebrate Giorgio's and my birthday.

"Giorgio is your milk brother," Mum said.

"What do you mean Mum?" I asked.

"Auntie Virginia was in hospital giving birth to Giorgio at the same time as I was giving birth to you. She was traumatised by the war and couldn't breastfeed Giorgio because her breast milk had dried up. I had more milk than you could drink, and you were never very hungry. I had to force you to drink. So, I took to breastfeeding both of you," Mum told me.

...I recall being passed around to whoever wanted to hold me, like a God baby. They all gave me sloppy kisses which I loved, happy to return the same.

Looking around the room I recall an elegant old lady dressed in a long black dress. She was sitting on a high back chair with arm rests, with her feet resting on a stool matching the chair. No one attempted to go near her. I walked from behind her and she was staring out the window motionless when I offered her my flowers, but she refused them and turned away from me. Mum told me the lady was Giorgio's grandmother, a noble lady—almost a princess, she said. Instinctively I reached up to touch my crown and I told Mum I couldn't see the lady's crown.

"The lady's crown has become invisible because of all the pain she has suffered," my mum said.

That day I made a new friend, Nadia. It would be her birthday also in a couple of days. Mum encouraged me to exchange my flowers with her. And there we were, three fatherless children born at a time of war and horror, engulfed by the love of the many grieving adults who had lost their children to the bombs. That lovely day, Nadia, Giorgio, and I exchanged flowers, birthday cake, hugs, and kisses, and a good lesson for our future: one of sharing.

I recall a couple of weeks later, a hot mid-August Ferragosto, walking barefooted on hot sand at the seaside resort of Civitavecchia, while building sand castles with my bucket and spade, and splashing in the shallow water of a sparkling blue sea with Nadia and Giorgio. Mum was lying on a colourful beach towel in her scandalous bikini, with many photographers fighting among themselves to take her picture. I can still hear her concerned voice and how she called out to me frantically, putting the fear of God in me just as I was running toward the shore to pick up more water with my bucket, telling me not to go in the water or I may drown, reminding me that I couldn't swim. Her words were so powerful that even today I still don't go into deep water, and I still can't swim.

I recall spending a lot of time in our bedroom on my own!

Mum had been working as a chef for high society families at the time, and we lived in a number of palatial apartments with marble staircases, Damascus drapes, precious paintings on walls and ceilings, and beautiful gold-painted furniture. I would spend my day in our bedroom surrounded by all this beauty, talking to my raggedy doll while Mum was attending to her work duties. She would come and check in on me through the day, and to bring me meals. I would patiently wait for her to finish her work, sometimes not until after dark. One night, Mum told me, she found me leaning against the bathroom door on my knees, with the third and fourth fingers of my right hand caught in the door that had slammed on my hand. I must have been there for some time, because she found me asleep. When she freed me my fingers were numb and blue, but I didn't cry. Eventually I lost the fingernails from the damaged fingers, and the regrowth left me with problem nails that became so hard that even to this day they are difficult to cut.

My beloved mother loved me so intensely that my loneliness was not an issue for me. No matter how tired she was she would fill my life with all the wonders of life through the stories she would tell me, putting me to sleep cradled in her arms. I would often hear Mum tell her friends that I was a contented child, I was never demanding of her, and always happy in my own company.

CHAPTER TWO

The Day My Mum Stopped the Train

I recall the autumn of 1947, at the age of five. One morning Mum hurriedly told me we were going to meet our relatives on our ancestor's birth land of Sardinia, the island across the sea from Italy's mainland. We were running late to catch the train for the 30 minute ride to Civitavecchia from where we were to board the ferry for the overnight crossing. We had a small suitcase as we were supposed to stay only for a couple of days.

We rushed on board the overcrowded train with Mum forgetting to take notice of the carriage number. We had been to Civitavecchia before and we knew the train would stop in the centre of town; half of the carriages would be disconnected to stay in town while the rest would continue north. Mum managed to secure two seats for us but she stood in front of me, leaving the seat next to me empty. I asked Mum to sit down, but she said she couldn't because my guardian angel was sitting there.

I couldn't see where we were heading but Mum kept up a running commentary for me. While she was engaged in conversation with another passenger the train came to a stop. We waited patiently for the doors to open and the carriage to be disconnected, however when the train started to travel again ever so slowly toward what we thought was the town centre, to our surprise it picked up speed again, and that's when Mum realised that we were in the wrong carriage. The train was not going into town but was heading north. With the train picking up speed, Mum told the other passenger we would miss the ferry if we didn't get off the train. The nice man told her that the only way to advise the conductor was to pull the emergency cord just above our heads.

Without hesitation Mum grabbed hold of the cord and pulled hard. This immediately activated the screeching sound of the alarm which in turn applied the brakes to the train and pulled it to a stop within a couple of minutes. The sudden stop caused the rest of the passengers to panic and they started to get off the train, just as the conductor came running into our carriage, wanting to know what the emergency was. To say that he was not a happy chap when Mum told him of our dilemma is an understatement! He was not interested or sympathetic to our problem; my young age was not his concern, and he started to write an infringement ticket. Mum pleaded with him not to as she didn't have the money. Then, in his enraged mood he ordered us off the train, blew his whistle to get the other passengers back on board, and got the train on its way again to continue north, leaving Mum and me stranded by the railway tracks, kilometres away from the main road.

In the cool afternoon of a drizzling October day, with suitcase in hand, not sure if we were headed in the right direction, we walked for kilometres over fields of private land in fear of being set upon by the farmer's dogs. We walked for what seemed like hours, with Mum urging me to stay strong by telling me the story of when she had walked barefooted and without a hat in the scorching Algerian desert.

"At least we are lucky that it's raining, and we won't burn our feet!" she told me.

"Where is Algeria, Mum?" I asked.

"It's a faraway land you don't know about. I will tell you of it when you're older—it's where I was born." Mum said.

When we reached the highway we stood by the roadside and prayed to our guardian angel to signal for a good samaritan to stop and give us a ride back to town, but there must have been a shortage of good samaritans on that day because we stood by the roadside for a long time before one stopped. What we didn't know however, was that our guardian angel was doing his job extremely well that day. He had us wait long enough for the good samaritan who lived in Civitavecchia to come along. We gratefully got in the car and as the good samaritan drove up to the top of the hill looking toward the town's port, we got a wonderful view of the ferry sailing west into the sunset, looking as if it was about to fall off the horizon.

Yes, we had missed the ferry! Mum had no money to buy another ticket and we had nowhere to stay. “Not a big problem really,” Mum said, “only an adventure we don’t need just now.” Mum had no way of advising our relatives about our delay, but she told me to look on the brighter side of life: “Boboo it could have been worse,” she said. “The emergency cord could have been broken in which case we may not have been able to get off the train until it was too late!” And she was right.

The good samaritan’s family welcomed us into their modest home. Their sick child was still carrying the injuries of war and needed their full attention but in their generosity they gave us food and lodging for the next two nights, and they even paid for our ferry ticket. It was an extraordinary experience and when Mum told them about pulling the train’s emergency cord they laughed about it all night. “The best laugh we’ve had in years; better than any medicine we could have given our child,” they said. I still can see the boy’s smile to this day.

Mum had her own philosophy. That night she said something that stayed forever imprinted in my mind and I was to hear it again and again through my life: “See Boboo, there’s a first time for everything, and nothing is impossible, and just like the ant that moved a mountain, if you want something bad enough, you too can stop the train.”

Two days later we boarded the ferry. It was a rough crossing, with the ferry rocking heavily from side to side. The cabin’s bunk was not big enough for two, and Mum was not feeling well. She was leaning on the wash basin making terrible noises. She spent the night standing up, washing herself. We disembarked in the early morning.

Mum’s older sister Auntie Giuseppina was there to meet us with a horse and cart. Mum introduced me to her and I stretched out my arms, expecting a warm hug, but it didn’t happened. Short and thin as spaghetti, her long black hair was brushed back tightly and tied up high on her head in a bun. She was dressed in black with a high neck buttoned all the way up under her chin. Her long skirt was not long enough to hide the country boots she wore. There was an air of urgency about her, no warm greetings for us, just a quick hello and on to the cart. She said she had come to meet the ferry for three

days, and considering that we were so late getting there, she was very annoyed by our happy disposition. She rambled on to Mum things I couldn't understand—she was very angry! My eyes kept going from Mum and her, I was trying to see the resemblance, but compared to Auntie, Mum never looked more beautiful to me.

Auntie whipped the horse and he galloped all the way. Seeing how much I was enjoying the ride Mum was giving me secret smiles without saying a word, but I could tell that she had lost her sparkle.

When we arrived at the house Auntie hurriedly pushed us into a room where there were lots of people standing around a wooden box, crying, while holding handkerchiefs to their noses, and some of the men were holding hammers. Everyone was dressed in black and the only splash of colour there was my Mum. She was dressed in red with matching lipstick, but now she was without her usual beautiful smile—she was stern while looking inside the wooden box. I tugged at her dress and when she picked me up she told me to hold the handkerchief to my nose.

In the box I saw a man sleeping with his arms crossed on his chest. There were blocks of ice around him and a very offensive odour coming from it. I looked at the man and silently I turned to Mum. She read the question in my eyes and she whispered that the man in the box was her father, but it didn't make any sense to me. I didn't understand what a father was because there was no father in my life.

Our viewing lasted only a couple of minutes, then the men holding hammers rushed in and nailed the lid on to the box. The priest said a quick prayer, blessed the box, and it was hurriedly carried away to I don't know where.

CHAPTER THREE

Living on Our Ancestral Family Farm

From that day I don't recall having Mum around for what seemed to be an eternity. I was to spend the next eight months with Mum's brother's family: Uncle Peppino, Auntie Pietrina, and their four boys, Mario who was fourteen, Giovanni who was thirteen, Salvatore who was eleven, and Antonello who was ten—as well as the spinster Auntie Giuseppina.

Mum didn't tell me why she was leaving me in Cagliari in the care of my relatives. It would only be for a short time as she would be back soon to take me home, she had said.

In silence I watched her walk away from me. I had never been without her for more than one hour, and when she was not back within that time my mind blocked out the painful moment of our goodbye.

While holding on to Auntie Pietrina's hand for reassurance I felt a hard tug to my pigtails that had me close to falling on my knees. With one angry outburst from his mother Antonello went running, laughing at my surprised expression. Antonello wants to play games, I thought. How wrong could I be!

My uncle's house was nothing like the elegant environment I was used to, but I was with loving family members, not alone in our room anymore. The house was a two-story stone building in the semi-circular shape of medieval homes, set on two acres of a vineyard on the outskirts of Cagliari. Bordering the road to the small village of Pirri, it was fenced by prickly pear all around the perimeter. The twelve-foot rustic wooden gate, big enough to allow entry to a horse and cart, could only be opened from the inside, and it would creak