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Secrets and lies, from her parents; Author unravels, and spills, family 'Business'

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NEVER TELL OUR BUSINESS TO STRANGERS

By Jennifer Mascia

Villard, 383 pages, \$26

First-time author Jennifer Mascia knew growing up that her family was special. Her parents were in their 40s when she came along, and although she had several half-siblings from her father's first marriage, young Jenny experienced life as a much-loved and doted-on only child.

Her parents, Johnny and Eleanor, were crazy in love with each other, too.

In describing that love in her memoir, *Never Tell Our Business to Strangers*, Mascia writes, "It cut through all the adultery, the bankruptcies and the addictions, all the crap that doesn't really change what people mean to each other. And my love for them is precisely the same: It never wavers."

This deep bond of family loyalty is at the heart of the book. Mascia wrestles with it and circles back to it throughout the narrative, trying to make sense of her life as she finds out secret after secret after secret.

As she moves into adulthood, she begins to uncover what really went on throughout her "happy" childhood. When her father was taken away in handcuffs when she was 5 years old, Jenny was told, "They're making a movie," when in fact it was for parole violation. Her father was connected to the mafia, was a lifelong cocaine addict and he spent 12 years in prison for committing murder. Her mother, a prison reform activist, met him while he was incarcerated. That her mother knew he was a murderer and still married him haunts her. After Eleanor's death, Mascia asks everyone who knew her mother the same question: Why?

Her parents died within a few years of each other when Mascia was in her 20s and just getting her life started. Sadly, neither parent lived to see their daughter land her first "real" job, at the New York Times, where she still works as a news assistant on the Metro desk.

"When (or if) I ever marry, when I have a child, when I finally pay off my student loan debt, all of these things will go unreported to the two people who mattered to me the most," Mascia writes. "I could choke to death on what might have been."

That's a great line, country song-like, in a book that oozes uncertainty. Writing her memoir seems to be what helped Mascia come to grips with her life of lies -- a supplemental therapy of sorts. She replays the good times and the bad times, trying to reconcile the dark cloud looming over it all.

"If anyone could be a murderer and a charmer, it was my father," she writes. This point is hammered home repeatedly as folks all around her reinforce the fact that Johnny was well-liked and loved her dearly.

Then she has moments of clarity and realization: "I now understood the grisly legacy I'd inherited before I'd even been born," she writes about the way her parents met and fell in love. "I was the product of a murder, in a way. It was horrifying."

And then back to sentimentality: "When I imagine him at his lowest is when I feel for him the most," she admits. "I know he killed people, yes, but that doesn't stop me from wishing I could meet him in the kitchen for our traditional 2 a.m. bowl of Frosted Flakes."

This push-pull between revulsion and familial loyalty is reminiscent of every mob movie ever made. ("Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in.")

She was told by her mother to never tell family business to strangers, yet this book is about as big a betrayal as she could commit. It's unlikely her mother would have spilled secrets on her deathbed if she had any inkling what would happen next.

Most impressive is that Mascia had the wherewithal to get her act together so quickly after the death of both parents. Her mother died just four years ago and the book is in stores now.

As her mother breathed her last breath, Jenny whispered in her ear, "Don't worry about me, Mom. I'm going to be the first female executive editor of the New York Times."

She's not quite at that level, but it wouldn't surprise me if she kept her promise.

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