



My Grandfather's Prison: A Story of Death and Deceit in 1940s Kansas City

Richard A. Serrano

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James Patrick Lyons abandoned his family for a life on Kansas City's skid row. A town drunk, he was arrested eighty times for public intoxication. On the night of his last arrest, he was taken to the city jail and held in solitary confinement. The next morning he was dead. Officials said it was natural causes—yet they could not explain his broken neck.

When Richard Serrano learned of the grandfather he had never known, the longtime journalist embarked upon a search that led him deep into the city's wide-open and ignoble past. He stumbled upon his maternal grandfather's death certificate from 1948 and discovered that the evidence pointed to murder in that basement cell. That revelation triggered a blizzard of questions for Serrano and provided the impetus for this engrossing story.

Part memoir, part historical mystery, *My Grandfather's Prison* takes readers back to a crossroads year for Kansas City. The Great Depression and World War II were over, yet vestiges still lingered from the corrupt Pendergast political machine. The city jail itself was a throwback to the old lockups and rock piles of popular fiction, while the sheriff's office was dishonest and inept—and tried to cover up the death.

Much has been written about Tom Pendergast and the iron hand with which he ruled Kansas City until his fall. Serrano's personal journey into that time takes the story further into those crucial years when the city tried to shake off the yoke of machine politics and political corruption and step into a new era of reform.

In his quest to uncover the details of his grandfather's life, Serrano re-creates the flavor of mid-twentieth-century Kansas City. He shows us real-life characters who broaden our understanding of the city's history: sheriffs and deputies, political bosses and coroners. And he also discovers a city filled with lost souls like James Lyons: the denizens of Kansas City's skid row, a neglected area near the river bottom that once housed the city's gilded community but now was home to derelicts and drunks.

As Serrano gradually comes to terms with the darker side of his family history, he traces a parallel reconciliation of the city with its own sordid past. James Lyons died just as the old ways of the city were dying, and this spellbinding account shows how one town in one time struggled with its past to find a brighter future.

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