

A stack of vinyl records is shown from a top-down perspective, with the concentric grooves clearly visible. The stack is centered in the frame. Overlaid on the stack are the letters 'S' and 'P' in a large, bold, white, sans-serif font. The 'S' is on the left, and the 'P' is on the right, partially overlapping the stack. The background is a dark, solid color, making the white text and the metallic-looking grooves of the records stand out.

**SP**



# IN

**LAMAR GILES**

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When DJ ParSec (Paris Secord), rising star of the local music scene, is found dead over her turntables, the two girls who found her, Kya (her pre-fame best friend) and Fuse (her current chief groupie) are torn between grief for Paris and hatred for each other—but when the lack of obvious suspects stalls the investigation, and the police seem to lose interest, despite pressure from social media and ParSec's loyal fans, the two girls unite, determined to find out who murdered their friend.

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# KYA

I did not kill Paris Secord.

I should've told the two police officers staring at me from across the table, though they hadn't asked. There'd been other questions about the night, I answered as honestly as I could—as honestly as felt smart. Yet, I wanted to state, unequivocally, that I was not the murderer here. Sweat made my shirt sticky, like a licked envelope, even though the tiny room was cold.

“You go to Cooke High?” Detective Barker asked.

Through my damp shirt, I clutched the oblong charm that dangled from a nylon necklace and rested against my chest. “Yes.”

“My daughter was an Eagle. Class of '97.” He dragged a finger down the sheet in the open folder before him. How did he have a paper about me, and this? “Sophomore?”

“I'll be a senior in the fall.”

I did NOT kill Paris Secord. Even rehearsing it in my head it seemed too loud, too fake. I did not KILL Par—

“If I understand the situation correctly, your friend Paris was a DJ known for throwing impromptu parties in unsanctioned locations?”

“Pop-ups. Yeah. Not so much these days.”

“Something changed with her?”

“She got busy. With her music production.” My hands kneaded into each other, worked invisible dough between them.

“Help me understand that a bit more. I’m an old guy. That means what exactly?”

“She made songs. The beats, sometimes lyrics, but not always. She made it all sound good together.”

“This was more than a hobby?”

“She had a song go viral some time ago. Then she did it again. And again. Bigger artists have been wanting to work with her. I heard J. Cole had some interest.”

“You heard?” One of the detective’s bushy eyebrows lifted. “Not from her?”

“No.” There hadn’t been many meaningful conversations between us lately. That last real talk was just mean. More name-calling than career updates. I had a feeling some of this stuff they knew already. How could they not? Paris was famous. Maybe not that get-mobbed-in-the-mall kind of fame. Not yet. Her name rang out in Virginia, and with music heads in general. She was on her way.

And now she wasn’t.

My hands kept working, even though I willed them to stop. Nothing was in my control that evening. Not even my own body.

I pressed my palms flat against the table. *Stay!* I shouted inside my skull, only slightly more convincing than my silent assertion of innocence. The camera just above the interrogation room door caught every bit of me acting weird while answering the simplest questions. When the cops rewatched this video, I’d look guilty. If they ever played it before a jury, I’d look guilty times twelve.

“Is there something you want to tell us?” Barker said. He was dark-skinned, like me, with matted black-and-white grandpa hair that looked like he’d been rolling in baby powder and coal dust. He’d smiled when he walked me into the room, and I remembered

wondering if they'd found a black man who smiled so I'd forget that badge on his belt and say something wrong. Were his simple questions *meant* to make me act weird, like a trap?

I DID NOT KILL Paris Secord.

"Hey, hey, Kya." His hands raised, palms facing me, a sign of peace. His smile twitched away. He looked as frightened as I felt. "I only asked because you were moving your lips a moment ago."

Moving my lips. I mouthed words when I got nervous. I'd probably mouthed *jury*; an expert lip reader might tell them I was already thinking of a way to trick the jury because I was 100 percent guilty.

His partner—a silent, youngish white policeman who was scary in a way I was used to—burst into the room, making me yelp. He held a box of Kleenex. Only then did my vision blur from accumulated tears that spilled over. I accepted the tissues and oh God, Paris was gone.

Staying quiet was the smart move. They hadn't arrested me. They never read me those rights cops read criminals on TV. I didn't know if that was a good or bad thing. I only knew that silence was always advised. How many movies had a lawyer yelling at their innocent client to keep their mouth shut? But there was the thing I needed to say. Out loud, once, and make it sound true. "I did not—"

Something crashed just outside the interrogation room. Shrieking curses followed. A general sense of panic soured the air inside the Ocean Shore Police Department's Second Precinct.

Barker and his partner rushed from the room, joining a couple of uniformed officers trying to contain the destructive lunatic who should be in here, handcuffed. Maybe muzzled too.

I did not kill Paris Secord. Had absolutely nothing to do with her death.

Could all her so-called friends say the same?

# FUSE

“She is not dead! Stop saying that!”

The cop was a liar. He was . . . giving false testimony or whatever. A lying hater with a crappy toy-store badge, and I threw a stapler at his head for saying that stupidity. Didn't he know DJ ParSec was *immortal*?

He ducked. The stapler crashed into the wall behind him, denting it. How could he say something so . . . *nasty*? How was he *allowed*?

I reached for my back pocket out of habit. Planned on blowing him up on every platform I had access to. Insta. Snap. YouTube. I'd rip the audio for SoundCloud, and even post it on Facebook so old people could see how . . . how . . . *corrupt* this cop was. This whole department. I'd have a quarter of a million likes by noon tomorrow. Easy. Except my phone wasn't where it was supposed to be.

I'd given it to someone earlier, a sure sign of how insanely nightmarish this all was. Handed it over to someone who wanted my dad's number from the emergency contacts because I wouldn't talk. Wouldn't walk on my own until someone said *shock* and *hospital* and I knew I'd end up at Sentara where Mom was doing rounds. “No hospital!” I'd managed, and they brought me here.

Lieutenant Liar held his hands at chest level, fingers curled, ready to grab me. “Calm down,” he said.

*Calm down?* I thought, in rhythm, to the infectious melody of my homegirl's smash track that people were singing all the way in China!

*Calm down? Uh-uh. When they say calm down, we turn up!*  
*TURN! UP!*

ParSec wasn't gone. She couldn't be.

While I was distracted, Liar Cop wrapped me up at the shoulder so all I could do was kick, then he lifted me so those kicks only hit air. "Lemme go! Lemme go!"

Two cops emerged from a door I hadn't noticed. One was white and tall and handsome like he could be in one of those superhero movies. The other was black and old, with a Santa tummy.

A third person emerged from that other room, and I went limp. It was the first I'd seen of her since they separated us at the warehouse and drove us off in different cars. She was as tall as the superhero cop, but gangly, too loose. As if her clothes were mis-sized, or she was missing key bones and was held together by muscle and skin only.

Her eyes were red, her badly applied makeup smudged from crying. Like she had a right. I directed all my venom, every bit of rage, and grief, and guilt, and disbelief, and violence at her. "What did you do, you . . . you *street trash giraffe*?"

Kya Caine's face twisted, her lips peeled back, flashing slick teeth. ParSec's self-proclaimed *first* best friend snarled and slipped between all the officers who should've been protecting me.

Her punch connected with my left eye. A solid *POP!* A white explosion of pain that washed out the room for a hot second.

The cop who held me cursed, dropped me. My vision flooded back when my butt connected with the floor. Kya stood over me, a



thousand feet tall. All three cops wrapped up her limbs then, maybe saving me from a kick to the ribs.

Beyond the tussle, another flash. From a camera phone. A quick burst from a young guy who'd been carrying files from somewhere to somewhere else. He swore under his breath, obviously not intending for the flash to go off. Yet the cops paid it no mind, too worried about a girl fight in the office pool. I watched camera boy with my good eye; he pocketed the phone, kept moving.

A throbbing pulse consumed the left side of my face, confused my senses. I half hurt, half heard, only catching some of the nasty things Kya shouted.

“Ask her!” she said. “Ask her why Paris didn’t want to see her!”

Wait. No. Was she trying to say *I* had something to do with what happened? Like she had any clue what was going on between me and ParSec. Was this psycho trying to blame—?

“Stop it!” said Black Santa Cop. His voice boomed and froze the room. “Both of you are working on an overnight stay if you don’t pull it together. Given what you’ve been through, I’d rather you get to sleep in your own beds. But test me if you want.”

He stared me down, and I flinched. I wanted my own bed.

Kya stopped bucking against the men who held her.

A tired-looking woman with glasses and gray streaks in her hair rounded a corner. “Detective Barker, guardians are here.”

Black Santa—Barker—said, “For which one?”

“Both.”

“Thank God.” Barker motioned my way. “The wounded one first.”

The pity in his voice shamed me into lowering my hand and exposing my swelling eye. Liar Cop tucked a hand into the armpit of my leather jacket, gently, an offer of help. I shook him off and

got up on my own, glaring at Kya like I was Mad-Eye Moody. We. Weren't. Finished.

She *didn't* flinch.

Things between us—all three of us—were bad before. I welcomed this new, enhanced anger and the pain that came with it. It was better than everything else I was trying not to feel. Or remember.

Like that sheet of sticky, dark blood over half of ParSec's face. How she'd been a rag doll, arms spread wide, across the turntables. Almost religious. Her eyes bulged, the right one deep red where white should be, like something in that side of her head had exploded, the other staring at a crowd no one in this world could see.

I choked back something between a sob and shriek.

Detective Barker positioned himself strategically between Kya and me, and soon we were in a corridor, walking through doors with steel-mesh windows embedded in them. The last door required a hand signal from the detective. Someone monitoring the corner-mounted camera registered the gesture, and an angry buzz accompanied the released lock. On the other side, a harshly lit lobby where my dad sprang from a cracked vinyl chair.

"Fatima!" His attention was on my eye. The shadows over his face darkened. Before I could answer, he sidestepped me and was in Barker's face. "Which one of you put your hands on my daughter?"

"Mr. Fallon," Barker began, monotone. "It's—"

"I want your name, badge number, your supervisor's name . . . You know what, I want a list of everyone working in this building tonight."

He kept ranting, so concerned with discovering who dared assault his daughter that he'd forgotten I was right there and really

wanted to go home. I knew better to interrupt him, though. So his voice became a drone, and my focus shifted to the other person present.

A tall woman in a short sequined dress, fishnet stockings, and a light jacket with a fake fur collar. Her hair was curled, though the once-bouncy coils struggled in the night's humidity. She had on too much makeup that didn't look great with her annoyed expression. I got the impression Kya wasn't in for a great time when she was reunited with her mother.

Good.

"Let's go, Fatima!" Dad's heavy hand landed on my shoulder.

Barker said, "We'd like to set up some time for questions. After she's had some rest."

"You've got my number." Dad applied more pressure. "Move."

"My phone," I said, barely a whisper.

"What?" It was his back-talk tone. He was mad I wasn't silently obeying. He'd be more mad if I left a thousand-dollar cell phone here.

"I need my phone."

Dad's head whipped toward Barker, who cut off his next tirade with a wait-a-minute finger. The detective disappeared into the station. Leaving me alone with the worst cop in my life.

"What did you do this time, Fatima?" Dad asked, hushed. My personal judge and jury had already decided I was guilty of something.

Kya's mom was tight-lipped, alert. She awaited my confession too.

That angry buzz again. Barker returned, my unmistakable bedazzled purple phone in his hand. I took it and fled through the exit into the muggy night, my nostrils filling with the scent of the salt sea just a couple of blocks over. Paris *loved* that smell. She

said it was inspiration like no other, was the reason why some of the biggest music stars came from right here, our state. She said Virginia music is the reason there's a saying about *it* being in the water. I knew that wasn't true, that saying was way older than us and our sound. Still, it felt true a lot over this last year. Felt true last night. True six hours ago. Before.

I thought I heard the waves crashing too. Knew deep down sound didn't carry *that* far. Not even Virginia sound.

Maybe it was life as I knew it, crashing.

And burning.