



**TOP SECRET**

By M. Michele Phillips

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**Setting**

- The common areas of the character's school

**Character Breakdown**

- Nia:** Spunky kid with a love for music and her friends. Always wants to help people, which means she has a hard time not getting involved.
- Jamal:** Outgoing and happy kid. Had some trouble with his dad the previous year, but Nia helped him out.
- Bruno:** The jokester of the group, but hasn't been very upbeat and happy lately due to problems at home.

**Props Breakdown**

- Nia:**
- Phone
  - Headphones (earbuds)
- Jamal:**
- Phone
- Bruno:**
- Phone
- All:**
- Folding chairs
  - Jeans and shirts/accessories to indicate passage of time

NIA

*(Three chairs are set up in a random formation. Nia enters with earbuds “in,” not immediately registering that she is in front of an audience)*

Oh! Um, hi, I'm Nia, and I have a kind of important story to tell. But before I get started I need to “set the stage,” like they say. I don't exactly know what that means, but I guess I need to tell you some of the facts first. As Middle Schoolers go, I'm pretty typical *(Bruno is entering, but listening)* My favorite things would be A. my friends—like my best friends Bruno and Jamal. B, music, and then C, the color yellow. But my most favorite thing to do is help people.

BRUNO

Oh, sure, Nia, like you the way you “helped” Jamal last year? *(Disgustedly)* Admit it, you're not very good at it.

NIA

*(Shocked)* I am too, Bruno!

BRUNO

Then you have a bad memory.

NIA

*(To the audience, indicating)* BTW, this is my friend Bruno. At least I thought he was my friend.

BRUNO

*(Surly)* Hi!

NIA

*(Back to the audience)* Oh wait, one thing I forgot— if I'm really good at anything, it's keeping a secret. When my friends tell me something they want me to keep quiet about, I do. Totally.

BRUNO

*(Angrily)* Ok, you really HAVE lost your mind! Last year, you told everybody, I mean everybody, Jamal's secret.

NIA

No way, not fair! *(then admitting it)* Um, OK, yeah, I kinda did. *(To the audience)* Jamal told me his dad had some problems with drinking...

BRUNO

And you told everybody!

NIA

C'mon—not everybody. Just my mom and the school counselor and she told a psychologist. His family got help, didn't they? And now they're doing a lot better.

JAMAL

*(Jamal enters, calling)*

Hey, what are guys talkin' about ?

NIA & BRUNO

*(Together)* Nothing.

JAMAL

C'mon, you can, tell me. Unless it's some big secret. Like Bruno has a girlfriend. Or Nia is getting braces—again.

NIA

*(Defensively)* Whatta ya' mean? My teeth look fine. *(Not really sure)* Don't they?

BRUNO

And IF I had a girlfriend, you two would be the last to know.

JAMAL

Hey, harsh, Bro. What's the matter?

BRUNO

Sorry. It's just that I feel like I'm in jail again. The way I felt when we had to stay in all the time and social distance. It still feels like jail.

NIA

What does?

BRUNO

*(Angrily)* MY LIFE. Remember when our class had that field trip to the County Jail? The jail cells were really cramped—And those beds were so skinny. And really hard.

JAMAL

Yeah. What's your point?

BRUNO

That's how I feel. Like somebody locked me up in a cell and threw away the key.

*(He gets frustrated because he can't really put it into words)*

JAMAL

None of us live at the County Jail. We have our own bedrooms, TV's, computers, cell phones, video games, we're not locked into a cell, we can move around...

BRUNO

Maybe you can. *(He starts to say more, then)* I, um, I gotta go. *(He exits angrily)*

JAMAL

Wow, Bruno seems really mad. How come? What' I say?

NIA

I don't know! *(She shrugs)*

JAMAL

Bruno is always the funny one—I mean he's the one that cracks the best jokes. What's goin' on?

NIA

No idea

JAMAL

He probably needs to talk about it.

NIA

That's what **I** think.

JAMAL

Maybe I should tell him how my family got through the pandemic. It wasn't like jail. My parents figured out this plan. There was a schedule on the refrigerator. All of us had work we have to get done each day and it was all on the whiteboard...

NIA

*(Incredulous)* Work? *(Sarcastic)* Wow, GREAT plan, Jamal. Yuck!

JAMAL

Hold on.

—We all had some stuff we had to do but it didn't take that long. And it was different everyday—so if you hated cleaning the bathroom, you only had to do it maybe once a week.

—We each had a specific time we could be online cause we only have a few computers, so we had to share. Half of that time was educational but the other half was up to us.

—Then on weeknights and weekends we had family tournaments—maybe ball games or relay races in the back yard or box games, card games or scavenger hunts, or twenty questions—whatever. Some nights—movies—with popcorn.

NIA

How's all that gonna help Bruno. It's only him and his parents. They don't have a big family like you.

JAMAL

Big Family? Three kids and two parents? You think that's a BIG family?

NIA

OK. It's not that big, but Bruno doesn't have siblings. Hey, wait, your DAD did all that goofy stuff with you?

JAMAL

Yeah, why?

NIA

I don't know. I mean, he wasn't exactly Mr. Fun last year.

JAMAL

*(Angry)* He got help, remember? He's better. A lot better. *(Relenting)* And if you hadn't talked to all those people, I guess he wouldn't be. My whole family got so used to doing all that extra stuff, especially the fun stuff, that we're still doing it. It really works for us.

NIA

Maybe Bruno's dad has the same problem as your dad. Ya' know, being mean and mad all the time?

JAMAL

Maybe. But how can we find out if that's what's wrong?

NIA

We gotta get him to talk. I mean you do. I can't do it cause he thinks I ratted out your family.

JAMAL

Well, I know him. He won't talk.

NIA

Ok, OK, BUT what if you said (*Nia imitates their voices*), Dude, are you mad at me? And he said, No Dude. And you said, well it seems like you are. And he'll say, Well, I'm not, and then you can say, That's good, but why are you in such a bad mood, and he'll say I don't wanna talk about it, and you can say, Yeah, I know how you feel, but it really helped me last year to talk about my Dad, and he'll say, You won't understand, and you can say, Just try me.

JAMAL

Who can remember all that?

NIA

Please try, OK?

JAMAL

*(Reluctantly)* OK.

*(Nia and Jamal break apart and X off. Bruno x's back in a different shirt to indicate that it's a different day. He is in the middle of a call)*

BRUNO

I can't text all this stuff. I know we promised. *(Pause)* I remember. *(Pause)* Don't you think I would be there if I could? *(Laughs)* Yeah, man, it's the lamest—I'm grounded for the next two weeks. Can't go anywhere. *(Disgustedly)* Family! *(Pause)* Sorry I gotta disappoint both of us. Yeah, bye.

*(Jamal enters in a different shirt and X'as to Bruno)*

JAMAL

Dude, what up? Are you still mad at me?

BRUNO

Dude, I was NOT mad at you. And I'm not THAT angry at Nia...but c'mon, she really did tell a lot of people about your Dad.

JAMAL

Yeah, but my family is glad she did—and she didn't really tell that many people.

BRUNO

Oh yeah? Well it was all anybody was talking about at school.

JAMAL

True. For a few weeks. Then everybody got tired of talking about it and quit. So just tell me—what’s wrong with your life.

BRUNO

I just really HATE it. Yeah, I know—(*Imitating a parent*) “a lot of people have it way worse than you do, with a lot more serious problems than you have.” But my problems ARE serious—to me. This is the worst my life has ever been. It’s nobody’s fault exactly--not my Mom or Dad or even my relatives. (*Getting frustrated*) My Uncle lost his job and my Aunt and Uncle and their four kids moved in with us. It’s totally unfair. We don’t have room for 6 more people.

JAMAL

Six extra people in my house would be like Mortal Kombat 11.

BRUNO

I don’t have a bedroom anymore because my aunt and uncle sleep there. Their stuff is all over the place—in my closet and in all the drawers. (*Angrily*) Even on my desk. No place for my computer unless I use the kitchen table, but that’s always full of groceries and dirty dishes. My family used to have breakfast, lunch and dinner at that table. Now everybody grabs what they can. We eat off paper plates with plastic forks. My littlest cousins don’t have any manners—they don’t care where the food ends up or how much of a mess they’re making. My Uncle is too preoccupied and stressed out to correct them and my Aunt works about 3 different part-time jobs, so she only comes home to sleep. They used to be so strict, my Aunt and Uncle. No more.

JAMAL

What happens if you say something, like “Hey clean that up.”

BRUNO

Everybody goes ballistic and starts yelling. At me! I just want to disappear. But I have no privacy. I can’t do one thing I wanna to do. I can’t get away from my family. I can’t see anybody unless I go to their house. I sure don’t want anybody comin’ to mine.

JAMAL

This is bad, Bruno.

Tell me about it. Seems like my parents are mad all the time, especially at me, and it’s not even my fault. Ya’ know, mostly, I really do love my relatives. But right now I can’t stand being around any of em’. They make me want to yell and never stop. My cousin Mateo, he’s 15—he was like one of my best friends. But he can’t stand all the chaos, so they put him on

anti-depressants. Now he acts like a zombie all the time. And the little ones are so confused they're fighting and acting out constantly. I think they need those drugs for hyper kids.

I'm sick a' talking about this. I'm sick a' all this. When's it gonna be over? I just don't see it getting better. See why it's important for me to keep all of it a secret?

JAMAL

Not exactly, but let's go someplace a little more private. The commons is noisy. Keep talking. You're on a roll—so keep rollin.'

*(Jamal and Bruno X offstage.)*

*(NEXT SCENE: a day later. Nia appears in another shirt, holding her phone like she's face timing with Jamal. We don't see Jamal, but we hear him.)*

JAMAL

Can you talk at 1:00 tomorrow?

NIA

Yeah, did you find out anything?

JAMAL

I'll tell you tomorrow.

NIA''

*(Rolling her eyes)* Fine. *(Giving it a second thought)* No, wait, tell me now. Jamal? Oh brother.

*(Nia crosses off stage exasperated)*

*(Next Scene 1 day later. JAMAL enters and sits. Squints at his phone.)*

JAMAL

C'mon Nia *(Exasperated that she's not there yet)*

NIA

*(Nia enters and sits)* Hi. *(Jamal does not answer)* Hello?—how are you?

JAMAL

OK.

NIA

Well?

JAMAL

Well what?

NIA

What did Bruno tell you?



JAMAL

I know why he's mad.

NIA

What's goin' on?

JAMAL

I promised to keep it on the down low. But it's really bad at his house right now.

NIA

Tell me.

JAMAL

I promised I wouldn't — tell you.

NIA

Jamal!!!

JAMAL

Sorry. Besides, there's nothing we can do about it.

NIA

How do you know?

JAMAL

Because there's nothing HE can do about it. It's all family stuff.

NIA

Duh! Didn't I say it was probably his Dad?

JAMAL

Well, it's not his dad—it's a whole bunch of different things. Like, remember his favorite-favorite Aunt?

NIA

Aunt Rosie?

JAMAL

Right. We all went over to her house that one time with Bruno? We had a blast.

NIA

She was so nice to us and so much fun. Bruno loves her. She's a fabulous cook.

JAMAL

Well, they can't go see her anymore, because the parents had a big fight about who needs to wear a mask when they go over there. Oh and ya' know that restaurant the whole family loved to go to?

NIA

Alejandro's?

JAMAL

Uh Huh! Went out of business because of the Pandemic. That was the place the whole family went to blow off steam and relax. The little kids keep bringing it up cause they want to go. Listen, Nia, I don't want Bruno's situation to be what the whole school is talking about.

NIA

Jamal, I solemnly swear that you can end our friendship on Instagram or wherever if I tell anybody Bruno's secret—but can't we put our heads together and figure SOMETHING out? Maybe we can't help. But we gotta try.

JAMAL

ALRIGHT! But if I hear or read somewhere any of the stuff I'm about to tell you, you're toast.

NIA

I get it!

JAMAL

Well, first of all his uncle lost his job and the family just got evicted from their house, so all six of them moved into Bruno's 2-bedroom house. Bruno had to give up his bedroom for his aunt and uncle.

NIA

I would hate that!

JAMAL

That's just part of it. They also have four kids, different ages, and his aunt has three part-time jobs, so she's hardly ever home. And his uncle is either applying for jobs or is too stressed to care about what his kids do—so Bruno's cousins are out of control, messing with his video games, hogging his computer, writing on the walls with permanent marker, wrecking his stuff...

NIA

Can't Bruno's parents say something?

JAMAL

They try, but it just causes these huge family fights. So everything's really tense. All the kids have to sleep together in the basement. Bruno used to escape to his treehouse but his cousins took that over. Now the only place he can get away is the attic, but it's full of his aunt and uncle's furniture and it's really TOO hot or Too cold up there. Bruno gets stuck babysitting and the other day he got so frustrated he threw a box of brand new crayons, the big box, at Maria, the 4 year old.

NIA

That doesn't sound like Bruno. He didn't hit her did he?

JAMAL

No, but he got in huge trouble. The crayons went all over and a bunch broke. Nobody has time to cook meals or wash clothes, so they eat a lot of fast food and there are mountains of dirty laundry. Plus his teenaged cousin is on prescription medicine and so is one of his little cousins. His Mom and Dad are frustrated and mad all the time, too, because on top of all the stuff I just told you, they have to support 6 extra people.

NIA

This is so bad. How'd you get him to tell you?

JAMAL

I, um...promised not to tell YOU.

NIA

What!!! Fine, whatever, thanks for sticking up for me. But what are we gonna DO about it?

JAMAL

Hey, I did all the research—what are YOU gonna do about it?

NIA

I don't know! I'm just a kid. Maybe we need to go talk to your Mom. Isn't she the one that's coming up with all these great ideas for your family?

JAMAL

Yeah, but we can't make Bruno's family do all that stuff.

NIA

No, but your Mom and my mom can call his parents and offer to help.

JAMAL

No way. Then Bruno'll know I didn't keep his stuff secret. He'll never trust me again.

NIA

Jamal, it sounds like Bruno's family needs help from a lot of different kinds of people. These are secrets that aren't good to keep.

JAMAL

See! I knew I would be sorry I told you!

NIA

C'mon, we need to tell somebody who knows what to do. Something really bad could happen if we don't.

JAMAL

Well...

NIA

My mom can talk to the people who helped your dad. Your mom could call the school ask who she should talk to. Then those guys can take over from there. Plus, I just had a brain storm—could your mom come up with ideas the three of us can do together—to help get his mind off what's going on at his house. She's great at that. Let's talk to her, then talk to him.

*(NEW SCENE—Jamal and Bruno-change accessories to indicate time passage)*

JAMAL

Me and Nia wanna talk to you.

BRUNO

What about?

JAMAL

Bunch a' stuff.

BRUNO

Forget it. I don't wanna talk to you, maybe ever again. I knew you'd tell Nia.

JAMAL

I'm sorry Bruno. I am. But we are really worried about all the things you have to put up with now. Remember when my Dad was angry and abusive all the time? Sure, I got mad when Nia told her Mom—I never wanted to talk to her again. But they found us some people who really helped him—which helped my whole family. We want that for you.

BRUNO

It's hopeless.

JAMAL

OK, maybe. But as Nia says, we gotta try.

BRUNO

*(Not convinced)* Whatever.

*(They exit)*

*(Next Scene: Nia appears onstage by herself)*

NIA

Wow, so much has happened because of the pandemic. Places that were in business for years had to close their doors and people can't count on those services anymore. Families need counseling help just to get through each day, except there aren't enough counselors to go around. Little kids don't have their Moms and Dads at home as much as they used to because the parents have to make a living. So like my mom says, the guidance and supervision those parents gave is missing—and kids don't have adults around to see what they spend their time doing—maybe it's just hours of cartoons. No one there to read them books or keep their minds stimulated. It's no wonder Bruno's family crashed and burned. But no matter how hard it got, his family is going to recover because he shared their story. Maybe he didn't want to, but sometimes friends really come in handy when stuff like this goes down.

*(She crosses offstage)*

BRUNO

*(To audience)* Hi—just waiting for Nia and Jamal. We've been getting together a lot. Do tons of fun stuff at school, on-line and then mostly at Nia's—she has a ping pong table and a finished basement, big screen TV, a couple of computers. Me and Jamal kind of turned it into a man cave, but Nia's mom was OK with it as long as we promise to change it back some time. Well, it is her house.

But just about 3 weeks ago, I didn't think I would ever be talking to either of them again, or that we would still be friends. I shared a family secret with Jamal and even though I made him swear, he didn't keep it to himself. It was private stuff about my home life. It wasn't anybody's fault exactly. I mean nobody was getting abused but it was terrible to have to be cooped up all the time. My aunt and uncle and my 4 cousins moved in, and the house got smaller, the messes got bigger, the garbage got out of control and the kids got frustrated and so did the parents — total confusion. It couldn't get worse, and I didn't believe it could ever get better.

Then like two super heroes, Nia and Jamal swooped in—and that made me even madder. BUT because of them, it all started to turn around, and slowly but slowly it did get better. Once the secret was out in the open lots of people—our school counselor, our principal, my coach, a psychologist, people from our neighborhood, our church—helped my family. It's not perfect yet—but it's getting there.

*(Nia and Jamal enter and sit with Bruno)*

NIA

Hey Bruno. I heard your uncle got a job!

BRUNO

Yeah. A good one.

JAMAL

Are they moving back to their house?

BRUNO

They can't, it got sold—and they need time to save some money. But everybody's doing better.

JAMAL

That's great, Bruno. Hey, I found this cool video online about the 10 biggest roller coasters in the world. We need to watch it before build our Mine Craft coasters.

BRUNO

Wait, my Mom is texting me for something. I'll be right back.

*(He exits, then comes right back)*

Don't start the video without me.

*(He exists and Nia and Jamal watch him leave).*

JAMAL

*(As soon as he is out of sight)* Wow, I was worried that we would never be friends again.

NIA

It was really hard to see how mad he was at us. But it was also really hard for him to deal with all that family stuff by himself, so he's finally admitted he wasn't sorry we told his secret. And he can't believe how kind people can be when you're in trouble. So what's the biggest roller coaster in the world, Jamal?

JAMAL

Right now, I think it's Kingda Ka in New Jersey. But somebody else in the world will build an even bigger one someplace soon.

*(Bruno enters and slides into place)*

BRUNO

Ready! And thanks, you guys.

NIA

For waiting?

JAMAL

For the video?

BRUNO

For being my friends who can't keep a secret--except when it really counts. Bring on the video!

*(They all look at Jamal's phone.)*

The End