

# THE MAGICAL REALITY OF NADIA

MIDDLE SCHOOL  
MISCHIEF



BASSEM YOUSSEF and CATHERINE R. DALY  
ILLUSTRATED BY DOUGLAS HOLGATE

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By BASSEM YOUSSEF and  
CATHERINE R. DALY



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To Nadia and Adam, the sources of  
my pride, happiness, and joy.

-B.Y.

To Katie Woehr, editor extraordinaire.

-C.D.

For Kristen and everyone  
at Squishy Minnie.

-D.H.

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October 12

Dear Nadia,

Hope all is well with you and the Nerd Patrol. I'm loving life in Memphis. I give tours of Graceland during the day and do my Elvis impersonation at night downtown. Did you know that Elvis liked to watch three TVs at the same time? And that he loved fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches? Hope you are staying safe and continuing to collect more of those fun facts you like to share with the world.

The weather is here, wish you were amazing. (jk)

Your friend,

Titi



Nadia Youssef

123 Main Street

Santa Monica CA 90406

# Prologue

The magician said—no, make that squeaked—the magic words and shape-shifted back into his human form. POOF!

“Disgusting,” he said. Transforming into a squirrel had not been his first choice, but if he wanted to get up to a chandelier inside Graceland, he needed to be a small, unassuming creature that was good at climbing. Unfortunately, there were very few creatures Khefren hated more than rodents. Vile, beady-eyed creatures.

But desperate times called for desperate measures. His only goal was revenge against the teacher turned tour guide. And if it took posing as a squirrel to accomplish that, so be it. After the teacher ridiculed him outside the palace—imagine the nerve, making fun of the royal magician in front of a whole crowd of people!—Khefren had banished the teacher to his own hippopotamus-shaped amulet. To the back half of the hippo, to be precise—the teacher wasn’t worthy of anything but a hippo’s butt.

But an elder magician had judged Khefren's actions to be unjust and had in turn trapped Khefren in the very same amulet—the front half, praise Anubis. Three thousand years he'd spent cooped up in that thing. Luckily, he and the teacher didn't have to interact. The magician was pretty sure the teacher didn't even know he had been trapped in the hippo with him.

And ever since the teacher had completed the seven problems and gotten his body back, Khefren had been free, too. The teacher didn't know that, either.

The magician headed back to his Elvis-themed hotel room and turned on the news. And there it was—the scene of the “accident” he'd orchestrated—the crushed chandelier, the broken glass, the flashing lights of the ambulances.

“Our top story tonight comes to us from Graceland,” the news anchor began, “where a deranged squirrel caused massive destruction to the foyer of Elvis Presley's historic home. The rodent chewed through a cable, causing a chandelier to fall on a local tour guide and Elvis impersonator. This is an unbelievable story. We're going to you live with reporter Brenda Mannix, who is on the scene. Brenda, what can you tell us about the situation at Graceland right now?”

The magician rolled his eyes. “Just show the body bag already,” he muttered.

“Thank you, George,” said the reporter. “The scene here is one of complete mayhem. And it all centers around a tour guide named . . .” She motioned for someone to come into the frame. “. . . Titi! Mr. Titi, can you tell us more about your miraculous escape from certain death?”

The magician's jaw dropped. No one could survive a one-thousand-pound chandelier falling on top of them. Unless . . .

He grabbed a blue suede shoe-shaped pillow off the bed and threw it at the TV. How had he overlooked this? Could it be that the elder's magic that imprisoned them both had also made the teacher . . . immortal? (Khefren was immortal, too, of course. All good magicians used their magic powers to make themselves immortal. Duh.)

How would he destroy the teacher now?

The magician needed to come up with a plan, but there was one thing he had to do first. He opened up the mini fridge and grabbed a bag of roasted almonds. Sure, they were grossly overpriced, but he had to get rid of this intense craving. The side effects of shape-shifting into a squirrel were no joke.



# Chapter One

**Y**ay!” cheered Nadia as a ball swished through the basket. She raised her fist into the air. “Nothing but net, amirite?”

Adam elbowed her in the ribs. “You’re cheering for the wrong team,” he informed her.

“Oh,” said Nadia, slightly embarrassed. It was the day before school started after the holiday break and she and her friends were sitting in the stands at their very first middle school basketball game, Bridget Mason Middle versus Tenth Street. Though they were more inclined to attend a debate tournament than a sporting event, they were there to support their newish friend Jason, who played on the team.

Nadia looked over at her freckled, redheaded best friend, who was watching the game intently. It was only a couple of months ago that Adam didn’t know a goal from a



touchdown. (They had goals in basketball, right?) And now, thanks to his desire to bond with his new stepdad, he was a veritable sports fanatic.

“Don’t worry, Nadia,” said Vikram. “You know I’m just here for the snacks.” He held up a box of nachos. “Mmmmm. The cheese just melts in your mouth.”

Vikram was also one of Nadia’s friends. The group called themselves the Nerd Patrol, and was originally made up of Nadia, Adam, Chloe, Sarah, and Vikram. They were a diverse group. Nadia was born in Egypt; Adam had recently discovered he had roots in Austria; Vikram’s parents were from India; Sarah was Korean American; and Chloe was half Jamaican American, half Barbadian American. But they had a lot in common. They were smart and funny. They took school seriously, but not necessarily themselves. They considered themselves well-rounded geeks. Even so, everyone had been surprised when Nadia suggested they go to the basketball game.

“Well, Jason is part of the Nerd Patrol now,” Nadia had said. “He plays sports. We should support him!”

Nobody could argue with that.

“So this is what the jocks do on Saturday afternoons,” marveled Chloe, looking around as she smoothed her velvet skirt. Nadia, unsure about what to wear to a sporting event, had gone with the safe jeans-and-T-shirt combo. But Chloe looked like she always did—a middle school fashionista.

Nadia looked around. Chloe was right. The Bridget Mason students scattered throughout the bleachers were

almost all from the school's different sports teams. Not a Dungeons & Dragons Club member or a mathlete in sight. Nadia didn't see any other nerds, or artsy kids, or goth kids, or even pastel-goth kids. Just sporty kids as far as the eye could see.

As if on cue, two eighth graders wearing volleyball sweatshirts pushed their way into their row, practically stepping on Vikram's nachos.

"Um, do you mind?" Nadia said.

"Yeah, I do mind," one of the girls said. She was tall, with long, straight jet-black hair that Nadia would have admired if she wasn't so annoyed. "You're in our seats."

Sarah jumped up. "We'll move!" She scooted down the row, pulling the rest of the Nerd Patrol along with her.

"Well, that was rude," Nadia said. "There's plenty of room."

"Eh," Sarah said. "I kinda get it. I'd be annoyed if a random kid sat in my favorite seat at a debate tournament." She shrugged. "We are sort of in their territory."

"But this is the gym," Nadia said. "The sports kids don't own it."

Adam shifted in his seat. "Whatever. I didn't mind the excuse to stand up. I never realized how uncomfortable these bleachers are. My ttub hurts."

Nadia frowned. "Are you talking backward again?"

About a month ago, Adam, who loved all things tech related, had discovered how to play audio backward and now peppered his commentary with backward words that

everyone had to decipher. It was both endearing and slightly annoying.

"Sey," he said with a grin. Then he pointed to the court, narrating the action like a sports announcer. "Jason gets the pass and immediately goes into a triple threat position. He sizes up his opponent . . . does a pump fake . . . and pulls up for the jump shot. SWISH!" He turned to Nadia, a teasing grin on his face. "That was us. You can clap now."

Nadia applauded politely. She was amused to discover that even on the basketball court, Jason paused for a moment to toss his shaggy sandy-blond hair out of his blue eyes. The Nerd Patrol's newest member brought his own brand of nerdery to the group—endless knowledge of plays, stats, and strategies. His sports brain was a new—and welcome—point of view. Nadia looked over at Sarah, who tried to push her new cat-eye glasses up on her face, forgetting that she was wearing a huge GO, BRIDGET MASON! foam hand. She ended up poking herself in the nose. Nadia giggled.

Yes, the Nerd Patrol were definitely expanding their horizons, thanks to Jason.

The ref blew a whistle and the teams went back to their benches.

"What are they doing now?" Nadia asked Adam.

"Tenth Street Middle is taking a time-out," he explained.

Their mascot, a huge green shell on its back, began moving around the court super slowly. The Tenth Street fans seemed to think this was hysterical.

"Tenth Street's mascot is a terrapin?" Nadia asked.

Adam gave her a look. "It is," he said. "But how did you know that? Most people assume it's just a turtle."

Nadia felt an excited buzz start up in her brain, like she always did when she sensed an opportunity to share interesting facts. "Well, its shell has a pattern," she said. "Also, it has red stripes on each side of its head, which leads me to believe that it's a red-eared slider terrapin." She laughed. "I just didn't think mascots were that . . . specific."

Nadia was distracted from the terrapin when the Bridget Mason cheerleaders started a cheer:

*"Hey, hey you, get out of our way  
Today is the day we will blow you away!"*

Sarah looked over at Nadia. "Eh," they said in unison. It was pretty uninspiring, as far as cheers went.

As the time-out clock buzzed, the teams ran back out on the court.

"Let's go, Bridget Mason!" Adam shouted. Then he turned to Nadia and said, "We really could win this."

The Tenth Street cheerleaders started a routine:

*"Extra, extra, read all about it:  
Your mascot is boring and there's no doubt about it!  
When you're up, you're up! When you're down, you're down!  
When you're Bridget Mason Middle, you're going down!"*

The cheerleaders ended their cheer pointing to the far corner of the gym. Nadia followed their gaze.

"Is that—" She nudged Vikram. "The Bridget Mason Petunia?"



“What else could it be?” Vikram said, shaking his head.

Nadia sighed, staring at the kid in costume. He was dressed in a green spandex onesie, a large headpiece surrounding his face with pink petals. He was just kind of standing there sticking his leafy arms out, acting like, well, a flower.

Nadia wasn’t surprised she hadn’t noticed the mascot until now. She was halfway through fifth grade before she realized that Bridget Mason even *had* a mascot.

The terrapin pointed to the petunia and laughed. Then it

fell onto its back and pretended it was stuck. It waved its arms and legs helplessly. The Tenth Street fans roared with laughter.

“I heard that poor kid didn’t even want to be the petunia,” Vikram said. “He tried out for the basketball team and didn’t make it. Coach Zuckerman hadn’t had any applicants for the mascot, so he said the kid could come to basketball practices if he agreed to be the mascot at games.”

Nadia watched as the petunia sighed and walked closer to the Bridget Mason cheerleaders. There, he struck a slightly more enthusiastic flower pose.

“Way to photosynthesize!” a boy wearing a Tenth Street sweatshirt shouted mockingly.

For the rest of the game, Nadia watched the mascots instead of the players. The terrapin was way more entertaining than the petunia. Where the turtle danced and shook its shell to the music, the petunia swayed back and forth like a blossom in the breeze. Yawn.

As the game went on, the cheerleaders’ insults continued.

“Your mascot is so boring! We’ll just keep on scoring!”

And Tenth Street did. They won 55 to 22.

“Well, that was lufwa,” said Adam after the game as the friends waited for Jason by the fountain at the Bridget Mason school entrance.

It took a minute for the rest of the Nerd Patrol to decipher the word.

“Yeah,” Chloe finally said. “Super awful.”

“I think all the mascot mocking had a lot to do with us losing,” Nadia said “A petunia is so . . . wilty. A terrapin

is a little strange, but at least there's potential for it to be entertaining. Doesn't it bother you all? They were mocking us the whole game."

"Eh, that's part of sports," said Adam. "Fans make fun of each other."

Sarah shrugged.

Nadia shook her head. "But we're handing it to them on a silver platter. Shouldn't we do something about it?"

"My big brother tried to get it changed a bunch of years ago," said Chloe. "But Principal Taylor refused. They say he actually used to be the petunia and that he still keeps his old costume somewhere in his office."

Now that did not surprise Nadia one bit. Their principal loved Bridget Mason Middle School—and its students—like nobody's business. And he wasn't afraid to show it. Like last semester, when he started DJing at school events. He himself had graduated from Bridget Mason Middle way back in the stone ages—the 1980s. If you looked at his yearbook (and she had) you could see Zachary Taylor in all his mulleted glory, his extremely long list of extracurriculars taking up two columns underneath his photo.

The door of the gym pushed open and Jason appeared. He looked pretty disappointed.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "Sorry we lost so bad."

"Are you kidding me?" said Nadia. "It was awesome! And you made four goals, too!"

Jason laughed. "Oh, Nadia, you crack me up," he said. "But geez, that was a tough game."

Two of Jason's teammates came outside, their duffel bags slung over their shoulders. "Yo, Flanagan, wanna bounce?" one of them called out.

"I'll see you guys later," said Jason. "I'm gonna hang out with these peeps."

The two boys looked surprised. "Suit yourself," one of them said with a shrug.

When they were out of earshot, Nadia nudged Jason. "So, how does it feel to be a spy?"

"Huh?" Jason said.

Nadia had been thinking about this ever since those eighth graders made them move seats. "It's like there are two schools—or more—in our one school," she said. "The Nerd School and the Jock School, and probably the Art School, and the Goth Schools, and other ones I don't even know about. And we don't overlap much." The rest of the Nerd Patrol was listening now. "We're a school divided. But you"—she pointed to Jason—"you're a crossover. Kind of like a spy."

Jason laughed. "I guess I am the exception."

Adam put an arm around Jason. "How about some ice cream for this exceptional friend? My treat." He quickly looked around at the others. "Well, just Jason," he said. "My allowance isn't that big!"



When Nadia got home from Ice Scream that afternoon (a double-scoop cone of peanut-butter-and-chocolate and blueberry pie seemed to cheer Jason right up), she was still



thinking about the way their school was so divided. It wasn't so much that the groups were at odds. It was just sad that they were so separate. Imagine how awesome it would be if the sports kids showed up to support the mathletes, and vice versa. Maybe the petunia stuff wouldn't have bothered the team so much today if they'd had bleachers full of Bridget Mason students there to drown out the Terrapin cheerleaders.

All of a sudden, Nadia got an idea. She opened up her laptop and started an email:

TO: Taylor, Principal Zachary

FROM: Youssef, Nadia

RE: Bridget Mason Mascot

Dear Principal Taylor,

I would like to make a suggestion. It concerns our school mascot. No one seems to like it and we are being mocked by the other sports teams. It seems as if it might be time to pick a new one, a mascot that represents all our students. I know this may be a sensitive issue, so I hope you will give this careful consideration.

Sincerely,

Nadia Youssef

She knew it was a long shot, what with Taylor's history as the petunia, but even if Chloe's brother had asked about it years ago, it wouldn't hurt for her to ask again. And maybe it would give all the students something to work on together.

Nadia read her email through one more time, then pressed send. She had nothing to lose, right?

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