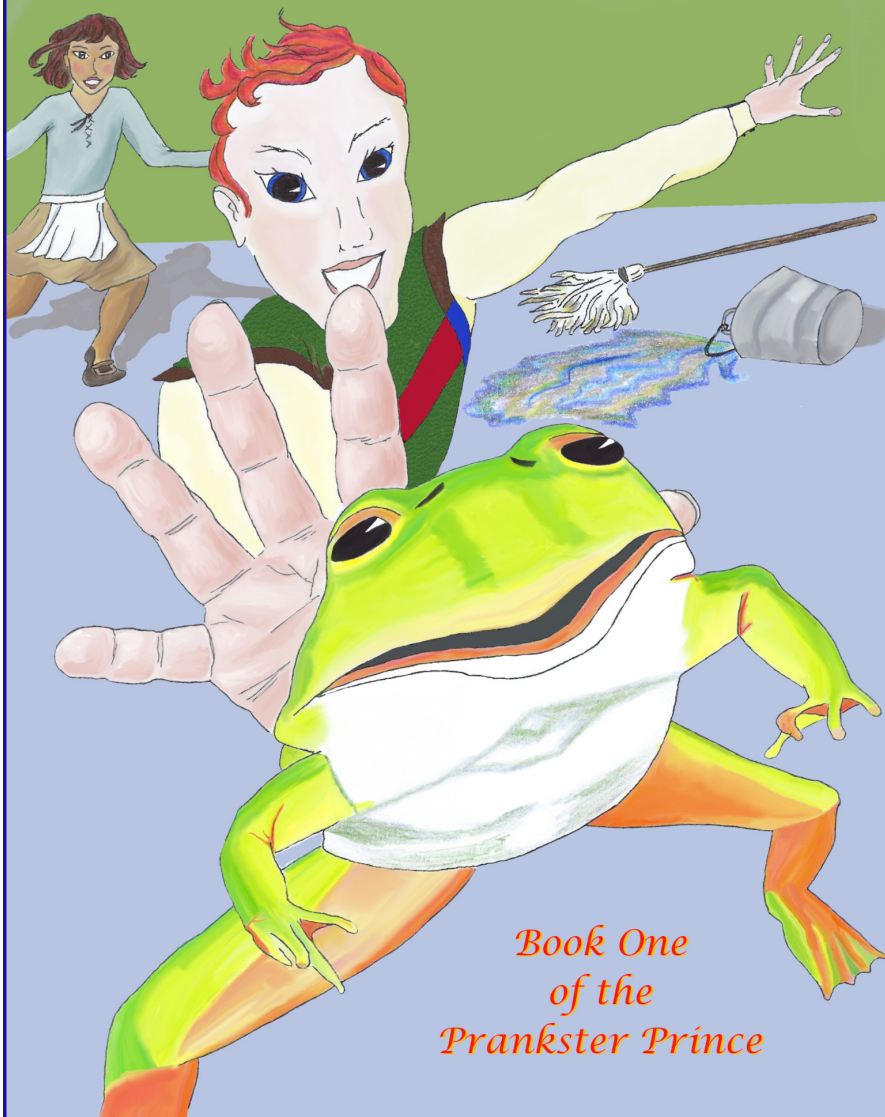


SNEAK PEEK THROUGH CHAPTER ONE!!

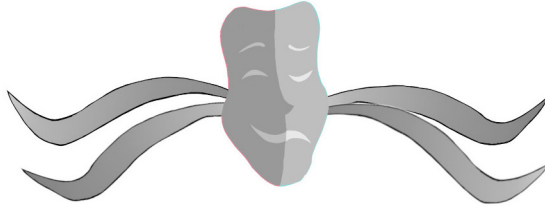
THONY
and the Much-Anticipated
Adventure

YA



Book One
of the
Prankster Prince

KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA



“Twice in one day, Thony?”

Even Princess Joanna’s ever-patient tone sounded exasperated.

“What are you trying to do? Get Papa to keep you from ever seeing the light of day again? At this rate even Master Eswith will run out of protocol lessons.”

“Um, no...?” She’d phrased it as a question, but Thony had the feeling it was rhetorical.

“And now you’re involving the *servants* in your pranks again?” And *that* was disappointment, and if there was anyone whom Thony actually *cared* about not disappointing, it was his eldest sister.

“It wasn’t a prank! The frog just sort of... escaped. And I knocked over her bucket. And then she helped catch it.” Which was all true, if slightly out of order. And definitely gave the impression that the frog had been *his* to start, rather than that *he* had been the victim of the *girl’s* prank.

There didn’t seem to be any good way out of this one. Thony looked at his feet. The servant girl had the frog, so he couldn’t even pretend he was looking at it.

Everyone in the castle tended to assume that, if there was something crazy going on, he was probably the cause of it.

To be fair, they were usually right.

And it was his honor and his privilege to liven things up a little.

...even if it did extend those interminable lessons with Master Eswith.

*THONY
AND THE
MUCH-ANTICIPATED
ADVENTURE*

*Book One of the
Prankster Prince*



KERRIDWEN MANGALA MCNAMARA

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Also available in eBook and hardcover editions.

McNamara, Kerridwen Mangala

Thony and the Much-Anticipated Adventure / by Kerridwen

Mangala McNamara Indiana: Rising Dragon Books, 2023

p. 176

(McNamara, Kerridwen Mangala. The Prankster Prince; bk. 1)

Summary: Fifteen-year-old Crown Prince, and inveterate prankster, Thony decides to go on a quest to find a princess to marry in order to save his country.

ISBN 978-1-960160-09-6 (pbk)

1. Princes and princesses - Fiction. 2. Adolescent Rebellion - Fiction

ISBN 978-1-960160-10-2 (hc) ISBN 978-1-960160-08-9(eBook)

Thony and the Much-Anticipated Adventure: Book One of the Prankster Prince

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Cover art and illustrations by the author

The Rising Dragon Logo was designed by Priyadevi McNamara

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For further information, email RisingDragonBooks@gmail.com

ISBN: 978-1-960160-09-6

First Print Edition: June 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THONY AND THE MUCH-ANTICIPATED ADVENTURE

For my kids:

Meenakshi, Priya, Griffin, Rhodri, Miles, and Tara.
Without you guys, life wouldn't be half as much fun - nor
would I be half the writer I am today.

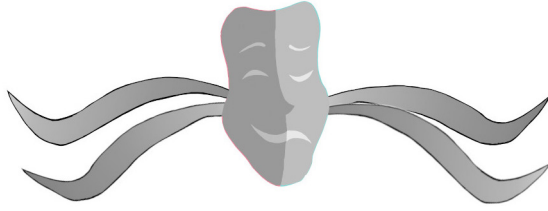
And for Shawn Michael McNamara
(1950-2023)

Thank you for being a great father-in-law, grandfather,
and for raising my husband to be the man he is. I miss
your wisdom, strength, and sense of humor so much
already.

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Chapter ONE

A Princely Punch

CROWN PRINCE ANTHONY DEVINTHAL THE AFFABLE (and the Affirmative) of the valley-kingdom of Aldyrwald – an inconsequential kingdom on a substandard continent on an unimportant world – slouched along a corridor of his father’s castle, kicking a small rock that someone (*probably him*) had tracked into the castle earlier.

It wasn’t *fair*.

His parents were ridiculously overprotective – all because Thony was Heir to the Throne. Queen Annabel had vapors when Thony went out of sight of the castle, even into the *very safe and well-maintained* woods beyond the village. King Bill started to *harumph* and look pale when Thony casually suggested a visit to the next valley-kingdom over, the one ruled by King Bill’s best friend who also happened to be the father-in-law of Thony’s older sister, Joanna – even *without* Thony

hinting that a detour to check out the local giant along the way might be interesting.

Being a crown prince was *seriously boring*.

And anytime he tried to do something to *make* things a little less boring he ended up in trouble.

Today being a case in point.

It was his mother's fault really. She knew better than to come into his rooms.

For goodness' sake, the *servants* knew better than to come into his rooms.

Thony hadn't even been *in* there when Mama had opened the door, taken one look, screamed, and fainted.

Someone had been sensible enough to summon Joanna.

Someone *else* had tracked down Thony and seen him into the throneroom to face his father for a little chat about what King Bill called his 'misdemeanor'. ("You're the one who's meaner!" *Thony had yelled in what was, perhaps, not the best display of behavior for a young man who was a few months away from fifteen. No matter that his parents seemed intent on treating him like he was five.*)

So now he was stuck with a fortnight of double-length protocol lessons with Master Eswith – the excruciatingly boring teacher who had reportedly convinced the eternally patient and polite Joanna to threaten to run away from home. (*That was the rumor anyways, passed on from Thony's middle sister, Priscilla. Joanna had been out from under Master Eswith's gentle care years before either of them had begun, though, so how Prissy knew this bit of intelligence was somewhat questionable.*)

An hour with Master Eswith was bad enough and what Thony had to suffer through on a regular basis. By two hours, the young prince was usually falling asleep and the 'gentle

master' was beating him about the head and hands with a wooden ruler to *prove* that Thony had fallen asleep and Thony was plotting vengeance on Eswith and whichever parent had stuck him in double-length lessons. The one time King Bill had sentenced him to *three-hour* long lessons, Thony had plotted vengeance on the entire castle.

No one had ever considered doing that again, even though it had been almost five years and he'd grown a bit more of a sense of proportion. Apparently, the memory of caterpillars everywhere – in the bedsheets, in shoes, in the cabinets of clean dishes (*but not in the food. He wasn't an idiot after all*) – still lingered.

Thony kind of agreed that he'd deserved what he'd gotten for that one – helping clean up all the mess – but most of his pranks were much more amusing and innocuous. And he still got in trouble with his father over them. (*And honestly? How seriously could you take a man who let his subjects call him 'King Bill'? Thony had long ago decided that if anyone tried to call him 'King Thony' when he was crowned, he'd lop their heads off. Except his sisters. And their husbands; Roger and Jeremy were cool. And maybe his mother.*)

Princes were supposed to go on adventures and do interesting things. Instead, his *sisters* had gone off on The Quest a year earlier – and Left Him Behind. Instead, he'd been stuck *here* in the most boring place in the Entire Universe. And with no real hope that he would *ever* get to go *anywhere* or do *anything* interesting. *Ever*.

Of course, he didn't really blame his sisters (*or Prince Roger, the second-born prince from the neighboring kingdom*) for going on The Quest. They'd kind of had to, after the debacle that Prissy's sixteenth birthday party had become. But they'd left him behind.

They'd come back a few months later. Both of his sisters had gotten married while they were gone, though Mama and Papa had insisted that Joanna and Roger, at least, go through a second wedding ceremony (*'for propriety's sake' – as if the very fact of Priscilla and Joanna secretly going off on The Quest hadn't taken everything so far beyond the pale of 'propriety' that there was no real way back. But the wedding had made Mama and Papa happier, not to mention King Richie and Queen Janet. Though Roger's older – and as yet unmarried – brother, Raymond, had kept giving both of the newlyweds odd looks as if he wanted to be happy for them, but couldn't quite stop wondering if they were planning to usurp the throne he was to inherit someday.*)

But Joanna had married Roger, whom they'd known forever. Mama and Papa were more or less refusing to acknowledge Priscilla's husband at all.

His sisters (*and Roger*) had also come back with the news that their magick-poor world was about to undergo a 'Ragnarök'. All the Gods they had been worshiping forever were about to *die* and be replaced by new ones. And the new ones just *happened* to be: Joanna and Roger and Priscilla – and the handful of friends they had brought back from The Quest.

Oh, and after all that, magick would be much more available to use. For everyone, not just the wisewomen and hermits and witches and sorcerers.

Mama and Papa's skepticism had been palpable. (*No one else than them and Thony had been told about the creation of new Gods at the time, although the word of the 'Ragnarök' had been duly passed along – no doubt with the tale growing less believable with every iteration.*) Princesses falling asleep for a hundred years and princes turning into swans and evil witches and ogres and such were par for the course in their opinion, but *Gods?*

And Joanna and Roger and Priscilla weren't even lucky-numbered children. Joanna was at least an eldest child, but she'd had the bad taste to then have a pair of younger siblings – nine years later, though apparently it hadn't been for lack of effort on King Bill and Queen Annabel's parts at attempting to properly produce three children (*of one gender*) or seven or twelve. (*Or even thirteen, though that number usually created more problems than it solved. King Bill was the oldest of seven brothers, and Queen Annabel was the youngest of seven sisters with three older brothers as well.*)

But Roger and Priscilla were both second-borns.

And then there was Prissy's tail.

Supposedly she'd been born the absolute epitome of perfect princesshood – golden-haired, bright blue eyes (*they were really more green, but for marketing purposes were blue*), fair skin, the works. But somewhere in the handful of minutes between her birth and being Presented to the Populace, Priscilla had acquired a bushy, black tail that was nearly as long as she was.

When the tail had fallen out of her baby blankets during her Presentation to the Populace – and it was obviously attached to the baby – their father, King Bill, had fainted. (*Which wasn't a manly thing to do, but what can you do when the guy tells people to call him 'King Bill'?*)

Unfortunately, he'd been holding the baby.

Fortunately – despite all the adults frozen in horror around her – nine-year-old Princess Joanna was the only person who had the presence of mind to dash forwards and rescue her baby sister from their falling father. And then to stand up before all the people (*who had been seriously confused, I mean, nothing interesting ever happened here*) and declaim that it was a fine tail. That, in fact it was quite likely the finest tail a princess had ever had. And then she told everyone to call Prissy 'Princess

Priscilla the Bright-Eyed and Bushy-Tailed' (*which might be where all these ridiculous appellations attached to the royal children had gotten started, though at least Joanna had gotten 'the Wise and Wonderful'. Not that Thony begrudged his sisters theirs, but 'the Affable and the Affirmative'? Yeesh!*) and the poor, confused crowds had cheered enthusiastically.

That was all fine with the Local Populace and even their own minor nobility were willing to go along with things, but Word had gotten out (*Mama said Word always did*) and the royalty in all the neighboring kingdoms had decided the Devinthals had Bad Blood and decided to avoid them. Except for Roger's parents, of course, since King Richie and King Bill had been friends since they were boys.

But since the local nobility of a given valley tended to follow the lead of their king, it meant that all of King Bill's pages and squires were the scions of local families, and all of Queen Annabel's ladies-in-waiting were as well. This was potentially something of a problem, since the girls and boys were sent up to the castle to find a spouse as much as to learn some useful skills, but King Richie had traded them a couple (*which was how they'd gotten to know Roger so well in the first place, though it seemed likely he hadn't been granted permission from King Richie to ask for Joanna's hand – so perhaps even best-friendship only went so far in the matter of Bad Blood*) and if there were somewhat fewer of each group than the king and queen would like, because some of their own more remotely located nobility had sent *their* scions off to other kingdoms, it didn't bother *Thony* at all.

He was busy mulling over all this old history and the Utter Unfairness of having been Left Behind while his sisters had Adventures in the Fairy Wood and how his small attempts to liven up this deadly boring place were met with such an extreme underappreciation... So he wasn't really paying attention to

where that rock was going and he nearly tripped over the girl scrubbing the floor.

Well.

Actually, his rock skittered into her bucket and knocked it over, even though he hadn't kicked it all *that* hard.

And *then* this midget-sized girl popped up practically under his chin and belted him a solid one in the gut.

And *then*, while he was stumbling away in surprise, he slipped in the soapy water and fell down, landing on top of the angry girl.

Who called him clumsy and overweight (*which he wasn't, thank you very much, either one. He'd been lanky until a couple years ago and now was sort of... stocky. Priscilla said he was just getting ready for a growth spurt, and she should know if anyone did, since she was now the Goddess of Animals – which apparently included humans, to Mama and Papa's even greater dismay*).

She also called him a thoughtless oaf... and that one struck a bit closer to home, given that he knew that a prince should always be considerate of his People and he really *should* have been more aware of where that rock was going. But he hadn't, because he hadn't been paying attention. Which was sort of the whole problem in a nutshell.

And anyways the whole thing was just too embarrassing. Getting beaten up by a teeny little girl who looked like she was maybe ten – and him almost fifteen? That dinky thing had a right hook that out-sized her for sure! And if he should have to try to explain this to someone...

No. Nope. *Not* happening.

Thony had sloshed halfway down the corridor and almost around the corner when he realized there was something in

his *pants*. Something that was *cold* and *wriggling* – and in his *underpants*, or it would have fallen out down his pantleg since Thony didn't hold with hose or tight pants.

It turned out to be a frog and it was alive and relatively unsquished when he got it out... which was a relief, though what he'd had to do to *get* it out in good order had been somewhat embarrassing.

That was when he heard the laughter.

He turned around and saw the scrubbing girl, hands on her hips, and laughing her head off at his antics.

Thony's first reaction was to scowl resentfully at her, but after a scant moment his expression changed to a sheepish grin. He'd stuffed enough frogs down other people's clothes (*though never their underpants – and how had she managed to do that without him noticing?*) that he had a fair idea of what he must have looked like. And it *was* pretty funny.

“He's getting away! Help me catch him!” The girl splashed sudsy water as she darted after the frog that was merrily hopping away from them.

Thony followed her without a question. Frogs – as pretty much everyone from Mama to Joanna to Priscilla had informed him on more than one occasion – *didn't* belong in the castle. The stone floors were too hard and dry for a creature that spent much of its life submerged in water, and the servants did too good a job at cleaning even the remotest dusty corners so there weren't enough insects for it to eat. (*Though Mama's concerns were rather different than his or his sisters'.*)

And chasing a frog through the castle together was generally silly enough to make anyone either fast friends or mortal enemies.

Honestly, Thony didn't care which. Either one would lighten the incredible boringness of life in Aldyrwald.

Fortunately, they caught up with the frog just inches before it would have leapt into his mother's solarium to wreak havoc on ladies-in-waiting and embroidery hoops alike.

Not so fortunately, Mama came over to see the commotion at the door, spotted the frog, and fainted. Again.

Joanna was sent for and Thony and the girl were made to wait for her while the ladies-in-waiting waved smelling salts under Queen Annabel's nose and placed cold cloths on her head and gossiped in quiet, giggly voices.

"Twice in one *day*, Thony?" Even Joanna's ever-patient tone sounded exasperated. "What are you trying to do? Get Papa to keep you from ever seeing the light of day again? At this rate even Master Eswith will run out of protocol lessons."

"Um, no...?" She'd phrased it as a question, but Thony had the feeling it was rhetorical.

"And now you're involving the *servants* in your pranks again?" And *that* was disappointment, and if there was anyone whom Thony actually *cared* about not disappointing, it was Joanna.

"It wasn't a prank! The frog just sort of... escaped. And I knocked over her bucket. And then she helped catch it." Which was all true, if slightly out of order. And definitely gave the impression that the frog had been *his* to start, rather than that *he* had been the victim of the *girl's* prank.

There didn't seem to be any good way out of this one. Thony looked at his feet. The girl had the frog, so he couldn't even pretend he was looking at it.

Priscilla bustled up right then – presumably summoned by Joanna in that God-Way they had now, or else called by the frog in her role as Goddess of Animals. She plucked the frog out of the girl's hands and headed back out, cooing at it, and

only noticing Thony by way of a quick ruffling of his red curls. She had that look she got when someone interrupted what Thony had nicknamed ‘Jeremy-time’ – though apparently part of being a Goddess was the ability to appear perfectly turned out in a proper, princessly pink and frilly daygown when one might be seen by one’s mother and her ladies.

So much for his best friend since forever.

Jeremy was cool, of course – and how cool was it to have a *centaur* for a brother-in-law? – but Priscilla never had time for Thony anymore.

“The bucket got tipped over? I’d imagine that’s how the frog escaped – and why the pair of you are dripping suds,” Joanna said thoughtfully after Priscilla had disappeared.

Her eyes looked like she had rather more of an idea of what had happened than that... like she could just look into Thony's own *soul* and pull the truth right out of him. And maybe she really *could*, now that she was the Goddess of the Earth and all. Though she’d been giving him *that* kind of look pretty much ever since he’d first discovered frogs when he was two or three years old, so it might just be a Joanna-Thing and not a Goddess-Thing.

“I should probably get that water taken care of and finish cleaning the floor before anyone slips in it and gets hurt,” the girl suggested. Thony decided he needed to remember that little crease between the brows that did such an excellent job of suggesting Concern and Responsibility. Not that it would likely do *him* much good, given that everyone in the castle tended to assume that if there was something crazy going on he was probably the cause of it.

To be fair, they were usually right.

And it was his honor and his privilege to liven things up a little.

Even if it did extend those interminable lessons with Master Eswith.

Joanna looked at him with a fair amount of empathy. “I’ll tell you what, Thony, you go help this girl clean up all that soapy water and we’ll just call it even. I’ll make things right with Mama.”

That was... not entirely unexpected. Joanna’s approach to discipline was all about ‘natural consequences’, which translated into ‘fixing what you’d messed up’. And since cleaning up the messes he’d helped create was *far and away* more interesting than protocol lessons, Thony far preferred it when *she* got to sort him out.

However, he did kind of have to admit that King Bill's approach was probably a more effective deterrent. Not only did it leave the energetic young prince less time to think up new ways to create havoc, but adding to the overall boringness of Aldyrwald – especially in his own personal life – went against every principle he tried to live by.

Though if he managed to stay *awake* while listening to Master Eswith droning on about what fork to use at dinner for which esoteric side-dish that would probably never show up on Thony’s plate, he often could daydream up some of his best ideas. Unfortunately, Master Eswith dealt with daydreaming about the same as he did actual sleeping, and bruises from that ruler could really hurt.

“Thanks, Joanna, you’re the best!” He stretched up and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then trotted after the girl. She’d taken Joanna’s comment as a permission to leave and had almost disappeared around a corner already. He had to move fast to catch up.

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Thony Goes Astray!
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