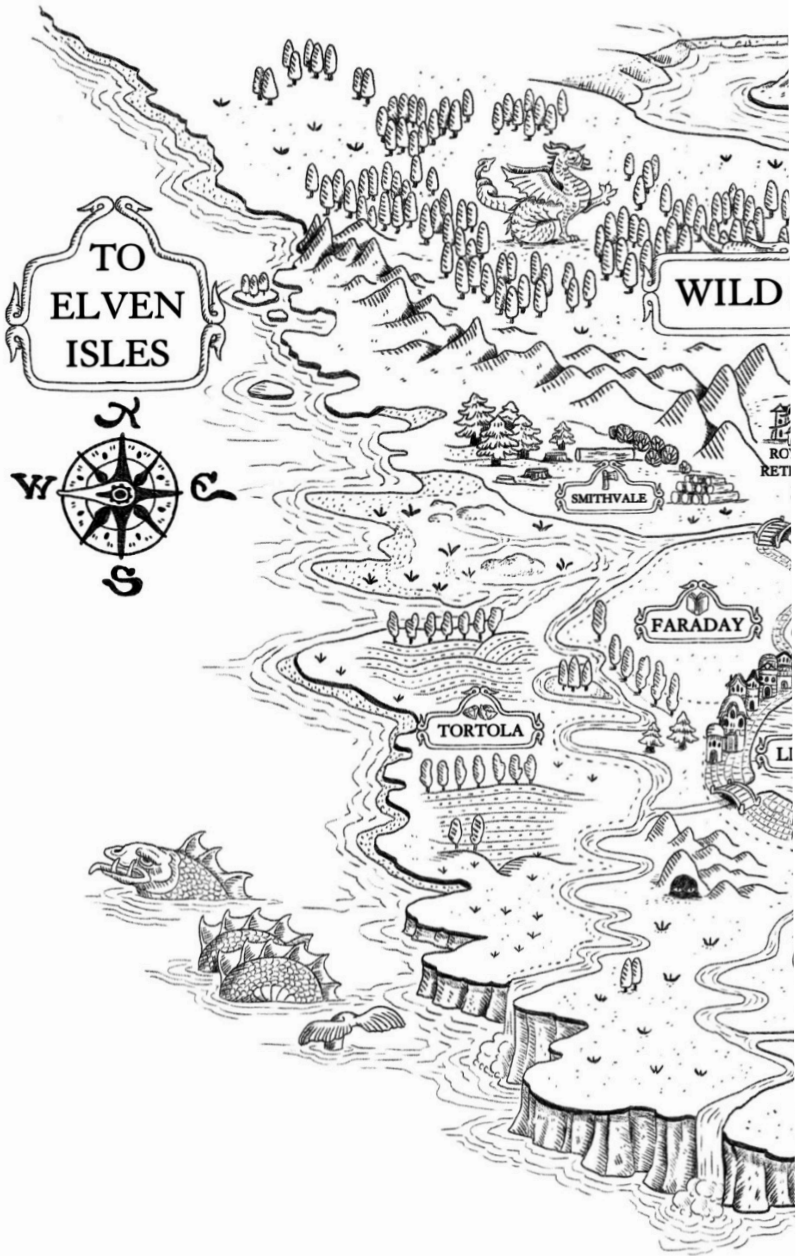
Plain Princess Jane



Jennifer Milne


TO
ELVEN
ISLES
WILD
SMITHVALE
FARADAY
TORTOLA


LANDS
BANDITS
NORESTER
COUNCIL
OF
KINGDOMS
SOLOMOR



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Publisher: Auctor Press

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Cover: Jennifer Milne

Interior Design: Sharmyn McGraw

Map Artwork: Lacey Fairchild

E-book ISBN: 979-8-9914680-0-8

Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9914680-1-5

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Once Upon A Time ...



Once upon a time, there was a princess named Jane. Not even "Jayne" with a "y" or anything cool like that. Princesses are supposed to have fancy names like Guinevere or Aurora or Kalina. Not Jane.

Plain Princess Jane.

Oh stop being so dramatic, Jane is a lovely name.

Says, Caterina. "Caterina" is a fancy name that fits a princess.

Except I am not a princess, I am just her cat.

Now who's being dramatic?

I am not being dramatic, it's the truth.

Yeah, but you said it all weird like, "woe is me I am just a house pet who is forced to sleep in a box, poop in the dirt, and chase mice!"

I do none of those things. Are you going to tell the story or continue blathering?

Whatever. We can't all be purr-fect like you, Caterina.

Was that a cat pun?

I don't know. Meow-by.

That was terrible.

Are you kitten me?

Just begin the story.

But I'm on a roll and I'm feline so good!

HISSssssssss.

Okay—okay! You don't have to hiss. So, twice upon a time...Er, once upon a second time?

For heaven's sake Jane, I shall start. It begins with me anyway.

Once upon a time, there was a cat...

Chapter One



Caterina

It is strange how we often recall the worst moments of our lives more clearly than the best. I would say it was just one of those funny things about being human, except that I am not.

Human, I mean.

My mother was a classic tabby cat, having gray fur with black stripes. I take after her. She cared for me and my two brothers and two sisters; always gentle in picking us up by our scruffs and licking us clean.

We belonged to the live-in cook of the royal palace. My mother was a mouser, and we were to be her little army, aiding her in roaming the castle for rodents. A very pregnant Queen Sara was present when we were born and took a great liking to us all. We were each distinguishable, with a different spot of color here or a stripe there, so she gave us names. I was given the name Lady Caterina.

One day, when I was a few months old, I was chasing a particularly sneaky rat through the Grand Hall. He had gotten hold of a large chunk of cheese from the kitchen and I thought if I caught him, the queen would be proud of me.

Unfortunately, I was momentarily distracted by a shiny tassel hanging upon a wall tapestry and lost sight of him. One minute he was there with the hunk of yellow cheese dangling beneath his twitchy whiskers, and the next he was gone. I took position near the gilded thrones of the king and queen that stood in the north end of the hall. The thrones sat upon a platform that allowed for an elevated view of the entire room, so I settled between the seats in my hunting crouch.

The hall was large and expansive, vaulted oak ceilings so high a small creature like me could barely see the top. Thick, colorful tapestries hung behind the thrones with the Smithvale royal family crest adorned in silver and gold. Large windows with multicolored glass and wooden shutters went around the top of three of the four walls of the room, while the final wall had two enormous entry doors crafted from sturdy oak.

There was a beautiful, dark wood, gold-rimmed baby crib in front of the platform with a carved headboard of the family crest surrounded by winged cherubs. The queen's new baby, however, was in her arms wearing a shimmering, lacy long dress with a bonnet upon her hairless head, and crying loudly. Both parents appeared panicked at their inability to quiet her.

"Is she alright?" asked a flustered King David.

"I think she just has gas," replied the queen, though she seemed unsure herself.

The king paced back and forth in front of the throne platform. He was tall and broad, his stride long. His dark hair was often overly long because he was far too busy to bother to cut it. He had a strong jaw and bright blue, kind eyes.

The queen was tall, slender, and stately. Her dark blonde hair shone golden when it caught the sun. She radiated warmth and was always quick to smile.

"Where are the fairies?" he yelled. Not because he was upset, but because he had to yell to be heard over the sound of the baby's crying. Which seemed as though it would never end.

"I don't know," yelled Queen Sara. "I've never heard of the Three Fairies being late for a Gifting."

"Why won't she stop?" King David moaned, rubbing his temples.

"I have no idea," Queen Sara said, on the verge of tears herself. "I've tried everything. She won't burp, she won't feed, she won't sleep."

"We could try a little ale," King David said as he scratched me behind the ears.

"You'd better be joking," the queen said grumpily.

"Yeah, totally. I'm joking, obviously."

The queen set baby Jane down in the bassinet to regain her composure, where Jane continued to scream her head off.

"I'll paint a unicorn purple and teach it to do a waltz if that's what she wants, I just need to *know*!" exclaimed the king.

"Babies can't talk, David."

"Maybe the Three will give her the Gift of Talking as a Baby."

"Would you really rather listen to a creepy baby voice screaming 'poop, poop, poop' over and over again?" she asked. "Besides that would be a totally useless Gift."

"There are Gifts more useless than that. Do you remember that guy from Solomor who had the Gift of Pulling Chickens out of his Pockets?"

Queen Sara laughed. "Or that girl from Faraday who had the Gift of Anything Looks Good on Her?"

"She was the one who wore a burlap sack to that ball that one time, right?"

"She looked better in that burlap sack than I did in my gown," said Queen Sara.

"No she didn't," King David said sweetly and hugged her.

She hugged him back and spoke muffled into his tunic, "I'm just so tiiiiiiiiired."

"I know," he said.

Suddenly, the baby stopped crying. The king looked up from his desperate state with wide-eyed fear as the queen snapped her teary eyes to his.

"What just happened?" asked Queen Sara.

"Is she still alive?" asked King David as he scrambled up and rushed to the Queen's side.

They both leaned over the crib and looked at the child expectantly. She had a strange look on her face; her cheeks were red and her eyes wide with what appeared to be confusion.

"Jane?" the queen whispered expectantly.

"What's wrong with her face?" asked the king as he leaned in closer to her.

Then Jane expelled an unfathomable amount of baby vomit from her little mouth. It shot with great force toward the king's face and spattered off of his rather large forehead back onto her own self, completely ruining her outfit.

The queen removed her hands from her mouth. "Wow." The king did not move. He stood as still as the statues of his ancestors that lined the hallways of the castle, while baby vomit dripped from his forehead, between his bushy dark eyebrows and down the tip of his nose.

Then he laughed. Then she laughed. And they laughed until they both had tears in their eyes and could barely catch their breath.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go change. The fairies can wait."

"They've certainly made us wait long enough," replied the queen.

They left the room, chatting and seemingly in good spirits, when I noticed him. A filthy rodent had skittered up the leg of the crib with his cheese glob and stood on top of the headboard. He nibbled with confidence, as though nothing could touch him.

Enraged by his brazen behavior I vaulted for the crib, taking a flying leap off the platform. Unfortunately, my jump fell short and I tumbled off the face of the headboard below him and into the soft cushions of the mattress.

I struggled with the blanket and when I finally broke free, found myself wearing baby Jane's bonnet atop my head. I shook but could not free myself from it. Remembering my foe I looked up but he was gone. I stood upon my hind legs, placed my front paws on the edge of the shallow crib wall, then scanned the room for any sign of him. I spotted his chubby rat bottom skittering away into the east wall, which led outside.

Blast it! As I sat in the crib, licking my paws and stewing in my defeat, I heard a loud crash as the shutter of one of the nearby windows flew open with such force, it shattered the glass.

Three women floated into the room, having a presence of overdone grandeur about them. They were all ethereally beautiful; their physical appearances timeless, embodying the contradiction of youth and aged wisdom. They all wore similarly styled dresses of some glamorous material that appeared to rest gently upon their bodies, rather than hanging off of them.

There was one with long, shimmering blonde hair, which floated down her shoulders and stopped at her waist. Her dress was a deep forest green and she carried an ivory-colored magic wand in

her left hand. Her other distinguishing characteristic was that she, strangely, wore the thickest glasses I had ever seen a person wear.

The one in the middle wore a gown of ocean blue. She had short, sharply cut red hair that would have made her seem regal if not for the fact that her face was swollen up like a puffer fish, minus the spikes.

The last one wore a pink gown that contrasted sharply against the raven black hair that cascaded down around her shoulders and back. She had a round face and wide, doe-like eyes that implied simpleness with what seemed to be many lifetimes of smiles.

Glasses Fairie swished toward the platform and announced herself, "Hello, King and Queen of Smithvale, we are here. I am Fayly—what, Yvonne, what?"

Yvonne stopped tapping Faylynn's shoulder.

"Mmmthey're, mmmnot, heremmmph," she said as she flicked her wand toward the broken window. The shattered glass rose into the air and reassembled itself in the window frame.

"What on earth are you saying?" snapped Faylynn with annoyance.

Yvonne placed her wand under her armpit and used her fingers to hold her limp, sopping lips out of the way.

"They're not here," she said, spewing a generous amount of spittle.

"For heavens sake, Yvonne, I have already taken a shower today! And of course I can see they're not here," Faylynn bumbled. "How dare they not be here, we are the *Three*!" she screeched.

The third one was swatting at a bug that was buzzing around her face.

"Get away from me demon," she said as she shot a ball of flame from her wand, incinerating it. Unfortunately, the ball continued on after killing the bug, bounced off of Faylynn's glasses and hit Yvonne, burning off her right eyebrow.

"Bernice!" screeched Faylynn.

"Oops, sorry," she said to Yvonne. "But Faylynn, that was a fly! You know how dangerous they are!"

Faylynn directed her wand toward Bernice, but Yvonne stepped in front of her and grabbed her arm.

"Whhhoa, calmmm dowwwn," said Yvonne, who seemed unfazed by her missing eyebrow.

"She is being particularly bubbleheaded today!" snapped Faylynn, one of her eyes twitching spastically.

"I mmmagree. Shhhe's havvving a worssse than usssual dayyy. Jussst takkke a mmmdeep brrreath," said Yvonne as she casually fixed her eyebrow with a zap of magic from her wand.

Faylynn took a deep breath and let it out. Then she looked around the room, and put her hands on her hips indignantly. "This is unacceptable. I cannot believe the offense these royals have committed by not being here!"

"MmmFaylynnmmm, mmwe, fffwere mmlate," said Yvonne rationally.

Faylynn huffed with much exasperation.

"It is no matter! One does not fail to be present when the Three arrive!"

As Faylynn continued her pompous rant to no one in particular, Yvonne made her way to the baby crib where I now sat in place of baby Jane. I had been watching them only because they were so loud as to annoy me. She rested her hands on the edge of the crib and moved her swollen face closer to me.

"MmmFaylynn. Mmmget mmover mmheremmph," she called out of her bratwurst lips.

Faylynn huffed again and stomped over towards me. She grabbed Bernice, who was picking her teeth with her wand tip and dragged her along.

"What Yvonne?!" Faylynn snapped.

Then she looked at me. She adjusted her glasses on her face and leaned in for a closer look. Apparently, she needed her prescription adjusted because she concluded that I—the cat—was the baby.

"My goodness, gracious!" exclaimed Faylynn. "Why would they leave the baby alone? Are they too busy and important to be present for their child's Gifting?"

She went on for another few minutes, while Yvonne rolled her eyes, though it was hard to tell behind her swollen eyelids which were the size of hard-boiled eggs.

"I have come to a decision," Faylynn declared. "The child will not be punished for the parents' vulgar behavior. We shall Gift the child and leave an angry note."

"Mmmare mmyou mmserioushhhh?" asked Yvonne incredulously.

"I'm certain I have no idea what you're blubbering on about."

Yvonne held up her lips again.

"Are you serious?" she asked, with even more incredulity.

"No need to shout, sister," Faylynn snapped. "And yes. I have made my decision. I am the eldest of the Three. Come, come!"

"Faylynn, we are immortal. Why does it matter that you are the oldest?" grumbled Bernice.

"When mother went away—"

"For figs sake, Faylynn," said Bernice with exasperation. "Mother didn't go on a vacation! She, and I quote, *forsook humanity and all who associate with it*, end quote. Over two hundred years ago. She didn't pop out for a breather, she didn't need a break, she didn't leave instructions and she certainly didn't leave YOU in charge."

"Well, she would have, she simply had something incredibly important to do and—"

"She abandoned us!" interrupted Bernice.

"She did no such thing! She just didn't want us to be burdened—"

"She doesn't care about us!"

"Don't talk about her like that!" shrieked Faylynn.

"Mmmmenough!" shouted Yvonne, at least two tablespoons of drool escaping her oversized lips.

"Yes, that will be quite enough from you Bernice, we have a Gifting to attend to," said Faylynn as she brushed her hair from her face in an overly dignified gesture, then muscled the other two behind her and stood in front of me. She raised her wand and spoke quickly.

"Royal child, I, Faylynn, grant you the Gift of Song and Dance!"

A stream of red silvery smoke shot from her wand and went up my nose. It tickled.

"What is with you and song and dance? How is that at all useful to anyone ruling a country?" asked Bernice, annoyed.

"It does not surprise me in the least that you don't understand the value of a good impression. When other kingdoms have balls it is always important to make said good impression on the dance floor."

"Of course, many a war has been prevented with a foxtrot," Bernice muttered, rolling her eyes.

Faylynn opened her mouth to respond, but Yvonne stepped up and lifted her wand.

"Mmmmroyal mmmchildmmm I mmmgrant mmmyou bbbbthe mmmgift fffffof ffffinding mmmthe loshhht."

Green silvery smoke shot from her wand and went up my nose. It burned.

"What in the cornhill did you say?" asked Bernice.

"Ttthe giiftttsh offfff ffinnnnnding da losht," repeated Yvonne as she sprayed Faylynn with spit, her lips flapping together like two dead fish.

Faylynn grunted with disgust and wiped the saliva from her face and hair. "I'm certain I have no idea what that is supposed to mean," she said haughtily.

Yvonne put the wand under her armpit again, then held her lips up out of the way.

"The Gift of Finding the Lost."

"Ohhhhh," they said simultaneously.

"Your turn," said Faylynn, as she shoved Bernice toward the crib.

Bernice stared at me a moment with her wand in her mouth horizontally.

"Go on," urged Faylynn.

"Hairy little thing aren't you, poor dear," said Bernice.

She was the only one of them without impaired vision. She had no excuse.

"Royal child, I grant you the Gift of Great Knowledge!"

Blue silvery smoke shot from her wand and went up my nose. It smelled fishy.

I failed to mention at the beginning of this story, that when I was a regular cat, I did not know what anyone was saying. It is only when I look back with my enhanced intelligence that I can now understand what was going on. But at the time, I was a cat. My greatest concern was killing the rat and regurgitating it for the queen. Perhaps into her favorite pair of shoes, where she'd be certain to see it.

What happened next was, I felt dizzy. I do not clearly recall what was happening around me in those next few minutes because of what was happening inside me. My head felt cold...cold and tingly. All of a sudden the noises the people made began to make sense. Those sounds meant something.

They were all shouting and there were more voices, more than just the voices of the Three Fairies. The king and queen were back in the room and they were shouting at the fairies.

I sat up cautiously and listened as a painful ache grew in the back of my throat.

"Why can't you just give Jane her Gifts? You gave them to the cat for God's sake!" bellowed the king.

The Three looked at each other dumbly. Then Bernice nudged Faylynn forward with a rough shove. "Answer them, you're the leader."

Faylynn glared at Bernice, then cleared her throat. "Yes, well, Your Highness—but it's the wording of the Laws you see. It says in the Fairie Laws, that we can only give one Gift each," she stuttered, nervously.

"But you didn't *give* the Gifts to our *child*!" the king screeched.

"Fairie Yvonne," said Queen Sara. "How could this have happened?"

Yvonne opened her mouth to speak, but Faylynn butted in. "Your Highness, the Law says, 'Upon the birth of a child of the royalty or nobility of the land, each shall give one Gift.' It doesn't say specifically to the child. The writing of the Laws implies to the household. It just does not specify," said Faylynn.

"You're telling me you can't give Jane her Gifts because of a freaking technicality?" King David asked with utter disbelief.

"Your Highness, the Fairie Queene wrote the Laws and we are magically bound to follow them. If we violate them, we lose our powers," Bernice explained softly.

"You Fairies have ruined my daughter's life! You've ruined EVERYTHING!" the king shouted.

The queen held baby Jane close to her, protectively, and said, "This is a catastrophe."



Why are you laughing, Jane?

Cat-astrophe. CAT-astrophe. Come on, you are a cat, Caterina!

That is correct, I am.

Seriously, do you really not see why that's hilarious?

You know how I feel about cat puns. Wha—unhand me! What are you doing?

I'm checking your leg for missing bones. Someone obviously stole your humerus, cuz you have no sense of humor.

That's not...actually that was rather clever.