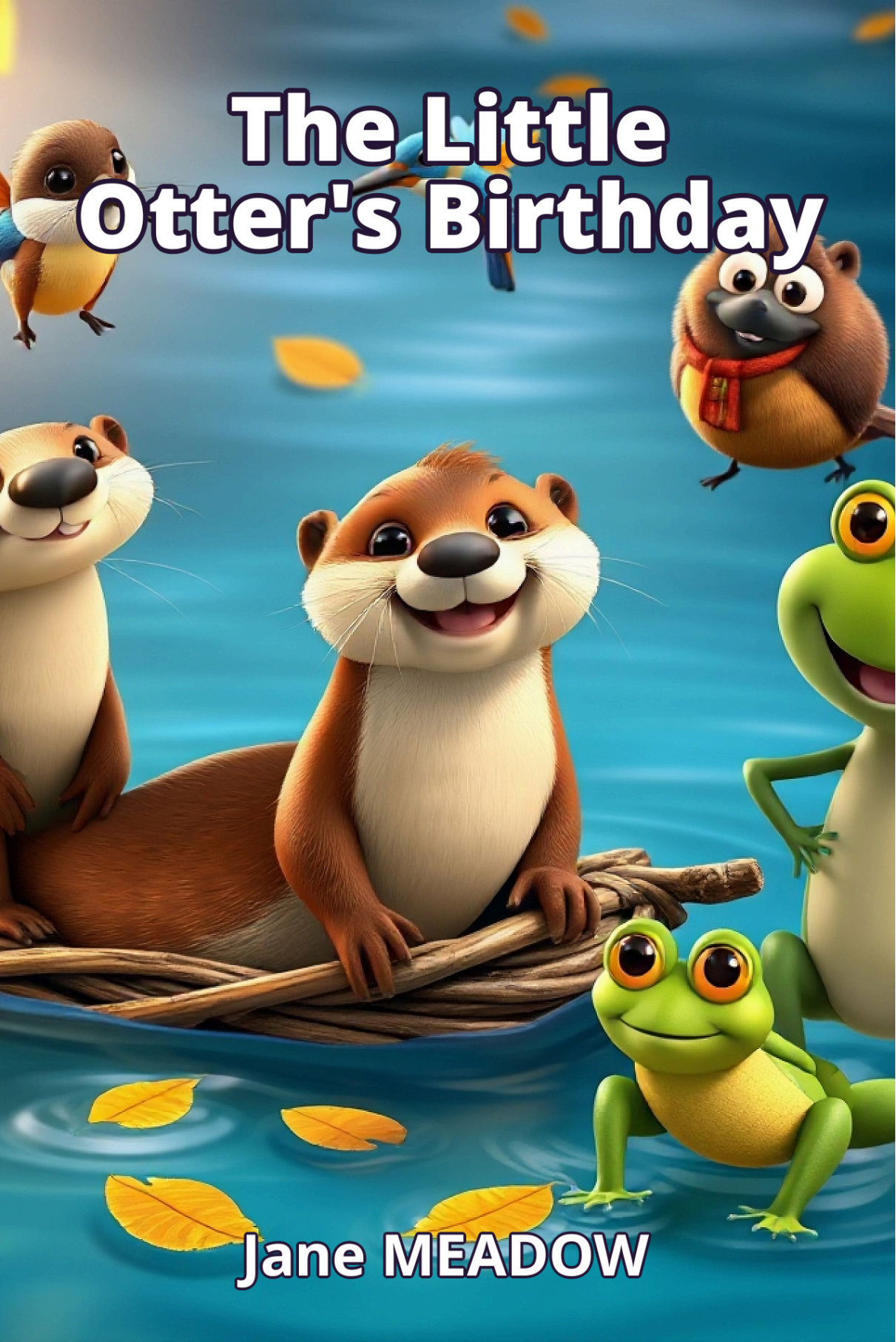




The Little Otter's Birthday

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On the morning of her birthday, Olive the otter popped her nose out of the den. The sun sparkled on the river, and the water looked extra blue. She wiggled her whiskers and stretched her thick tapered tail. Today was her special day! She wondered if anyone else had remembered. Her cream belly fluttered with excitement as she slid down the muddy bank into the cool, rushing water.



Down by the riverbank, Pip the kingfisher zipped past with a tiny red scarf flapping. "Good morning, Olive!" chirped Pip, trying to look very busy. Bramble the beaver was humming near a pile of leaves, hiding something behind his flat tail. Fern the frog giggled and splashed away. Olive blinked her big dark eyes. Everyone was acting very strange today.



Olive paddled in slow circles, feeling a little puzzled. Why did her friends keep whispering? Why did Bramble keep hiding leaves in his twine belt pouch? She floated on her back and watched the clouds drift by. Maybe they had forgotten her birthday after all. A small sigh slipped out of her whiskers as she paddled toward the reeds.



Just then, a bright orange leaf floated past Olive's nose. Then a yellow one, and a red one, and a purple one! Each leaf was decorated with tiny berries and flower petals. Olive gasped. "What is this?" she squeaked. More leaves came bobbing down the river, spinning gently in the current like a colorful floating parade just for her.



Pip swooped low over the water, her long beak shining. "Happy birthday, Olive!" she called. "Bramble decorated every single leaf, and I sent them down the river for you!" Bramble waved from the bank, his big front teeth showing in a shy grin. Olive's heart felt as warm as sunshine. She spun in the water, trying to catch every drifting leaf.



Fern bounced up onto a smooth stone. "Wait, there is more!" the spotted frog laughed. "We made a game for you. Race you to the big bend!" Fern's blue ribbon fluttered as she leaped. Olive darted after her, sleek and quick. Pip flew overhead, cheering loudly. Bramble lumbered along the bank, his flat tail thumping happily with every step.



Olive reached the big bend first, of course, because otters are wonderfully fast in water. "You win!" Fern giggled, splashing her long back legs. Everyone laughed and panted together. Olive's brown fur dripped and gleamed. She felt like the luckiest otter in the whole wide river. The sun was still climbing, and the day was only beginning.



Next came Fern's splashing game. Everyone had to splash the water high and shout a happy word. "Splash! Birthday! Splash! Joy!" they cried. Bramble splashed with his broad paws, making a giant whoosh. Pip fluttered just above the spray, dodging droplets. Olive laughed so hard her whiskers wiggled. Water flew everywhere, sparkling like tiny diamonds in the morning light.



After the splashing, Bramble brought out a raft he had built from twigs and leaves. It was small and sturdy, just right for a birthday treat. On top sat a crown of woven reeds with tiny yellow flowers tucked inside. "For you," said Bramble softly. "I made it myself." Olive's big dark eyes grew round with wonder.



Olive placed the crown gently on her head. It fit perfectly between her tiny rounded ears. Pip tied a fresh reed bracelet around Olive's wrist and tucked a yellow flower in it. "Now you look like a true river queen!" Pip declared. Olive twirled on the raft, her thick tapered tail swishing. All her friends cheered, and the river seemed to cheer along with them.



Olive sat on the raft and looked at her friends. "You remembered," she whispered. "You remembered that I love leaf parades and racing and splashing." Pip nodded. "Of course we did! You are our friend, and friends remember what makes you happy." Olive felt a warm glow spread from her nose to the tip of her tail.



Fern hopped up beside her. "That is why we planned everything in secret," the frog said. "Seeing your happy face is the best part." Bramble nodded, his small friendly eyes crinkling. Olive realized that her friends had been busy all morning, not because they forgot, but because they cared. Her heart felt full, like a river after spring rain.



The friends floated together on the raft and watched the decorated leaves drift far away down the river. Some would travel for miles, carrying tiny berries and petals. Olive waved goodbye to each one. "Thank you for the most wonderful birthday," she said softly. The sun was warm on her back, and the water sang its gentle song.



As evening came, the friends gathered on the bank. They shared berries and told stories about the day. Olive laughed at the memory of Bramble's giant splash. Pip sang a little song with her quick bright eyes half closed. Fern did a silly dance. It was simple and sweet, and Olive did not want it to end.



Before they said goodnight, Olive looked at each of her friends. "You did not just remember my birthday," she said. "You remembered me." Pip tucked her wing around her scarf. Bramble smiled his big-toothed smile. Fern nodded with golden eyes shining. Olive felt loved from her whiskers to her tail, warm and safe and truly special.



Olive curled up in her cozy den that night, still wearing the reed crown with its tiny yellow flower. Outside, the river whispered in the moonlight. She thought about the floating leaf parade, the racing, the splashing, and the sweet gifts. Thoughtful gestures, she decided, are the best way to say happy birthday. She closed her big dark eyes and smiled.