

## The Whisper that Woke Ruffles

Ruffles' ears perked up as the sounds of screeching tires and honking horns filled his tiny Waterdown apartment. It was springtime, and almost everyone was outside soaking in the warm air. The scent of freshly-cut grass drifted in the open window, but something felt off.

The playful Schnoodle paced the living room, his paws tapping softly against the hardwood floor. His owner, Max, wasn't there. At first, Ruffles thought maybe he'd just overslept or gone for an extra-long walk. However, as Ruffles looked around the room more, he realized that he and his sister, Luna the cat, were all alone. The thrill of an adventure tingled in Ruffles' paws as he realized that with Max gone, they could do anything they wanted! Ruffles began to try to get Luna to play a game of tag with him. He bowed down and yipped at her. Luna, who was sprawled out in a patch of sunlight, didn't move.

"Come on, Luna! You're It!" Ruffles insisted.

"I don't want to play. I'm enjoying my nap in the sunshine," Luna yawned.

"But this is our chance!" Ruffles insisted, circling her. "If Max were here, he'd say no. He'd worry we'd knock over a lamp or scratch the couch again."

Luna opened one eye and gave him a slow blink. "You're acting weird. You love tag, but your tail is barely wagging."

Ruffles paused, his ears drooping slightly. She was right. Something didn't feel like a game anymore.

Ruffles gave up and jumped on the back of the couch to look out the window. That was another thing Max never let him do. Ruffles' eyes darted back and forth as he watched the bustling street below, filled with honking cars and busy people. Suddenly, a sharp pain of hunger jolted through him, making his tummy rumble like a thunderstorm. Ruffles looked at his bowl. There was nothing in it. What was he going to do?

"Luna," he said, nudging her with his nose, "I'm starving. There's no food."

Luna stretched and blinked slowly. "Max always fills our bowls. You probably missed it."

"No," Ruffles said, his voice trembling. "Max didn't come home. He's gone. And our bowls are empty."

Luna jumped up and sniffed her own bowl. Empty. She started to panic too. How would they survive without food?

Suddenly, the pets heard Ruffles' name drift through the window like a whisper.

"Ruff-lllles"

It sounded like Max's voice!

"Did you hear that?" Ruffles asked Luna.

They ran to the window to see if they could see where Max was. The living room window was open just enough that if they wanted to, they could squeeze through and climb down the narrow fire escape to enter the heart of the city. The siblings thought about it and then, with shared determination, agreed to climb through the window and set off on a journey to find Max together. Once they hit the sidewalk, the dynamic duo darted directly towards Fortinos, their hearts pounding with anticipation as they hoped to catch Max in the act of buying food. They raced past blooming tulips and barking dogs toward the front windows of Fortinos, where the scent of fresh bread wafted out. When they reached the front of the store, Ruffles and Luna jumped up on the window ledge to look into the store to see if Max was inside. There were tall people, short people, young people and old people, but they didn't see Max anywhere.

"Let's continue our journey and look around the rest of the town," suggested Ruffles.

Luna agreed, "OK, let's go and look around the rest of the town for Max. He has to be here somewhere."

Suddenly, Ruffles heard his name whispered in the wind again. He turned and saw someone familiar across the street in Memorial Park. They wore a Blue Jays hat tilted just the way Max always wore his, and they walked with a familiar bounce. "It's him! It has to be him!" Ruffles thought, his heart pounding with hope. He ran after them, and Luna followed close behind him. As the pets got closer to the person, the person turned around, but it wasn't Max. Ruffles skidded to a stop and Luna almost crashed into him as she quickly stopped herself.

Ruffles' and Luna's hearts sank, but they were determined to keep going to find Max. They looked all over town, scouring Weeks, the library, and Dollarama, but Max wasn't in any of those places. They decided to head over to Sealey Park.

Ruffles trotted ahead, tail wagging, but then stopped. "Wait! This doesn't look right."

Luna caught up and looked around. "Where's the park? I thought it was this way." It wasn't.

They were surrounded by tall buildings and weird smells. Cars zoomed past, and people didn't even notice two little pets trying to find their human.

"I think we're lost," Ruffles said, his ears drooping.

Luna didn't answer right away. She just stared at the sidewalk like it might give her a clue. "We'll figure it out," she said finally, but her voice sounded unsure.

They walked for a while, turning corners and sniffing the air, hoping for something familiar. But everything looked the same. Loud. Busy. Confusing.

Ruffles sat down next to a trash can. "What if Max doesn't find us?"

Luna sat beside him and snuggled up close. "He will. Or we'll find him. We're not giving up!"

Just then, Ruffles' keen nose picked up a familiar scent. He barked excitedly at Luna, and the two pets set off after Max's scent. The scent trail guided them through more of Waterdown's busy streets as they dodged buses and oblivious pedestrians. The scent led them to a tall building. With their noses to the ground, they skillfully slipped inside as someone exited the front door. The pets followed Max's scent up the stairs to an apartment that had its door open ajar.

"He's in here, Luna! Max is here. I can smell him!" declared Ruffles.

Ruffles pushed the door open a little wider with his nose so that his body would fit through the opening, and then he burst inside. Unfortunately, when he looked around, Max wasn't there. Ruffles didn't understand because Max's scent was so strong. He felt defeated. Ruffles stopped to think, and when he looked around, he realized that there was something strangely familiar about this apartment. Ruffles and Luna continued to

scan the walls and the furniture, and then they looked at each other. This wasn't a strange apartment. It was their apartment! They had followed Max's scent home!! Frustration washed over the two pets. They had searched the entire city, only to end up back home without finding Max. Exhausted from their long journey, they decided to take a nap to recharge before resuming their search. As they curled up together, Ruffles tried to sleep, but he kept hearing the sound of his name being whispered like a distant echo.

"Ruffles!" "Ruffles!"

He pressed his paws over his ears to try to muffle the sound, but it was no use. Then, he opened his eyes and saw something astonishing. Max was standing right beside him, calling his name! When did Max come home? How had he snuck past them? That is when Ruffles realized that Max's disappearance and his incredible adventure to find his owner had all been a dream! Ruffles bolted up towards Max. His tail was wagging wildly, and he began showering Max with enthusiastic licks. Max started groaning softly as he tried to fend off the attack of affection, but Ruffles didn't care because his heart was bursting with joy. His Max was home, and they were together, and that was all that mattered.

Ruffles stretched and looked around. Everything was normal again. But something felt different. Even though it was just a dream, it stuck with him. Ruffles remembered how scared and lost he'd felt, and how Luna had stayed by his side the whole time.

He wagged his tail and went over and curled up next to her again.

“Thanks,” he whispered.

Luna opened one eye. “For what?”

“For always being there. I think I’m braver when I’m with you.”

She smiled, a bit confused, and closed her eyes again.

Ruffles didn’t know if Max would ever disappear like that in real life, but if he did, Ruffles knew one thing for sure, he wouldn’t give up. Not as long as he had Luna!