



Leo's First Step: The Uncharted Hallway

Queenelle Bonnici



Leo stands at the threshold of Oakridge Middle School, his brand-new backpack feeling heavy against his shoulders. Buses hiss and rumble as swarms of loud, older-looking kids flood through the tall glass doors. He adjusts his jacket zipper, takes a slow breath, and steps into the roaring noise of the main foyer.



Inside, the endless corridor stretches out like a labyrinth lined with tall metal lockers and bright welcoming banners. Leo glances down at his crumpled paper schedule, trying to match class codes with room numbers while dodging busy students. Every doorway looks identical, and the chatter around him swirls into an intimidating hum.



Reaching his assigned locker, Leo stares at the silvery dial on the lock, his fingers trembling slightly. He turns it right, left, and right again, but the heavy door refuses to budge on his third attempt. Dropping his head in brief frustration, he wonders if everyone else was handed a secret instruction manual he missed.



Need a trick for those sticky latches? a soft voice asks behind him, making Leo spin around. A cheerful girl with paint-stained sneakers and a bright yellow notebook smiles warmly, holding up a binder. She demonstrates a gentle lift-and-tug motion on the handle, causing the lock to pop open with a satisfying click.



In his first class, Mr. Harrison's art room, sunlight streams through large windows onto tables covered in clay and sketchbooks. Leo takes a seat near the window, feeling his shoulders relax as the teacher invites everyone to doodle their favorite personal memory. Maya, the girl from the hallway, sits at the same table and unfolds her drawing pens.



By mid-day, the bustling cafeteria feels like a high-stakes obstacle course packed with clattering trays and booming voices. Leo walks carefully with his lunch tray, eyes scanning the sea of unfamiliar faces for an open spot. For a brief second, a pang of self-doubt bubbles up, making the large room feel overwhelming.



Maya waves him over to a wooden table near the corner where two other students are sharing a bag of pretzels. Sitting down, Leo joins their lively debate about comic book superheroes and drawing techniques, realizing his worries are slowly melting away. Laughter ripples through their corner as they trade stories about their chaotic morning schedules.



During afternoon science class, the students gather around lab tables to construct small bridge models out of wooden sticks. Working as partners, Leo and his new classmate Sam brainstorm a sturdy triangular arch design together. Their collaborative idea works so well that their bridge holds the weight of three heavy textbooks without bending.



As the final bell echoes through the halls, a wave of relief and quiet pride washes over Leo. The once-intimidating corridors now feel familiar, and his backpack somehow feels much lighter than it did that morning. He slams his locker shut with confidence, knowing he has survived—and even enjoyed—his very first day.



Outside under the crisp afternoon sky, Leo waits by the bus stop with Maya and Sam, laughing under the golden autumn trees. Looking back at the school building, he realizes that stepping into the unknown was not as scary as he feared. With new friends by his side and a sketchbook in hand, he feels completely ready for whatever tomorrow brings.