

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of *If These Wings Could Fly* opens with Leighton taking a hard look at her academic performance. She's proud of her perfect 100 in AP English, but other subjects don't seem to reflect the same level of success. Particularly disheartening is her C in Art I, a grade she never anticipated. Art was meant to be a break from the academic pressures she'd been facing, a subject that would allow her to focus on her other interests, such as her work at the school newspaper and her college applications. However, this C brings disappointment, as she expected the class to offer a bit of relief instead of causing additional stress. The emotional weight of this grade follows her through the school halls as she tries to shake off her frustration. She longs for a mental escape, a space where she can indulge in her love for reading and music, two passions that help her clear her mind.

Leighton's journey through the hallways is interrupted when she runs into Liam, a fellow student who notices her frustration. In their exchange, Liam teases her about her grades, breaking through some of the tension she's feeling. Their conversation reveals the beginnings of a friendship, with Liam offering to help her improve her art skills. Leighton is initially resistant, doubting her ability to succeed in a subject she had seen as easy. But Liam's offer, wrapped in humor and good-natured teasing, begins to soften her stance. She finds herself intrigued by the idea of spending time with him outside of school, even if the tutoring session is presented as nothing more than a casual academic offer. As they chat, Leighton starts to feel the spark of a deeper connection with him, though she's not entirely ready to admit it.

Their playful banter continues, and the conversation shifts when Liam invites Leighton to a football game that evening. The event includes a bonfire afterward, something that fills Leighton with anxiety. She isn't the type to enjoy large parties or social gatherings, often preferring the quieter moments spent alone or with close friends. Yet, Liam's enthusiasm is infectious, and despite her reservations, she feels a pull to join in. A part of her wants to experience the excitement of the evening, to step outside her comfort zone and embrace the spontaneity of the situation. But the hesitation remains, as she grapples with the pressure to remain true to herself while considering what stepping out of her familiar world might mean for her relationships with others.

Leighton decides to decline Liam's invitation and boards the bus to head home, her mind spinning with uncertainty. Her friend Campbell notices her mood and presses her about Liam, teasing her about her budding connection with him. The conversation then shifts to her academic future, particularly her dream of attending New York University. Campbell's protective nature shines through as she expresses concern about Leighton's grades, highlighting their shared fears about the future. Leighton begins to feel the weight of these worries, as the pressure to live up to her own ambitions starts to mount. She wonders whether her current path, which feels safe and predictable, is the best one for her future. At the same time, she contemplates what it would mean to take risks—whether in her academic pursuits or in her personal life.

The chapter ends with Leighton lost in thought, weighing the possibilities of her future and wondering which path to take. The themes of ambition, friendship, and personal growth are explored deeply, as Leighton faces the reality of her own fears and aspirations. Her internal struggle between staying in her comfort zone and pushing herself to take chances is something that many readers will relate to, especially those navigating the complexities of young adulthood. The chapter invites reflection on the difficult choices that come with pursuing personal goals while also dealing with the expectations of others. Leighton's story is a poignant reminder of the courage required to move forward, whether in academics, relationships, or life itself. The narrative masterfully captures the tension between what feels safe and what might lead to a more fulfilling and transformative future.