

Chapter Twenty-Three

In Chapter Twenty-Three of **If These Wings Could Fly**, the narrative opens with a vivid description of a bonfire, symbolizing both physical heat and internal turmoil. The protagonist, Leighton, feels overwhelmed by the fire's intensity, which mirrors her own emotional unrest. Amidst the warmth and flickering flames, she finds comfort in Liam's presence, whose attentive and grounding demeanor provides a momentary refuge from her inner chaos. Their quiet connection contrasts sharply with the surrounding environment, highlighting Leighton's desire to escape the discomfort and painful memories ignited by the fire.

As the evening progresses, Leighton and Liam attempt to slip away from the group, but their departure is quickly noticed and met with teasing from Liam's intoxicated friends. The interaction underscores the social tensions and discomfort Leighton experiences within this circle, especially as she faces unwanted attention and judgment. Liam's apology for his friends' behavior and his protective stance reveal a deeper care and sensitivity, setting the stage for a more intimate and genuine connection away from the group's scrutiny.

Choosing to evade the confines of their small town, Leighton playfully suggests impossible destinations, illustrating her longing for freedom and escape. Liam responds with a proposal to simply drive around, and they venture onto dark, quiet back roads. The absence of streetlights and the isolation of the setting create a private space where their relationship can evolve without interruption. Their mutual hesitation and subsequent decision to stop the car signify a pivotal moment of vulnerability and courage, as they navigate the unspoken tension between them.

The chapter culminates in a tender and exploratory kiss, marking a significant shift in Leighton's self-perception and emotional openness. The physical closeness and Liam's gentle attentiveness help Leighton shed her guarded persona, revealing a more

authentic and vulnerable self. Despite an internal voice cautioning restraint, she embraces the moment, experiencing safety and warmth in Liam's presence. This intimate encounter encapsulates Leighton's complex feelings of desire, fear, and the hope for genuine connection beyond her usual defenses.