

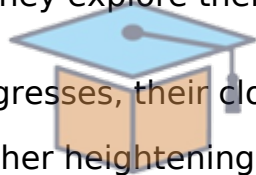
Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of *If These Wings Could Fly* opens with the protagonist, Leighton, reflecting on the sunset as she makes her way to Liam's house. The vibrant colors of the sunset contrast with the imperfections of Auburn, a town that holds both beauty and flaws in equal measure. The red glow of the sun brings to mind a chaotic moment with her sister, Juniper, when highlighters were used on the pages of *The Bell Jar*. This juxtaposition of bright hues against dark words symbolizes the complex, often conflicting emotions Leighton feels. Upon her arrival at Liam's house, her mother teases her about needing a tutor, specifically in art, which leads to playful banter between them. Leighton then shows her mother her latest still-life project, which elicits a laugh, and in a tender moment, she kisses her mother goodbye, feeling a mix of affection and a sense of longing for something more.

Upon entering Liam's home, Leighton is warmly greeted by his sister, Fiona, who seems relieved to see her, particularly as a shield from Liam's usual antics. Their easy camaraderie sets the tone for the visit, with Fiona playfully commenting on Liam's hobbies and teasing him about his quirks. As the door opens, Mrs. McNamara, Liam's mother, enters, filling the room with a sense of warmth and comfort. She shares her experiences of teaching in a small, predominantly white town and speaks passionately about the importance of inclusivity in education. These conversations subtly highlight the different dynamics of their families while revealing the shared experiences of growing up in a small community. The openness of Liam's family contrasts with Leighton's often complicated home life, giving her a brief respite from her usual struggles.

Liam's arrival brings a wave of energy, and his charming presence leaves Leighton feeling both comfortable and unsure of where their relationship stands. They banter casually while picking out snacks, and Liam's laid-back nature continues to break down

Leighton's walls, slowly easing her reservations. As they move to Liam's room, the space is filled with creative works: art, graphic novels, and glimpses of Liam's personal aspirations. Amidst the playful exchanges, they begin discussing deeper topics, such as their future dreams and the fears that come with them, particularly regarding their small-town life. Leighton starts to see Liam not just as a friend, but as someone with whom she could potentially share more than just surface-level interactions. Despite the lightheartedness of their conversation, there's an undeniable connection that grows stronger as they explore their shared ambitions and anxieties.



Summary

As the evening progresses, their close proximity while working on art leads to playful, flirty moments, further heightening the chemistry between them. However, the arrival of Fiona interrupts the atmosphere, reminding them both of the boundaries that exist within their friendship. The interruption gives way to a more reflective tone as the reality of their relationship settles in. Before they part ways, Liam expresses a desire to spend more time together beyond the confines of school and their current routine. Leighton, torn between her sense of responsibility and the excitement of a spontaneous connection, agrees to join him for a bonfire, a decision that adds to the thrill of breaking away from her usual routine. Despite the internal tug-of-war between ambition and enjoyment, she feels a spark of exhilaration, wondering what this moment could lead to.

As she returns home, a swirl of emotions floods her mind. There's a sense of excitement about venturing into something new, but also a feeling of guilt, as if she's stepping away from her usual obligations and expectations. In bed that night, she feels the weight of her choices—how they blend youthful exploration with the responsibilities that weigh heavily on her. The chapter ends with Leighton caught in a delicate balance between family obligations, the thrill of teenage life, and the desire to forge her own path, setting the stage for the emotional complexities that will follow.