

Chapter 50

Chapter 50 of *If These Wings Could Fly* portrays a pivotal moment in the protagonist Leighton's emotional journey as she faces the discomfort of attending a high school art show where her own work is on display. Leighton stands beside her piece, *Portrait of an Old Crow*, feeling the crushing weight of embarrassment and self-doubt that so often accompanies high school events. The eyes of her peers, the judgment she imagines, and the reality of presenting her personal work push her further into a state of vulnerability. Although Liam encourages her to continue with her art by suggesting she take Art II next spring, she remains skeptical of his praise, comparing herself to an old house that needs restoration. This internal comparison reflects her low self-esteem and inability to accept the support being offered. The juxtaposition between Liam's genuine encouragement and Leighton's inner doubts highlights the complexity of their dynamic, where Leighton is still struggling to believe in herself despite external validation.

As the evening stretches on, time seems to drag painfully for Leighton, heightening her discomfort in the social setting. At 7:30, desperate to escape the tense atmosphere surrounding her, she hurries away from her display and seeks out Liam, hoping to find some sense of solace. But instead of simply seeking him out for comfort, she unexpectedly discovers his artwork, which captivates her in a way she hadn't anticipated. His drawings depict three girls, with one notably resembling Leighton in both her features and expression, conveying deep feelings of isolation and heartbreak. The piece is titled *THESE BROKEN WINGS: AN ORIGIN STORY*, a title that adds weight to her realization. The art deeply unsettles her, and she confronts Liam, demanding to understand why he would choose to depict her in such a way. As their eyes meet, Leighton's internal world collides with the rawness of her feelings, leaving her questioning whether Liam sees her as broken, as depicted in his art.

The emotional intensity of the moment drives Leighton to retreat to the girls' locker room, seeking a place of refuge away from the charged atmosphere. Liam, concerned but not understanding the depth of her hurt, follows her, gently reminding her that he is her ride and that she is staying at his house. The cold air outside does little to soothe the discomfort between them, and as they drive in silence, Leighton struggles to process her emotions, feeling the weight of her vulnerability and the hurt that lingers. Upon reaching Liam's home, Leighton is still emotionally raw, needing to express herself despite the silence that has settled between them. She states firmly, "I am not broken," signaling her defiance against the portrayal of her inner struggles. Liam, recognizing the pain he's caused, apologizes, assuring her that the depiction was accidental and expressing regret for not forewarning her about the nature of his work. His apology does little to ease the emotional rift between them, leaving Leighton grappling with her feelings of exposure and vulnerability.

After the heavy exchange, Liam invites Leighton to see more of his artwork, specifically a comic that tells the transformative story of a female character who begins as fragile and vulnerable but grows into a powerful hero. As Leighton examines the drawings, she begins to understand the underlying message of strength and resilience, seeing the character evolve from a place of vulnerability into someone who can stand tall and fearless. This revelation shifts her perspective on Liam's intentions, revealing that his work was not meant to harm her, but to explore themes of personal growth and empowerment. As they share this quiet moment together, with their laughter and the ease that follows, a deepened bond forms between them. This moment of connection offers Leighton a glimpse into Liam's creative vision, one that reflects themes of transformation and hope. By the end of the chapter, Leighton decides to release the anger she had initially felt, understanding that moving forward in their relationship requires embracing vulnerability and letting go of misconceptions. This decision marks a turning point for Leighton, as she acknowledges the importance of mutual understanding and connection in building a relationship.