

Chapter 61

Chapter 61 of *If These Wings Could Fly* opens with the protagonist, Leighton, being summoned out of her art class by Mrs. Riley to discuss an important matter in the newsroom. As Leighton enters the space, Mrs. Riley reveals that the council has decided to award her a scholarship of five thousand dollars in recognition of her essay. This announcement initially fills Leighton with joy, but her happiness quickly turns to confusion when Mrs. Riley informs her that the council has also decided not to publish her essay in the *Auburn Gazette*. Leighton's excitement over the scholarship is soon overshadowed by questions about why her work, which was clearly deemed worthy of a financial reward, is considered unsuitable for public consumption. Mrs. Riley, attempting to clarify, explains that while the council acknowledges the quality of Leighton's essay, they have labeled it a "liability." This term, used in reference to something that could cause harm or legal trouble, leaves Leighton questioning who stands to be hurt by the essay's publication.

Leighton's mind begins to race as she wonders how the essay could affect her, her family, or the community at large. Mrs. Riley, sensing her confusion, suggests that the potential danger extends to both Leighton and her family, indicating that the town's interests are also at stake. The council's hesitation to publish the essay adds an unsettling layer to the situation, as it becomes clear that the decision is not just about the content of her work but the consequences of making it public. Leighton's concerns deepen as she ponders the broader implications of this decision. The more she thinks about it, the more she realizes that the town's collective interests might be influencing this seemingly personal matter. As Leighton contemplates the council's motivations, she notices Joe, a character connected to her in some way, sitting outside, a silent witness to her turmoil. His presence, though unspoken, amplifies her discomfort, intensifying the unease that has already begun to settle in her mind.

In an effort to resolve the situation, Leighton proposes a solution: she suggests that the council publish her essay anonymously. This idea, she believes, would relieve her of the perceived liability while still allowing her message to be heard. Mrs. Riley, however, hesitates at the suggestion, expressing doubt about whether the council would agree to such a compromise. Leighton, undeterred, argues that by publishing anonymously, the liability would shift to the council, absolving her of any risk. She points out that if the council continues to refuse her request, it would only reveal that their concern for her safety is less about protecting her and more about safeguarding their own interests. Leighton's unwavering insistence shows her determination to have her work recognized, despite the council's reluctance and the personal cost it may carry. Her resilience is evident as she fights for the value of her words and the opportunity to make an impact, even when others seem hesitant to support her.

Further, Leighton shares her plan to use her essay for other college applications, regardless of whether it is published in the *Auburn Gazette*. She explains that the recognition of her work doesn't need to come from the council, as long as it can help her future prospects. This forward-thinking approach shows Leighton's strength and determination to keep moving forward despite the challenges. Mrs. Riley, seeing Leighton's drive, agrees to approach the council on her behalf, offering a glimmer of hope that the situation might be resolved in Leighton's favor. Yet, despite this small reassurance, as the conversation ends, Leighton looks back out the window and notices that Joe has disappeared. His absence highlights the emotional isolation Leighton feels in this moment—surrounded by people, yet still alone in her struggle. This moment of solitude, underscored by the emptiness left by Joe's disappearance, intensifies Leighton's sense of being disconnected from those around her, further emphasizing the internal battle she faces as she navigates the complexities of her situation. The chapter, through its quiet moments and intense reflections, underscores the emotional weight of Leighton's journey as she grapples with the pressure to be both seen and heard in a world that seems reluctant to acknowledge her.