**The Night of a Thousand Butterflies**Elena stared at the duffel bag, her fingers running through her silky brown hair. Her gut danced with moths that refused to settle. She tapped her foot softly and pressed her knees together; each movement betrayed her nervousness.

At Chloe's front door, Elena's shoulders rose toward her ears. She attempted a smile, but it was strained like a rubber band stretched to its limit. Her heart pounded as she did her best to avoid the other girls, her eyes glancing over at the clock on the wall. Time wouldn't move quickly enough; instead, it dragged.

Laughter and warmth greeted her within, but the relaxation was distant. Elena sat on the bed's edge, knees locked together, nibbling at her nails with shaking fingers. She did not know if she could talk even if she tried. Between bursts of laughter, she glanced into the living room. She remembered the couch that she and her mum used on movie nights. Her heart was hollow, yearning for home.

Chloe elbowed her playfully, and Elena smiled stiffly, treating herself like a fragile ornament. However, she traced the cardboard moon on the ceiling with her finger, musing longingly for her own bedroom at home.

And as the evening went to games and snacks, things changed. Elena's foot tapped out in time to a good joke she shared with them. She leaned in when Chloe whispered a secret, and her fidgety hands stilled as amazement overcame fear. The blanket fort surrounded them, closing in around Elena like an angel. Her shoulders finally came down.

Her heart kept pounding, but now it was steady enough, like a timid butterfly learning to come to rest. When someone was distributing marshmallows, Elena's hand raised involuntarily. She was holding one tentatively out to a friend; her voice was soft but firm.

Eventually, snuggled in a sleeping bag under the soft glow of fairy lights, Elena's breathing regulated. She stared up at ceiling stars, her fingers tracing constellations in the fabric above. Homesickness still tugged at her, but it coexisted with something new: warmth, belonging, friendship.