

TEJEDORA

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For Lee

The quilt held all of the child's favorite things. His mother was a gifted *tejedora*, weaver: she had the rare knowledge that let her spin the stories and songs themselves, the pictures and scents and tastes, into the yarn that she worked with her clicking needles. The human mind was fragile. Memories could slip through the cracks too easily, but the child would never lose those pieces of his past as long as he kept the quilt close.

The child chose the yarn for each new, palm-sized square. Sky-blue for the clapping game he played with his best friend. Cinnamon-brown for the taste of *horchata*, the sweet drink made with milk and rice and vanilla. Sunlight yellow for the hugs his *abuela* gave him. His mother knitted the squares and pieced them together into a mosaic as singular as the boy himself. From the time when he was old enough to choose the colors, the child knew how much the quilt mattered. Each time his mother knitted a new square, he felt the yarn curling through his thoughts, winding around the things he loved to hold them tight and safe.

The mother used her knitting needles to create her magic, or what other people would call magic, but she kept something else close to her: six spiders, each about the size of a walnut, carved out of wood. They were beautiful, made by her grandfather for her grandmother, who was also a *tejedora*. Their sleek bodies and slender legs were veined with the grain of the pine. Their eyes, made out of polished glass, glittered like dewdrops in the sun. The mother kept the spiders near her, but did not use them yet. For anyone else, they would only have been beautiful carvings. For her, when her hands grew too stiff to work her needles anymore, the spiders would – as they had done for her grandmother – do what spiders did best.

The mother often had trouble getting new colors of yarn. There on the poorest edge of Tegucigalpa, where rival gangs tore at each other with knives and gunfire, the simplest things became luxuries and the luxuries were as remote as heaven. The mother braved the dangerous streets day after day, to get to the better neighborhoods where beautiful things could be had for the asking. She didn't ask for anything for herself: only the colors she wove for her boy.

Someday, she knew they would have to leave. She could scrape some kind of life for herself here on the edges, but she wouldn't lose her son to the drug gangs that had taken his father, or let him grow up in a place where tomorrow was barely a hope. She had a sister away to the north in the *Estados Unidos*. If she and her boy were lucky, if God did care for the weak, they might make it that far.

She didn't know what might happen on that journey across land she couldn't imagine. As the time came when she knew they would have to go, she did something she had never done before.

Her son had never asked her to weave herself into his quilt. *Mamá* was always there, as certain as the patched roof of their shabby house and the faded paint-peeling walls. During their last handful of nights at home, as May burned into June, the mother chose her own favorite colors. Rose, gold, and the pale green of new grass. Carefully, she wove them into the mosaic, making a border around her child's memories. She did it in case, sometime soon, he would need the memory of her arms holding him.

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Estevan tried as hard as he could to like his tía Aurelia and tío James. They had come and gotten him out of that place in Texas where the American *soldados*, the soldiers in their dark-green uniforms and thick boots, put him and Mamá. Mamá had said she and Estevan would be safe once they got across the river, but the *soldados* caught them at a place called El Paso and put them in a

building with thick concrete walls and bars on the windows. Then one day they came and...but Estevan tried not to think about that. He had nightmares about it every time he slept.

Tía Aurelia was Mamá's sister. She told Estevan she was a little younger than Mamá, but she said that when she was seven years old, the age Estevan was now, people had thought she and his mother were twins. She called him Este, the way Mamá did, and *mi amor* and *mi cielo*, and she told him she was so glad to finally meet him, she'd always wanted to meet her sister's boy. She told him she had missed Mamá so much when she married tío James and moved to *los Estados Unidos*. She had never stopped worrying about the family she had left behind in Tegucigalpa. She said she knew everything was going to be all right now, the American soldiers would let Mamá go soon, and Mamá would come to Arizona and be with her family.

Estevan tried to like his aunt, but she didn't look anything like Mamá. She didn't have the silvery hair or the crinkly lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth. She didn't have the quick hands that made wooden knitting needles click like crickets chirping at night. She didn't have thick knitter's calluses on her thumbs and fingertips. Tía Aurelia couldn't knit at all. And she didn't know how to make the foods Mamá loved to cook, even though her huge kitchen was smooth and shiny and clean, and she had more food in her tall refrigerator than Estevan thought anybody could ever eat. He had never been in a place like the apartment where his aunt and uncle lived. Everything looked and smelled brand-new, the carpets and paint and the wooden furniture.

Tía Aurelia smiled and told him how well-behaved and grown-up he was, and said he shouldn't worry, he should relax and feel right at home. But this wasn't his home, this place where everything tasted and sounded wrong. His aunt and uncle talked together in English and Estevan didn't understand. Every night, he woke up out of dreams that made him feel like he was drowning.

He didn't tell his aunt and uncle about the dreams. He also didn't tell them how he counted every single day since he'd lost Mamá. Then, on the night of the twenty-first day, he woke up screaming.

The little room in Texas had bars on its one little window. The American soldier-woman came in with a gun like the ones the bad boys carried back home. She caught Estevan by the wrist, she was pulling him out of the little room, he didn't know where she was going to take him. Mamá sat on the wooden bench, under the little window with the bars on it. She cried and twisted her hands in her lap and her face looked like soft dough with holes for eyes. And Estevan yelled for help as loud as he could. He fought and kicked at the soldier-woman's heavy boots, but she hung onto his wrist and dragged him to the door and he couldn't get his arm loose. And Mamá sat there on the bench crying and didn't get up or reach for him or say one word.

Estevan heard himself screaming out loud. *No! I won't go! Mamá, help!* The darkness in the bedroom clutched at him and his heart bang-bang-banged in his ears. He fought his way loose of the tangled bedsheets. His quilt, the quilt Mamá made him, had fallen on the floor. He heard footsteps coming fast down the hall.

Tía Aurelia turned the bedroom light on. The glare hurt his eyes. "*Hijito mío,*" she said. She sat on the bed and touched Estevan's face with her soft hand. Mamá used to smell like yeast bread and cinnamon, but tía Aurelia smelled too sweet, like the lilies they had in church. "You had a bad dream?" she said.

Estevan nodded. He didn't like her calling him a little boy, and he didn't want to remember the soldier-woman in her big boots. If he stayed very still and quiet inside himself, maybe everything else would go away.

Tía Aurelia picked his quilt up off the floor. "Here. This will help." She wrapped it around his shoulders as if he was a baby. "Your mamá made it for you, I know," she said. "You were dreaming about her, weren't you."

Estevan nodded again. His throat hurt so much he couldn't talk anyway. The quilt felt warm around him. He remembered the clicking of Mamá's knitting needles, how she'd told him he would always remember the most important things, as long as he had his quilt with him. But he didn't want to think about those things, because then he might cry.

Tía Aurelia said, "I remember how much your mamá loved to knit. There never was anybody else as good as her, from the time we were little." She looked close into his face and smiled. "Your grandmama tried to teach me too, but I never could learn."

She said it as if she was telling him a joke. Estevan couldn't smile. She went on, "Your grandmama was so proud that Luci was a real *tejedora*. You know what that means, don't you?"

Anger bubbled in Estevan's stomach. His whole life, he'd known about Mamá's magic with the yarn and the needles. He probably knew more about that magic than anybody, especially tía Aurelia who couldn't even knit. But when his mouth opened, he heard himself say, "Mamá's name is Lucera."

Tía Aurelia looked surprised. "Of course, *mi amor*. But when we were little, everybody called her Luci. I was Lia." She reached out to touch the quilt, the sunshine-yellow square near Estevan's hand. "So did she pick out this color, or did you?"

She was making him talk. Estevan wanted to yank the quilt away from her, but it was safer to sit very still. "I picked it," he said.

"What did your mama put in it?"

Estevan swallowed. His eyes felt like he had gotten dirt in them. "*Abuelita*," he said. "When *abuelita* gives me a hug."

Tía Aurelia's eyes looked sad. "I haven't seen your grandmama in a long time," she said. "I remember her hugs." She touched the sky-blue square on Estevan's shoulder. "What about this one?"

“My best friend.” Estevan didn’t have to touch the square to hear the song he and Alejo sang, or feel their hands clapping against each other. When he and Mamá got ready to leave their old house, she’d told him he might not be able to see Alejo anymore, but he didn’t need to be sad because he would always have the quilt to remember with.

Now his aunt had hold of the edge of the quilt. “And this green is Luci’s favorite color,” she said. “Or one of them anyway.” She ran her thumb back and forth along the yarn. “When she had her *quinceañera*, she wanted a dress this exact green, and she wanted a bouquet of pink and yellow roses. Your grandpapa said it cost too much, but your grandmama said, a girl only has her fifteenth birthday once.”

Estevan didn’t want to hear about that, or think about what Mamá had said, that last day in their old house before they left. He could hear the words in his head anyway.

“I don’t want you to be scared, but it won’t be easy to get where we’re going. If anything happens, if you and I end up in different places sometime, everything will be all right as long as you keep your quilt with you. You’ll do that, won’t you?”

He had never seen her look so serious. He’d felt scared, even though she said not to, and he didn’t know what she meant about *different places*, but he tried to sit up straight and show her he knew how to be a man.

Now it didn’t matter how still he sat on the bed, or how still he tried to stay inside himself. He was ready to cry, but tía Aurelia was still sitting there holding onto the quilt as if Mamá had made it for her and not him.

She said something very quietly in English. He caught the name “Luci.” Anger made his face hot. “What did you say?” he demanded.

For a second, she looked at him as if she thought maybe she shouldn’t answer. Then in Spanish she explained, “I told your mamá that she was smart to put herself in your quilt.”

Estevan stuck his jaw out and clenched his teeth so hard they hurt. He was *not* going to cry. But Mamá put herself in his quilt. She thought sometime they might end up in different places...and she sat there on that bench and cried when the American soldier-woman took him away. She didn't make the woman stop. Now he was here, and she was still there in the little room with the bars on the windows, and it had been twenty-one days.

Tía Aurelia touched his face again. "*Hijito*, I know it's hard. You miss her so much. But it's going to be all right. We're going to help her get out of that place, and then she'll come here, and we'll all be together."

Estevan didn't believe it. Not when Mamá had let the soldier-woman take him.

He didn't want his aunt's hand on his cheek or her sad, worried eyes, or the bright light in the room or the quilt wrapped around him. He jerked away from her, yanked the quilt off, and threw it on the floor again. Then he burrowed under the smooth sheet and pulled it over his head to shut out the light.

"Go away," he said. Mamá would scold him for talking so disrespectfully, but she wasn't here.

For a long minute, nothing happened. Then the bed moved as his aunt got up. She touched his shoulder. "*Mi amor*," she said, "don't you want your quilt back?"

Everything will be all right as long as you keep your quilt with you. But it would never be all right again.

"No," he said. "I don't."

He lay perfectly still until the light went out and he heard her footsteps going away.

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Lucera knew how lucky she was that Aurelia and James had been able to take Estevan. Every day she offered prayers of thanks that she had a sister in this country, with a husband who was an

American citizen, and that the two of them had responded at once when the American *soldados* had taken Lucera's boy away from her. She knew where Estevan was and that he was safe. For this, she must give thanks for the rest of her life.

She didn't know what was going to happen to her. The American *soldados* had her in a prison in the city called El Paso, in Texas. They said she was a criminal for trying to come into the country. She knew the word *asylum*, but the *soldados* didn't want to hear it. The Spanish-speaking American lawyer who tried to help Lucera had told her that she might stay in jail for many months before anyone would listen to her reasons for coming here. Even if they did finally hear what she had to say, they might decide to send her back to Honduras. Estevan, now in the care of an American citizen, would stay behind. Lucera told herself she would manage alone. As long as she knew where her son was and that he was growing up healthy.

Every hour of every day, while she sat on the cot in her cell, or sat in the big room with the other women and ate the tasteless food she was given, Lucera tried to remember how lucky she was. Too many other mothers didn't know where their children were. She and the other women weren't supposed to talk together much, but the guards didn't really stop them. Lucera had met three women, two from Mexico and a fellow *hondureña*, whose children had also been taken somewhere else. The four of them helped each other stumble from one day to the next.

Jimena, one of the Mexican women, told Lucera and the others that she'd wanted to fight the soldier who took her toddler from her. "I'd have put my fist through his jaw," she said, one morning during Lucera's third week in the jail, scooping bland breakfast cereal on her spoon. "But if he fired his gun in that tiny room, the bullet could have gone anywhere." Lucera pictured the bullet ricocheting off the cement walls, the way the gang boys' bullets had chipped sidewalks and gouged houses back home. Jimena said, "My baby and I didn't come all this way for some *pendejo's* gun to tear her belly open." Lucera saw that too, and wished she didn't: the tiny body so violated, the blood

running free. Jimena laid her spoon on her tray with a solid *clink*. “But,” she said, “you can bet your life that nobody is going to keep my girl from me.”

She had the most hope of the four of them. Lucera admired her restless strength, like a tiger in a cage. Inés, the other *bondureña*, was more like Lucera herself, small and soft-voiced. She answered Jimena, “I don’t know. The lawyer says we can’t do much.”

The words clawed Lucera’s heart. Jimena’s jaw set. “American lawyers. What do they know?”

The other *mexicana*, Pilar, touched the place at her throat where Lucera knew she must have worn a crucifix or saint’s medal before the guards took all of those things away. Pilar was the oldest of the four of them. Her husband and two teenage boys had ended up in other prisons somewhere else. “Mother Mary will help our children,” she said. “I don’t ask for help for myself.”

Neither do I. Lucera didn’t answer out loud. She liked these women – they had to like each other, keep each other alive – but she never said much when they were all together. She couldn’t tell them she was a *tejedora*. In the prison, of course, that meant nothing: the guards had taken her needles, along with the six priceless spiders her grandfather had carved against his wife’s old age. Still, she had given her child a gift that the other mothers could not. Even if Este never saw her again, he would not forget her.

She couldn’t tell these grieving women that. Worse, she couldn’t tell them what she herself had done when the American *soldado* took her boy away. Every hour of every day, even as she tried to give thanks to God for the mercies He had granted her, she heard her son’s voice, screaming.

No! I won’t go! Mamá, help!

She and Este had come so far. When they crossed the river at El Paso, the last of her strength seemed to rush out of her, but she had thought they were safe. Then the soldier came to take Este away, and in the face of that horror, Lucera had nothing left to give. She had felt the tears

running down her cheeks as her son reached out for her, shouting and fighting the soldier with all his strength. Even her hands had been too heavy to lift.

Then Este was gone. She had not even managed to tell him she loved him.

“Lucera.” Jimena’s voice reached her from across the table. “*Mujer*, are you going to drink that juice or what?”

Lucera realized she was staring at the plastic cup on her tray. “I’m not thirsty,” she said. “Do you want it?”

Pilar was the one who answered. “No, Luci, you should drink it. You don’t eat enough as it is.”

“Look out, Luci,” Jimena said. “Pilar’s adopting you.”

The other women laughed. The sound made Lucera feel dizzy, like a rush of fresh air. *Luci*: only her sister and mother called her that. She drank the too-sweet juice, which had no real oranges in it that she could taste.

If only she knew exactly what the place looked like where Este spent his days. She had only gotten to talk to Aurelia twice so far, and the guards only gave her a few minutes each time. On the phone, she and Aurelia had both cried and tried to pretend they weren’t crying, and they had both talked about how the minute the *americanos* realized they had to let Lucera go, Lia and James would buy her a plane ticket to fly to Phoenix to be with her family. They had pretended to have answers for everything. As much as Lucera’s whole soul ached to hear her son’s voice, in real life instead of memory and imagination, she had let the minutes run out while Lia was still on the phone. She told herself it was because it would be hard and strange for Este to talk to her while she was still in this place. It would upset him too much. She tried not to admit, even to herself, that she didn’t want to know if he had given up on his mother.

He still had the quilt. Any time he wanted, he would be able to feel her arms around him. Sitting in the big cell, with the other women's voices murmuring around her, Lucera tried to hope.

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The morning after the bad night, twenty-two days after he lost Mamá, Estevan woke up with something heavy and cold in his stomach. His face felt stiff, as if it would hurt to blink his eyes. He felt the way he sometimes felt when he had to be sick, except he felt empty too, as if something that belonged inside him had gotten out and snuck away during the night.

It was early. The sun had just gotten up. Back home, Mamá would be awake already, but tía Aurelia and tío James slept later. Tío James worked in an office where they didn't need him to come in until after nine. Tía Aurelia didn't go to work. Soon she would get up and make Estevan a bowl of the thick warm cereal she said was good for him, and she would watch to make sure he ate enough of it. It was all right if he put some milk and sugar on it, but otherwise it tasted like warm nothing. This morning he didn't think he could open his mouth to put anything in. Even if he could, he didn't think it would fit in his stomach, with that cold heavy thing inside.

The quilt lay on the floor where he had thrown it last night. He looked at it over the side of the bed. The cold thing in his stomach seemed to get bigger, but the rest of him felt emptier than ever.

Everything will be all right as long as you keep your quilt with you.

The *soldado* with her gun. Mamá sitting there with the tears running down her face. Estevan couldn't forget things. The quilt wouldn't let him.

When he pushed the sheet back and got out of bed, his whole body felt so cold he got chills, but he picked up the quilt and held it away from him the way you hold smelly trash. Some of it still dragged on the ground. Carrying it that way, he tiptoed out of his room and down the hall.

Tía Aurelia kept scissors in the kitchen, in the drawer next to the stove. She used them to cut up meat. They were very sharp. Estevan wasn't supposed to touch them, but he knew how to be careful.

He took them out, touching them only by the handles. He put the quilt on the table and picked up the corner square, the one that was bright yellow for his *abuela*.

The scissors went *snick*, clipping through the stitches Mamá had knitted. Estevan watched the yellow square falling on the table in little pieces, the loose ends of yarn working free like worms. At first he felt nothing at all: just quiet. And then...

Abuelita kneeling in the yellow sunlight. Estevan was so small that the tiny yard looked huge, abuelita so far away. His legs felt wobbly and he was scared he would fall, but he took one step forward. Abuelita called to him – “come here, little one, that’s it” – and he took another step and another. Then her warm hands reached out and caught him, and she swooped him up into the sunlight, and he was laughing...

Estevan cut faster. The cold thing in his stomach slid around like ice melting in a cup. He cut bigger pieces, slashing the scissors through the middle of one square and then another. The colors tumbled onto the table and floor.

Alejo came up the road shouting. “Este, come on! Mamá says we can play till supper!” Estevan ran outside into a summer afternoon where the blue sky reached down to touch the cracked pavement, and the air tasted like being happy...

...In the kitchen, Mamá opened a glass bottle full of creamy white milk. “Hijito mio, it’s time to make borchata.” Estevan’s favorite drink, that Mamá only made for special days because the milk and vanilla cost a lot, but today was his fifth birthday. He could already taste the sweet rice and feel the smooth liquid sliding down his throat. Nothing ever tasted better...

Now the cold thing inside him was gone. Estevan's stomach felt full like a huge ball of water, and he was going to be sick, he was going to cry. The scissors went faster and faster, the sharp blades moving *snicksnicksnick*.

...rain on the roof in the old house, rain on the roof in winter, but inside it was warm and dry and safe. Mamá was baking bread. Her eyes didn't look tired; she was humming a song...

...last Christmas when Estevan and Alejo searched every street and gutter for empty bottles and old nails and bits of broken wood. They took everything they found to the junk shop and got money for it, and Estevan took his share to abuelita and together they got Mamá a shawl made out of soft fabric the color of roses. The way her eyes looked when she opened the package...

He was crying now, the tears running hot down his cheeks and dripping off his chin, and he couldn't stop to wipe them because he had to keep cutting, he had to, he had gone through almost the whole quilt now...

Mamá's voice singing to him. Mamá's arms holding him. The smells of cinnamon and yeast bread. Mamá.

Estevan heard someone sobbing, an awful sound like an animal hurting. The scissors were still moving but his hand didn't want to open and close them anymore. There was still a little bit of quilt left, with some of the gold and pink and green stitching.

Then somebody was calling out, "Este, no! What are you doing?"

Somebody's hand wrapped around his. Estevan tried and tried to keep the scissors moving, but somebody tugged the scissors away, tugged the last of the quilt out of his other hand, and he wanted to struggle and kick and yell for help, but he couldn't breathe and everything hurt so much. Then somebody knelt down, somebody wrapped their arms around him, and Estevan caught a flowery smell and then his arms went around her too, his empty hands hanging onto the smooth fabric of her nightdress. The two of them held onto each other and they cried and cried, with the pieces of the quilt scattered on the floor all around them.

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Lucera woke up knowing what had happened. Estevan had destroyed the quilt.

She had to know it because the quilt held a piece of herself. She felt it, the same way she thought she would surely feel it if her boy died, even if he was on the other side of the world.

At breakfast with the other women, she sat silent. Pilar tried to get her to have a spoonful or two of cereal, but Lucera shook her head and pushed the bowl away. Jimena asked her what was wrong. When Lucera didn't answer, the *mexicana* got angry.

"*Mujer*. You can't just give up." Jimena scooped up her own cereal and chewed it fast and hard, as if she could eat for herself and Lucera both. "You have to keep trying. Your boy needs you."

He doesn't want me. Lucera couldn't open her mouth to say the words. If only she had given Estevan the carved spiders, if she had thought to do that before the guards took everything. But there hadn't been time, and then they had taken him too. She wasn't living through anything worse than what these other mothers suffered, but for the first time, she could not offer the prayers of thanks she knew she must.

Early that afternoon, Aurelia called the prison. Lucera didn't especially want to talk to her, but then, nothing seemed to matter much. Her body felt light and empty enough to blow away on a breeze.

"Luci." Lia's voice on the other end of the phone sounded startlingly clear, as if she was standing there in the room with the grimy beige walls instead of her mysterious apartment in Phoenix. "Luci, you have to tell me how to fix it."

Lia couldn't do any such thing. She had never known how to knit. Even if she did, she could not recapture Estevan's memories and put them back where they belonged. She was not a *tejedora*. For all the good it had done, Lucera knew she herself might as well not have been either.

“Luci,” Lia repeated. If she was upset, Lucera couldn’t hear it. Her voice sounded firm and determined. “Tell me what to do.”

Lucera knew she didn’t have much time on the phone. It would be so easy to stand here silent until the few minutes ran out.

“*Hermana*,” Lia said. “Sister. You should have heard him crying. He cried himself out. He misses you so much.”

Lucera found she could speak. Her voice sounded as if she had swallowed a mouthful of dust. “He wants me?”

“Wants you?” Now Lucera heard her sister’s tears. “Luci, we picked up every scrap of that quilt. Every little piece of yarn. We put them all in a grocery bag. He held onto that bag and he wouldn’t let go of it, not to wash his face or eat or anything, until I told him his mamá would tell us how to put it all back together.” Her voice sounded clear and steady again as she said, “I promised him you would, Luci. You’ve got to.”

Lucera felt as if she had spent the past weeks, ever since the *soldados* had taken her son, buried underground in the dark. Now a tiny shaft of light broke through. “Is he there, Lia? Can you put him on the phone?”

“Yes.”

The minutes were draining away too fast now. There was a way, if only Lucera could keep her thoughts together. She couldn’t knit the quilt back together herself, and Lia couldn’t do it, but those were Este’s memories, and he knew how it felt when they wove together with the yarn.

“Mamá?”

At the sound of his voice, Lucera’s heart scrambled up her throat. For a moment she felt so dizzy she thought she would faint.

“Mamá, I’m sorry. I cut it up. I was so mad...”

He was crying, her baby. She ached to reach through the phone line, across the distance she couldn't measure, and take him in her arms. Her voice had to reach out instead. "Este, *precioso*, it's all right. I think we can fix it, but I need your help."

She heard him gulp. "I don't know how to knit."

If she could teach him, someday. If she could hold him again. Could God allow her such miracles?

"It's all right," she said again. "I'll tell you what you need to do. Listen closely, now."

"Yes, Mamá."

She told him. So much of it depended on what he knew about the weaving, and the fact that the memories were his. As Lucera explained what he needed to make, and what to do with it once he had it, she found herself praying again, offering thanks and asking God's help to see this through.

When she finished, Este was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "I can do it. But what if they're not very good?"

The guard by the phone looked at Lucera meaningfully. Her minutes were almost up. "Don't worry about that, *hijito*," she said. "As long as you know what they're for, they should do the job."

"I'll do it," he promised. Then, "Can I talk to you again next time?"

The next time Lia called her. Lucera wanted to tell him that, soon, they wouldn't have to talk on the phone, that she would be free and they wouldn't have to be apart anymore. "Yes, you can," she said. "We'll talk again before you know it."

She had to hang up now. Before she did, she told him what she hadn't managed to say that day in the cell.

"I love you, *hijito*. You know that, right?"

"I love you too, Mamá."

Lucera waited for the click on his end of the line before she hung up the phone. The dingy room was full of light.

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Estevan didn't tell Mamá on the phone, or tía Aurelia either once he hung up, but he didn't see how it was going to work to do what Mamá said. But he would do it, because she was really there in that place in El Paso. He'd heard her voice on the phone, so he knew.

He and tía Aurelia went shopping to get what they needed. The store had things like fabric and needles and yarn, and paints and special paper to draw on. The air was cool and smelled like dried flowers. Estevan sniffed it and looked up at his aunt. "Mamá would like it here."

"She would," tía Aurelia agreed.

She didn't say *we'll bring her here*, or anything like that. After this morning, after the quilt, she didn't tell him everything was going to be all right, or Mamá would come be with them soon, or those other things she'd said before. Estevan knew that Mamá was in trouble, and maybe they wouldn't be able to help her get out of it. That was the truth. But he'd heard her voice on the phone, so that was true too. And maybe they really could fix the quilt.

They found an aisle that had boxes of modeling clay stacked on a shelf. You could get a box with different-colored sticks of clay in it. And when they found another aisle that had pipecleaners, all different sizes and colors, he laughed at the big thick ones that were covered in glitter. Tía Aurelia laughed too. "I don't think we should get those, do you?" she said.

"No." Estevan thought about what it would look like, if he made what Mamá had told him to make, with those thick glittery pipecleaners. He wondered if maybe, if they could put the quilt back together, he could put in how it felt to laugh so he wouldn't forget again.

They chose some thin black pipecleaners, and finally, a thin black marker that would draw on the clay once it dried. Back home, tía Aurelia set everything out on the kitchen table.

“Do you want to be by yourself to do this?” she asked.

Estevan studied her. Maybe, after all, she did look a little bit like Mamá. It was something about the way she looked at him. “Can you help?”

“Of course.”

Estevan picked the colors of clay and rolled out balls of it like Mamá had said, six bigger ones and six smaller ones. He tried to make them very neat. Mamá said that didn’t matter, but he thought if they looked good, they might do a better job. He put them in pairs, one small one with one big one, and pushed them together so they would stick. Tía Aurelia cut the black pipecleaners into pieces, all the same length. Six sets of eight pieces. She helped him bend the pipecleaners and push them into the clay, as evenly as they could.

It didn’t take very long. After the clay dried, they drew two little black dots at the front of each small clay ball. Then they stood back and looked at what they had made.

Six spiders sat in a row on the table and looked back at them. Two were blue, two were green, and two were yellow. Mamá had told Estevan to pick his favorite colors. She said that was very important. They were too big to be real spiders, and they were made of clay, and they had pipecleaner legs and eyes made of marker ink...but somehow, even though they didn’t look real at all, Estevan wouldn’t have been surprised to see them start scuttling around on the table.

Tía Aurelia thought so too. Looking at them, she smiled and shook her head. “I don’t like spiders, *mi amor*. Let’s put them where they belong.”

The grocery bag of quilt pieces sat on Estevan’s pillow. He put the spiders inside it carefully, one at a time, and tied the bag’s plastic handles together to shut it tight.

He didn’t know if it would work. He remembered Mamá’s wooden spiders that her own *abuela* had given her, and how she’d told him that she would use them when she got very old and

couldn't knit anymore. But they had been beautiful. His spiders were made out of modeling clay, with pipecleaner legs. Could they really do what she said?

He had to try. As he slipped the bag under his bed where nothing would bother it, the way Mamá had said to do, for just a second he caught the scents of bread and cinnamon.

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The quilt held all of the child's favorite things. Most of all, maybe, it held his mother too, some piece of her breath and thought and life. When the mother woke up in the prison and felt as though torn pieces of her heart had been knitted back together, she knew her boy had made the magic work.

Lying on the narrow cot, looking up at the bars on the cell windows, she imagined the spiders her son had made. They would not have been elegant like the carved ones she had lost, but he had made them with his hands and love. She imagined them there in the plastic bag that held the scraps of his quilt, rushing back and forth on their pipecleaner legs. They had done what spiders did best.

The quilt could not be exactly the same as it was before. Her heart, and her boy's heart, could not be what they had been before the prison and the soldiers. Not even if a miracle happened and the two of them found each other again, and she had no way of knowing if that could ever be.

But now, and always, he would have all of his favorite memories, kept safe where he would never lose them. Whenever he wanted, he could feel her arms holding him tight.