

The inside of La Tagliatella transports Olivia right out of the Basque Country and drops her into an old Italian city. Paintings of rural Italy line the stone, dimly lit walls, and soft classical music creates an intimate ambiance. This could be the perfect place to take Eneko for a romantic dinner, but the thought escapes her mind just as quickly as it entered when Amy walks in through the door. She spots Olivia and waves, making her way over to the high top table. She takes in the crusty bread and shallow plate filled with olive oil, speckled with salt and pepper. She moans. "This is what I have been dreaming of for the past three hours." She drops her purse next to her chair and plops down, reaching into the bread basket. Olivia's gaze follows the purse to the floor and squints at it. *Is that a Louis Vuitton? She definitely did not have that the last time we met up.* "I'm sorry, I'm starving. I haven't eaten since like eight this morning."

"No, no, don't apologize. Dive in." Olivia brings her hands to her lap and glances around the restaurant. "The bread's really good. It's still warm." Amy moans again.

"Literally anything but a Goddamn pintxo right now would hit the spot. I cannot eat another lukewarm mayonnaise fish sandwich that's been sitting under a light all day." Olivia's eyes widen in amusement. "Seriously, why do people enjoy that here?" Amy continues, reaching in for another piece of bread. She dunks it into the oil, tilts her head back, and drops it into her mouth. A trickle of oil streams down the side of her lips. After chewing and swallowing, Amy takes a deep breath. "Okay, if I don't stop with the bread now, I never will. Let me look at this menu..." She flips a laminated page over and scans down the list of items. "Do you know what you're getting?"

"I'm thinking the pesto penne," Olivia responds. "The picture looks really good."

"Ooo you can never go wrong with a pesto," Amy affirms. She reads down the menu for another few minutes and then sets it back down. "I gotta go with the lasagna." She leans in and sets her elbows on the table. "So what's going on with you? How is everything at home?" Olivia swallows.

"It's...okay. You know, same old, same old."

Amy's eyes narrow, suspiciously. "You okay? You seem...not okay," she concludes. Olivia ponders whether she could tell Amy about the letters. It's not like Amy's connected to Miren any more. But the whole thing just seems so fresh and personal. Telling Amy about it would make it even more real.

"I don't know if it's the best fit, honestly," Olivia lands on. "I'm definitely struggling with some of the same things you talked about. And I feel pretty anxious when I'm at home." Amy nods empathetically. Olivia inhales. "I was actually wondering if you could share any more information about your new job. You've started now, right? Is that where you came from just now?" Nervousness flashes across Amy's gaze. She clears her throat.

"Are you thinking about leaving Miren's place?" She asks in a hushed tone.

"I...I honestly haven't thought everything through yet. But it would be really helpful to know about other options for income if I do land on that decision." A beat of

silence passes, the girls staring at each other. Amy breaks the eye contact and shifts backwards, lifting her elbows off the table.

“I mean, yeah I could share some info with you if you’re interested.” Olivia nods enthusiastically. When it’s clear she’s waiting for Olivia to lead the conversation, Olivia clears her throat.

“Yeah, I guess I would just love to hear about your experience so far. I mean,” she gestures to the purse on the floor next to Amy, “It seems like you’re making some good money, right?” Amy’s foot finds the purse and instinctively pushes it closer to the chair leg.

“I will say they give what they promise- substantial compensation.”

“Can I ask how much?” Olivia cuts in. “If you’re comfortable sharing,” she adds. Amy’s gaze flits down and back up again to meet Olivia’s.

“I made about a thousand euros this week.” Olivia’s jaw drops open. At that moment, a waitress approaches their table.

“Have we made any decisions yet?” she asks, and in English, Olivia notices. The girls both look up at her. Amy’s last words flood Olivia’s mind. “English?” the woman checks with them.

“Yeah, sorry, I forgot what I had decided on for a second. I’ll get the lasagna,” Amy says.

Amy returns from the bathroom as the waitress is placing their steaming plates in front of them. “Woah, that was fast,” Amy remarks, rolling up her sleeves before reaching for the extra parmesan. Olivia allows a few moments to pass in silence as Amy blows on her first bite of lasagna before taking a bite.

“How is it?” Olivia asks.

“So, so good. Yours?”

Olivia nods. “Super good.” She pauses. “So...one thousand euros in a week,” she repeats from earlier. “That’s like...a ton of money. Do you feel like the application was transparent about what your role is with the organization? You’re pretty much just supporting women going through the IVF process?” she clarifies.

“Yeah, I mean that’s pretty much the gig.” Amy takes another bite, exhaling out steam as she chews. Olivia sighs, frustration setting in. Clearly she’s going to have to ask very specific questions.

“What was the orientation part like? Did you meet with the person who started this organization?”

“Mmm...kind of. Not like met in person or anything. But we chatted a bit about the role before I started.”

“Like over the phone?” Olivia asks. Amy exhales forcefully. “I’m sorry, do you not want to talk about it?” she asks. Amy sets down her fork.

"I want to help you if you're actually interested in the job. But...I'm not really supposed to be talking about it with other people."

"Why?" Olivia asks. "Wouldn't they want you to spread the word so more women hear about it? Whether that's women who want to fill your kind of role or women who are going through the process them-"

"I signed an NDA," Amy states. Olivia's brows furrow.

"An NDA? Why?"

"It's a private thing for some women. Not every woman wants people to know that she's having a baby in this way. It could be controversial for some people." She shrugs.

"Really?" Olivia presses, not convinced. "In this day in age?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Some people think women should only be having a baby with a man- the natural way."

Olivia nods slowly. "I guess...so. But I was just asking about your role. I don't want or need to hear about what specific women you're helping." Amy slowly finishes chewing and swallows, gaze down. She looks up at Olivia.

"I don't know what to tell you."

Olivia stutters. "I don't get why you're being so secretive," she scoffs. She can't believe she's getting into an argument with a girl she has literally only met twice. But she can't back down. She needs to know what Amy's hiding from her. This is her only potential access point into the shrouded mystery that seems to slowly be encroaching on every aspect of her life here. Amy runs her tongue along the front of her teeth and swallows, evaluating Olivia.

"Do you actually want to know?"

"Know what?"

"What this job entails. I mean, are you *actually* considering doing it?" Olivia remembers that the application has been deactivated, so there is actually no way for her to apply now, but she stays quiet. If saying yes is the only way Amy will share whatever secret knowledge she has, then Olivia can play along.

"Yes, I'm actually thinking about doing it." Amy stares at her a moment longer and then leans in. Olivia mirrors her and meets her halfway.

"I'm not only supporting these women," Amy states. "I'm...influencing them." Olivia pulls away.

"What do you mean you're-"

"Can you not shout what I'm telling you?" Amy interjects, frustrated. Olivia stays quiet. "I wish I had known this before I started the job- so that's the only reason I'm telling you." Olivia nods her understanding. Her promise of silence implicit. "Basically these women are given a binder of men to choose from as their potential sperm donors. Each man's profile lists all of their information. I sit with the woman when she's choosing. And I...influence her on who to pick."

"But what do you mean-"

“I basically tell her who to pick, Olivia.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. I truly don’t know. It’s just what I have to do. To get this.” She reaches down to the floor, picks up her purse, and produces a thick wad of cash from the inside. Olivia’s jaw drops open.

“But what if they don’t pick the...the guy you’re supposed to get them-”

“Then I don’t get the money,” Amy responds curtly. “Think of it like a commission.”

Olivia shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s really what commission-”

“You asked what the job entailed.” Olivia shuts her mouth. Her mind reels.

“Why would they- these women, I mean- even listen to you? I mean, they’re essentially deciding on what man to have a baby with. Who half of their baby will be,” she reiterates. “How could you have any influence over-”

“Because, Olivia,” she cuts in. “I’ve built a relationship with them by that point. I’ve held their hand during their egg retrievals. I’ve responded to their late night texts, when they’re up worrying about whether this round will actually work. I’ve prayed with them,” her voice cracks at the end. She clears her throat. “So they trust me. And they already feel like something is wrong with themselves- either they couldn’t get pregnant the natural way which must mean their body is broken or they couldn’t find a man to love them which must mean...” Amy throws her hands up in the air, at a loss for words.

“They’re also broken in some way,” Olivia finishes for her. Amy exhales.

“Exactly. So they trust me. I’m the one person who they’ve been able to trust all along. Through this whole process. So when we’re in an intense moment together, and they’re about to choose the father of their future child, they are terrified they are going to choose wrongly. They are terrified their brokenness is going to steer them astray. They hesitantly point to their choice and look up at me with fear and hope in their eyes, and then I say ‘Ehh...I don’t know about that one.’ And they immediately doubt themselves. They immediately realize they fucked up again. Their body didn’t know how to make a baby, so why would their mind know how to choose the father? And in that moment, I slide in with my ‘recommendation.’” She creates air quotes with her fingers.

“And...and...that’s that.” Olivia’s mouth tries to form a word, but no sound comes out.

“And they choose who you tell them to? Every time?”

“I just had my first...successful outcome yesterday,” she states matter-of-factly.

“And how many unsuccessful outcomes?” Olivia presses, cringing at the verbiage.

“None.” Amy picks her fork back up and digs back into her lasagna, signifying that the conversation is over. Olivia stares at her now cold pasta, her appetite gone.