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Benvenuti!

THE BOOK OF CASA HABITORIA

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Prologue

There are places that call to us long before we even arrive - places woven from memories, feelings and quiet longings. *Casa Habitoria* is such place.

Tucked into the sun-warmed stone of a Tuscan hillside, it is not just a house but a way of living. Neither entirely home nor fully guesthouse, it lingers somewhere in between - an in-between that invites belonging.

This book is not a guide. It is a mosaic of lived moments. Of meals shared and silences cherished. Of strangers who became neighbors and footsteps that turned into stories. Within these pages, you will not find a blueprint, but a lived-in architecture of human experience.

Casa Habitoria is imagined not as a fixed design, but as a vessel for continuity - a place that evolves with each inhabitant. And maybe, somewhere between the wisteria vines and the slow afternoons, you'll find echoes of your own dreams.

Benevenuti! You've arrived.

1

I arrive just before the sunset. The sky is brushed with that golden light that makes everything feel softer. It's been a long day - a delayed flight, a packed train, a bus that never arrived. And now, each cobblestone, beautiful as they are, feels like a punishment for me and my suitcase.

I had to pause halfway down the hill to take in the views around as heat clings to my skin and hunger hums low in the stomach. My body is tired and the mind slightly disoriented. But the air carries something gentle, something promising. A breeze stirs the olive branches and in the distance, a bell tower marks the hour. Even in fatigue, my senses begin to open.

The town hums softly. Not with traffic, but with wine glasses clinking, someone laughing two streets away, Vespa starting somewhere uphill, a trattoria kitchen coming to life... From far down the hill, a dog barks lazily and a tractor hums like a lullaby.

And suddenly, the thought returns - the one that carried me through the terminal, through the heat, through the weight of the suitcase: a glass of chilled Italian wine, mozzarella torn by hand, tomatoes still warm from the sun with basil and olive oil. The simplest of meals and yet the one I've been dreaming of. Not luxury - but that particular Tuscan kind of comfort.

I've never been here before, but it feels familiar. It feels welcoming. It feels cozy. Nothing is polished, yet everything feels intentional. Every crack in the stone seems to whisper "*You've arrived*".

So welcome to Montepulciano - a Tuscan hill town settled between the poetic landscapes of Val d'Orcia and Val di Chiana. Perched at over 600 meters above sea level, it rests like a crown above vineyards, olive groves and fields that seem to roll forever. The town itself feels like a labyrinth of narrow stone streets, winding past Renaissance facades, weathered archways and busy piazzas.

Life here moves slowly, but never dull. It is a place where time doesn't disappear - it stretches. Mornings begin with a fresh cornetto and the hiss of espresso machines as the piazza gradually awakens.

By midday, the light sharpens and the pace dissolves. Shutters close. Shops pause. The town exhales into its siesta. Heat ripples off the terracotta roofs and only the cicadas keep moving. In this stillness, lunch is sacred - a slow ritual, often shared, featuring seasonal ingredients and stories passed between bites. There's no need to rush. The rest of the day will wait.

Then comes the evening - golden and alive. As the sun slips low, the streets begin to stir again. Laughter returns, locals gather on terraces and doorsteps, voices echo through alleys, cutlery clinks against plates, the scent of simmering tomatoes drifts through the streets...

Every moment here is lived fully. It's not just a town; it's a way of being, a way of living. To stay here is to be reminded of how life can taste when it's slow, intentional and shared.

And just when I thought I can't carry my suitcase another step, I see it.

Casa Habitoria.

A stone building tucked gently into the slope, its walls catching the last light of the day. It doesn't announce itself - it just belongs. It looks less like an architectural intervention and more like something that has always been here.

Part guesthouse, part home. It holds within it a curious duality: the comfort of familiarity and the thrill of discovery.

Casa Habitoria wasn't made to impress. It was made to belong - to the slope, to the town, to the people and to the lives that fill it. It breathes with Montepulciano's rhythm: slow, intentional, human.

I have always been a romantic at heart and for as long as I can remember, I've dreamed of cobbled streets, sun-drenched piazzas and long Italian dinners where the conversation and wine flow without an end. In my dream, I've lived in a stone house draped in ivy, married to an Italian man and rolling pasta every day with an apron on.

But life, as it often does, pulled me in different direction - a quiet home in England, a career I loved, a few relationships that never quite made it to the wedding bells... The dream, however, never disappeared. It simply waited.

Now, on the eve of my 54th birthday, I have gifted myself something long overdue: a four-week stay in Italy. Not in a hotel, not in a villa. But in *Casa Habitoria* - a home that is half-guesthouse, half-residence. At first because it was the only place with a room available. And then because it felt like destiny. It felt like someone had left the door open and said: "Stay as long as you need". I didn't want luxury. I wanted life. Real Italian life.

My first morning, I woke up to the sound of church bells echoing softly through the valley. From my room on the last floor, the windows framed the view of the hills still wrapped in the morning mist. I stood there for a moment, taking it in as it was exactly the kind of a view that I had always imagined and never quite believed I'd get to live in.

Then I padded barefoot across the wooden floors downstairs, drawn by the smell of fresh bread drifting through the house. The same smell that already woke up Anna, Fabio and Giovanni.

I passed Chiara, our receptionist, who was already at her desk. That front room is more like a living room than a reception - books on the shelf, an armchair by the window and that familiar hum of low conversation and coffee spoons. Chiara was telling me yesterday about her daily routine which she calls her choreography - down the steps into the kitchen, up again with a warm mug, across the lobby and out onto the golden terrace. Now I'm starting to understand the beauty of it's simplicity and ritual.

In the kitchen, Nonna Maria and Anna, both longtime residents of *Casa Habitoria*, were already deep in conversation, hands moving as fast as their words. They paused long enough to greet me with a warm "*Buongiorno*" and a cup of coffee poured without asking - as if they had been expecting me.

From where I stood, the kitchen spilled into the terrace and the terrace melted into the garden - terracotta pots overflowing with basil and sage, tomatoes hanging low, flowers curling around the edges... The terrace has become our second living room now. The glass doors stay wide open and the air flows freely through the space, carrying in the scent of soil and sunlight. It was hard to tell where the house ended and the landscape began. In Tuscany, outside and inside are never really separate.

As I stood there, I've listened Maria tell a story about her grandson's terrible attempt at baking crostata, which made Anna laugh so hard that she dropped the tomatoes she just picked from the garden. The whole room felt like a scene from a book that I had read way too many times - familiar, warm, unreal.

Just behind me, Fabio stood at the kitchen island, already on his second espresso. As Giovanni - or Nanni, as everyone calls him, always reminded us, Italians drink "Espresso, not cappuccino" because "It's morning, not a dessert!". He says it every day and we always laugh.

Katja and Felix, the German couple, wandered in quietly, not long after. They never say much in the mornings, but you can feel them soaking it all in - the smells, the softness, the slowness. They looked like they had just stepped out of a dream and were still trying to catch up with themselves.

That morning, I found myself standing in the lobby, just watching and observing. Everyone moving in their own patterns - Maria slicing bread, Anna humming, Nanni grumbling playfully, Felix slowly buttering toast, Chiara typing, Fabio disappearing with his third espresso...

And it didn't feel like I had arrived in a stranger's house. It felt like I had slipped into the middle of something already in motion. A life I don't need to build, just step into and enjoy.

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After lunch, the house quiets. Plates are cleared, glasses are empty and the conversation fades into a hush.

Most people drift off for a nap, and so Giovanni settles into the old armchair just outside his door, tilted slightly so he can still hear everything happening in the house. He says he's resting, but I've seen him open one eye when someone walks past. He likes to know what's going on.

Anna, on the other hand, never naps. She moves quietly through the house, wiping down surfaces, folding napkins, humming softly to herself. Her hands always seem to be doing something - even at rest, she's in motion.

As for me, I usually slip away to one of the balconies. If I want to be alone, I take my book to the covered loggia - where I can see the town without being seen myself. Other times, I sit on the open balcony by the stairs, where I can wave to the locals. I read, mostly, but sometimes I also just... sit.

Now mentioning the stairs - there are many of them here. The house itself feels like a journey, letting the space unfold gradually from different angles, inviting exploration and becoming an experience itself. Just like Italy, where every corner brings something new.

By mid-afternoon, the stillness begins to stir.

I often find myself in the pottery studio - a room that Fabio carved from an old storage space. He and Paola are always there ahead of me, sleeves rolled up, clay already under their nails. I've fallen in love with terracotta. There's something so grounding about shaping bowls and tiles with your hands, like anchoring yourself to the present moment. And between baking and glazing, they tell me stories: about childhood, old lovers, strange dialect words and the time Fabio accidentally painted an entire vase the wrong color because he was distracted by a song on the radio.

Around four, the courtyard comes alive. Nanni emerges first, already shuffling his cards as he walks. He claims his usual spot and begins setting up the table. Chairs gather and so do voices. Old friends, new guests, everyone finds their place.

The games are full of drama - loud accusations, exaggerated groans, cursing in dialect and sudden laughter. Sometimes Nanni and Lorenzo even fall out over a game and sulk across from each other like two teenagers, each pretending not to care. The house seems to understand that though - there are just enough quiet corners within for someone to have privacy without disappearing.

By then, Katja and Felix usually return from their wandering. But instead of collapsing, they go straight to the garden. Katja always laughs at herself trying to snap basil without bruising it, while Felix examines each zucchini flower like he's preparing for surgery. Their clumsiness is sweet, honest - like they're remembering how to touch things again.

If it rains, we all retreat to the living room. It's always ready - soft sofas with cushions that feel like they've held entire lives, record player waiting for new tunes, shelves filled with photos, old books and hand-painted ceramics.

The fireplace glows even when not lit and just outside the wide windows, there's a narrow body of water that runs along the house. You can hear it, see it and sometimes even smell it. I once dipped my toes in while listening to Giovanni read an old letter he wrote to his late wife.

That afternoon, like many others, didn't have a plan. And yet everything happened exactly as it should.

"...the terrace at Casa Habitoria is magic... golden light, pink sky and the scent of wisteria in the air. Come up for a coffee? (Or a glass of wine if you're feeling fancy?)..."

Giulia texted her friends. She's a local who knows everyone and everyone knows her. Every evening, she puts on comfortable shoes and sets out for her daily walk - up and down the hilly streets, past Piazza Grande, along Via di Gracciano nel Corso and Via di S. Biagio. She greets friends, comments on the weather, asks about families and then stops at *Casa Habitoria*. It's her favourite ritual - a small, cherished break. She'll either linger on the terrace, admiring the sunset over Val d'Orcia, or settle at the kitchen island, talking about town gossip, recipes she's trying or memories from childhood. She always says she'll stay for "just one coffee," but ends up chatting for at least an hour - laughing, gesturing, and sipping slowly.

Tonight, she also stopped by as we all joined her for aperitivo - the ritual that has become our anchor here. Chiara was the first to join, fresh from her shift, though she rarely leaves home immediately. Mateo and Paola arrive too, their laughter mixing with the gentle clinking of glasses. We sip spritzes, passing around pecorino and olives in chipped bowls. Someone brings out a half-eaten crostata and the sweetness adds to our easy, unguarded conversation. Gossip, memories, laughter.

As the sunset turns to dusk, we gather inside to prepare dinner. The kitchen smells like heaven - rosemary focaccia slides into the oven as Nonna Maria and Anna work side by side. Chiara, Giulia and Poala catch up on the latest town happenings, Katja chops vegetables with focused grace, while Felix and Matteo take care of the firepit outside, preparing the flames that will soon char the eggplants and peppers.

The kitchen here is the heart of *Casa Habitoria* - sunken slightly, creating a sort of piazza where people can sit, talk and be part of the rhythm, even if they're not cooking. The space has double height, so from the upstairs you can hear the hum of life below - laughter, clinking glasses, the chopping of knives - all while watching it without stepping fully inside the buzz.

All the doors to the kitchen are open, and we squeeze around the table outside, passing plates, savoring the night air and one another's company. After dinner, the house breathes deeper. Some stay out under the stars, talking, singing or simply watching the sky. Others head to bed, full in every sense of the word.

Before my bedtime, I always write in my journal. I capture the day in careful, loving detail - the way that the light hit the stone walls, how the pasta dough turned out, the short story Giovanni shared with me earlier and so on...

And tonight, I might write:

"Today felt like a dream I finally caught up to."

This was the story of Evelyn, a character who came to *Casa Habitoria* and to Montepulciano to fulfill her lifelong dream.

Even though all characters, including Evelyn, move within the same building, each of them experiences it differently. They inhabit it in their own ways, layering the space with personal narratives. And each of them tells a different story.

But they are not the only ones - nor will they be. This building was never meant to be a fixed monument. It was meant to evolve, to belong. It's a living habitat, shaped by stories, softened by use and always open to change. The walls carry conversations. The floors remember footsteps.

As the seasons change and new guests arrive, the story will go on - in different languages, in familiar gestures, in the quiet poetry of everyday life. And there will always be room for one more story.

