

When an earthquake hits the village
of Fossa, Italy, the tremors crack
open more than just walls
and foundations.

The earthquake reveals Luca's
family's past and a story of
secrets, friendship, and rescue
from the Nazis.



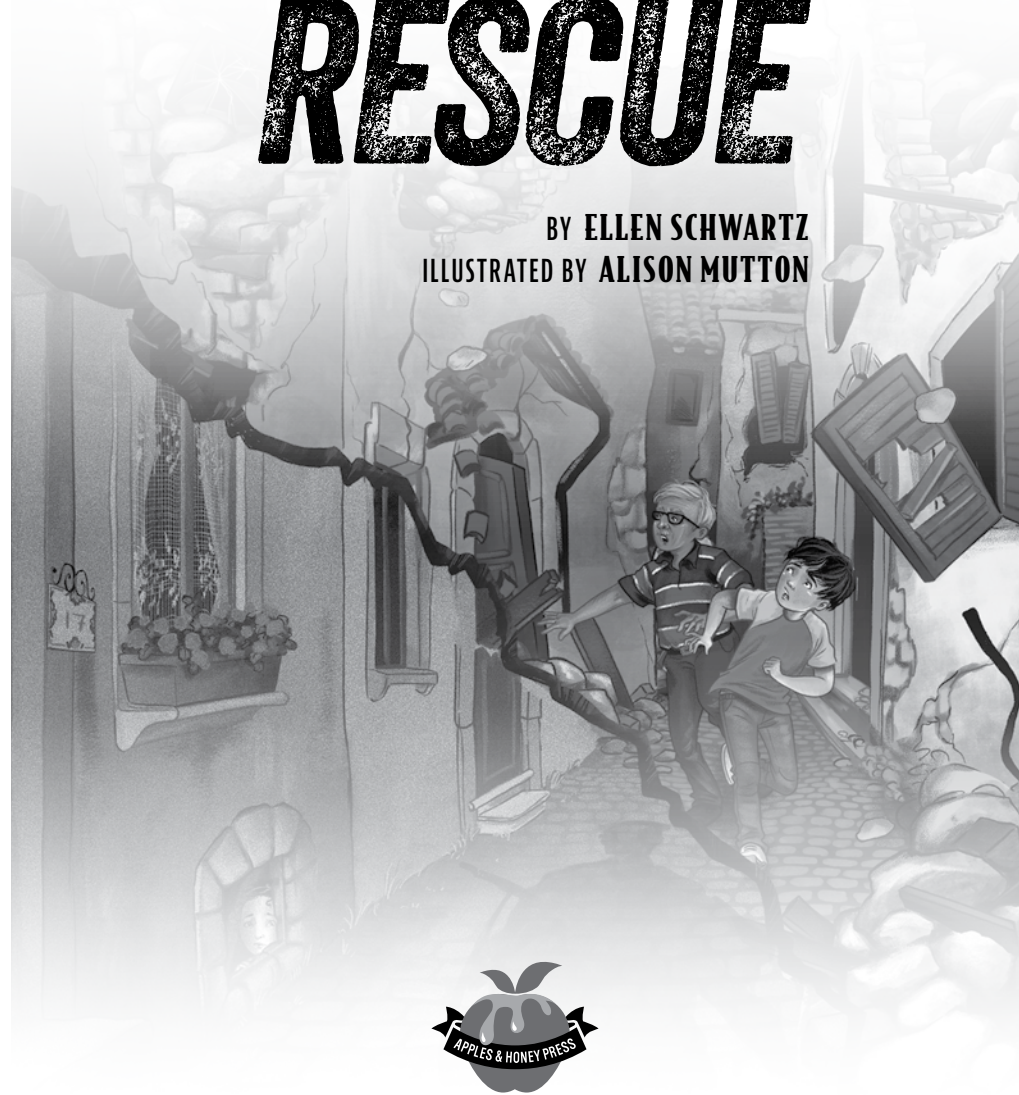
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Friends ^{TO} THE *RESCUE*

BY ELLEN SCHWARTZ
ILLUSTRATED BY ALISON MUTTON



For Marion, Ellie, and Olivia
And for all the Righteous Among the Nations.
— E S

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FRIENDS TO THE RESCUE

This story is historical fiction, based on actual events that occurred in the town of Fossa, in the Abruzzo region of Italy, in 1943 and in 2009. Some details have been changed.

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FOSSA!

Monte Ocre



L'AQUILA !!

Hospital and Temporary Kitchen

Castle Ocre

Castle Fossa

Via del Convento

Town Square

Town Hall

Signora Rosa

Antonio's House

School

Santa Maria Ad Cryptas

Church of Maria Assunta

MY HOUSE!!

Zio Carlo

Via Osteria

Signora Donatella

Via Madonna del Grotto

Via Monticchio

Casertino

Monte Cerro





Earthquake!

APRIL 6, 2009

Luca and his grandfather, Nonno Roberto, stood in the middle of the road, staring at what remained of their house.

Just minutes before, they had been in the kitchen, eating lunch, when the first earthquake tremor struck. Luca's glass of milk jiggled on the table.

"Look, Nonno, my milk is dancing," he had joked.

Then the floor shook. The kitchen counters. The light fixture above.

Crash! Glass sprayed as the microwave toppled to the floor.

Bang! Nonno Roberto's computer fell in a heap.

Boom! The living room floor buckled.

"Nonno, what's happ—"

"Luca! *Pronto!*" In a flash, Nonno Roberto swept Luca outside. Moments later, the roof groaned and tilted. Red clay tiles slid off and shattered on the ground. The wrought-iron balcony attached to the house-front broke away, and the pots of tomato plants that Luca and his grandfather had planted just that morning crashed onto the garden below.

Luca glanced around. All down the street, neighbors screamed and ran out of their houses as roofs collapsed and walls buckled. Stones and tiles and windows crashed down. A crack appeared down the center of the narrow cobblestone street, as if someone had unzipped it.

“Nonno, what is it? Why is everything falling?”

“An earthquake. A bad one.” Nonno Roberto’s voice sounded tight.

Just then, someone a few houses down cried out, “Oh, no! Marco is trapped. I hope he’s okay!”

Luca thought. *What if he’s dead—like Mama and Papa? No! Don’t think about that!*

Luca saw neighbors run toward Marco’s house. Then the ground shook again. A large stone from the upstairs wall fell and rolled nearly to Luca’s feet.

Luca yelped, “Aaahhh! Nonno! Why won’t it stop? Make it stop!”

“I wish I could,” Nonno Roberto murmured. He pulled Luca close. Luca clung to his grandfather’s warmth, the strength of his arms. He remembered clinging to Nonno Roberto in the same way after his parents had been killed in a car accident, five years earlier, when he was five. As if he would never let go.

Another tremor struck. Luca jumped. This time, the front steps of the house slid downward, one after the other, like logs rolling down a hill. The walls on either side of the steps crumpled into a heap, exposing the inside of the basement.

Nonno Roberto pointed. “The cold room,” he moaned.

Luca followed his grandfather’s finger. The cold room was in the basement, built just beneath the front steps. It was where Nonno Roberto stored onions, potatoes, and carrots for the winter and where wide shelves were lined with jars of tomatoes from the garden. Luca saw how the



shelves had buckled. He heard the tinkling of glass as jars crashed to the floor.

Yes, it's sad to lose the cold room, he thought, but why is Nonno Roberto upset about that, when the whole house is destroyed? Everything we have—our beds, our food, my books, my toys—gone.

At that thought, he burst into tears. “Nonno! Our house! It's ruined! How will we live? Where will we live?”

“Someday, God willing, we will rebuild.”

“But how? It's impossible. Look—it's such a wreck. We have nothing!”

Nonno Roberto put his hands on Luca's shoulders. “We're alive. We have each other. That's what matters. And look, Marco made it out just fine.”

Luca looked down the street and saw Marco walking out of the rubble, bruised but alive. *Yes*, Luca thought. *Nonno is right.*

But although he tried to believe that everything would be okay, he couldn't. He was too frightened.



Best Friends

2009

“Come, Luca, we must see if our neighbors are injured or need help,” Nonno Roberto said.

As Luca followed his grandfather down the street, he drew in a sharp breath. It was as if a giant had swiped his hand along the row of houses, wreaking destruction from one to the next to the next. A thick timber lay half in and half out of Signora Rosa's roof, poking up like a straw in a drinking glass. Next door, Zio Carlo and Zia Maria's house had fallen in from the top; it looked like someone had taken a sledgehammer to the upper story.

Luca no longer heard the sounds of tumbling debris. He heard something worse: screaming, shouting, wailing. Signora Donatella, who lived at the corner, sat on a pile of ruins and sobbed into her hands. Her husband cradled the body of their dog in his arms and moaned, “Bruno, Bruno,” over and over.

The way the dog's body sagged, unmoving, Luca knew he was dead.

“Oh, Nonno!” Luca said, turning away, his throat thick. Sometimes he threw sticks for Bruno. The dog’s name was a joke: he had been a little sausage dog, not a “Bruno.” But he would bark as if he were as fierce as a bear.

Poor Bruno . . .

“Lidia, Lidia, where are you?” Luca saw a woman running frantically down the street. He recognized his classmate Lidia’s mother. A nurse, she had once taken a nasty splinter out of Luca’s hand. She hadn’t told anyone that he cried. “Lidia!” She disappeared around the corner.

A terrible thought struck Luca. *Antonio! Where is Antonio?*

Luca ran across the street to where his best friend lived. Then he stopped short. The front of Antonio’s house was a heap of bricks and stones. The roof tilted like a toboggan racing down a hill. No voices came from inside.

How can anyone survive such wreckage?

“Antonio . . . ,” Luca whimpered. He covered his face with his hands, blocking out the sight. And it wasn’t just Antonio whom Luca feared for. What about Antonio’s mama and papa? What about his big sister, Bianca, who always tossed her head and said that Luca and Antonio were annoying—but still waited for them to walk to and from school with her? She played football with them. And sometimes she even acted out *Capitano Eroe*, “Captain Hero,” comic book adventures with them. Antonio always complained, “Bianca is such a pain,” but Luca secretly wished he had a big sister like her.

What if they all—

“Luca?” a voice said.



Luca whipped around. Antonio was climbing out of a side window whose frame had somehow remained whole. He was covered with dust, and his shirt was torn, and he had only one shoe on.

“Antonio!” Luca yelled, dashing over. “You’re alive!”

One by one, the rest of Antonio’s family climbed out too—his mama and papa and Bianca. There was blood on Antonio’s papa’s cheek—Luca could see a deep scratch—but he was smiling.

“Thank God,” Nonno Roberto said, shaking Antonio’s papa’s hand.

“For your safety too, Roberto,” Antonio’s mama said in a choked voice.

Bianca murmured, “Hey, kid, glad you’re okay”—and to Luca’s amazement, she hugged him!

Luca turned back to Antonio, ready to throw his arms around his friend. But then he saw that Antonio was huddling next to his mama. And he was crying.

Luca was so shocked that he was speechless. Antonio never cried.

“Antonio?” he said. “Are you all right?”

Antonio shook his head. “I’m hurt. I’ve broken my arm.” His voice trembled.

Nonno Roberto stepped forward. He was a physician, retired now. “Let’s have a look, my boy.”

Antonio indicated his arm, where it showed through the rip in his shirt. Nonno Roberto examined Antonio’s arm, raising it up to shoulder height, bending it at the elbow, and pressing lightly.

“No broken bones, Antonio,” he said. “Perhaps it’s just bruised.”

“No, it’s really bad, I know it is,” Antonio whined.

He hid his face against his mama’s side. Luca was stunned. Antonio wouldn’t be *faking*. But he didn’t seem to be seriously hurt either.

Antonio’s terrified, Luca realized.

He couldn’t blame his friend. He was terrified too.

But this wasn’t like Antonio—because Antonio had always been the brave one. Like the time a bully grabbed Luca’s *Capitano Ero* comic book, and Antonio snatched it back while Luca hid behind him. Like the time Antonio blithely leaped from stone to stone across a creek and then, when Luca was too scared to follow, Antonio came back and held Luca’s hand to cross. Antonio often persuaded Luca to come on adventures when Luca wanted to stay safe indoors, reading about danger in one of his beloved books instead of acting it out.

“I don’t know about this. It looks dangerous,” Luca always said.

Antonio always replied, “You can do it, Luca.”

And Luca did, with Antonio leading the way.

If Antonio has fallen apart, what hope is there for me? Luca thought.