

THE ELEPHANT ROAD

*For Viv and John Burton
and Rebecca Absalom, Sudipto Chatterjee
and the people of the Garo Hills*

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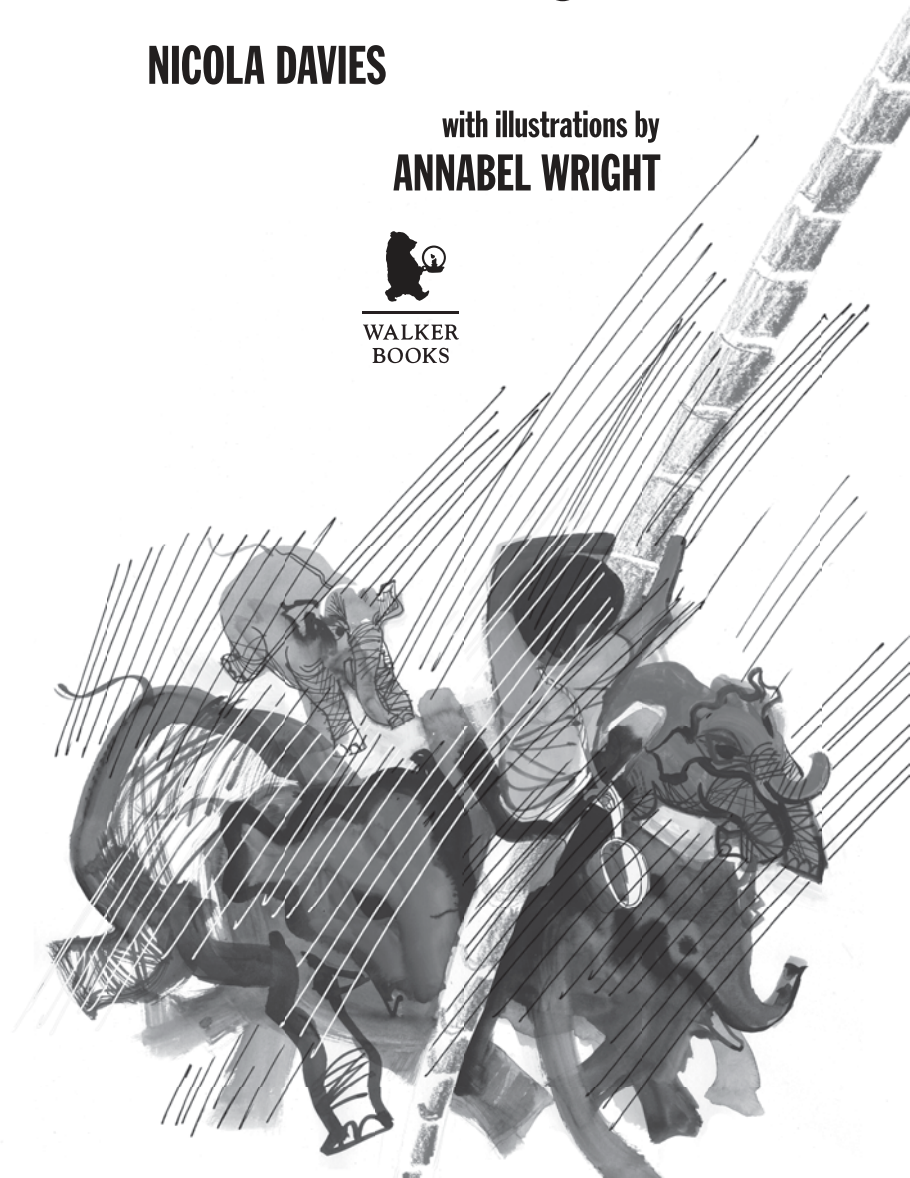
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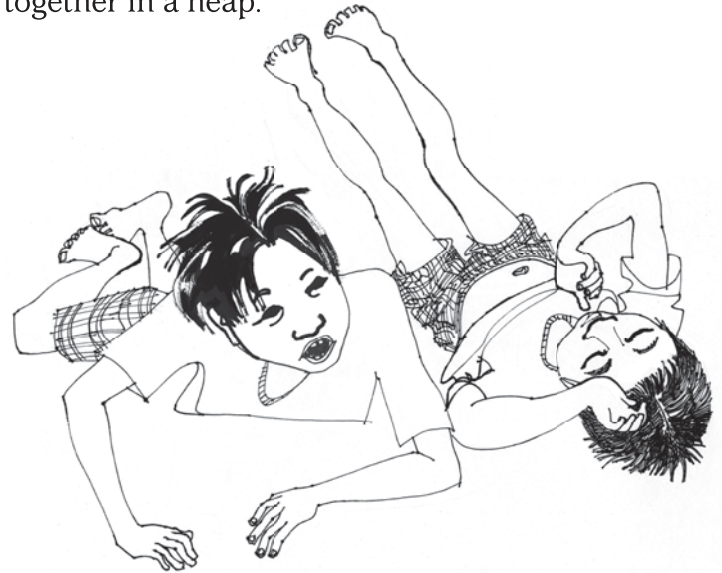
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Chapter One

Wilen sat on the back of his uncle Denngu's shiny motorbike. They flew along a road between tall buildings, so fast the neon signs blurred with their speed. All the lights of the big city spread out in front of them like a feast. Faster and faster they went, so fast that the bike left the ground behind altogether and began to fly...

Thwack! Wilen's head hit the floor of the hut and he woke up. Something had tipped him and his little brother Relip out of their bed. They lay together in a heap.



“What happened?” Relip whispered, sleepily.
“Why is the floor tilted?”

Relip was right. The slivers of moonlight coming through the palm-weave walls showed that the whole room was sloping. The two boys kept still and listened.

Something very, very big was pushing at the corner of the sleeping hut. It made a low rumbling that Wilen felt in his chest rather than heard through his ears, and its deep breaths huffed through the gaps in the walls. It shuffled its feet, with a sound like someone moving huge sacks of rice over a dusty floor, and pushed the hut further over. The bamboo framework creaked and groaned and the boys were rolled around like beans in a box.

They came to rest against the far wall and Relip cried out.

“Stop it!” he yelled at the creature. “*Stop it!* Go away! Just *go away!*”

Wilen thought that shouting might make it cross, and that it would be better to be quiet, but

when he put a finger to his brother’s lips to make him hush, Relip pushed his hand away and said, “No! Grandpa says they can understand what we say.” And he shouted again, “Go away! *Go away!*”

For a moment their hut was held, as if the animal was contemplating overturning it completely, but as quickly and easily as it had been picked up, it was dropped with a judder. Outside, there was a little more rumbling and shuffling, one long, last sigh and then silence. The boys held their breath. Insects and frogs churred and plinked in the dark forest. The night had returned to normal.

“Told you they could understand us!” whispered Relip.

Wilen didn’t reply.

Their father came in from the next room with a lantern.

“You all right in here, boys?” His hair was standing on end like the leaves on a pineapple, but his voice was calm and strong. As the husband of the village chief, the Nokma, Father was the village

headman and he had to be a leader when things went wrong.

“Yes, father,” said Relip.

“Good. You get back to sleep; there’s nothing to worry about. I’m just going to look in on Grandpa and a few other people. We’ll check on the damage in the morning,” said their father.

Mother joined him in the doorway. “Nothing to be afraid of,” she said in her reassuring Nokma voice. “They’re just passing through, like they’ve done before.” She stroked the little bundle flopped on her shoulder and added, “Your little sister didn’t even wake up!”

Wilén and Relip exchanged a smile: their baby sister’s ability to sleep was already a matter of family legend, so it was hardly a surprise that not even elephants could wake her.

Chapter Two

Wilén woke early. He slipped out of bed and pulled on his school clothes. Relip could sleep on; he was too little to go to school. Outside, the sunlight slanted through the trees and birds called. Wilén liked the cool stillness of morning, when the forest seemed to hold his village in its big green hand.

He looked at the ground beside the sleeping hut. There were marks on the hard red mud where the elephant’s feet had been. Wilén had seen tracks like this before. Most years, about this time, elephants passed by as they travelled between one forest reserve in the east to another in the west.

“The reserves are elephant palaces,” Grandpa had explained when Wilén was small. “We live on the elephant road between them.”

Living on the road to an elephant palace had seemed to Wilén like something to be very proud of.