Some years ago, Lawrence bought a piece of land in Zululand, KwaZulu-Natal that had been used for hunting, and turned it into a private game reserve. He called it Thula Thula which means ‘quietly quietly’. He and his wife Françoise, who came from Paris in France, built a lodge where people could stay and learn about the animals in the reserve.

One day Lawrence was asked to save the lives of a herd of 7 elephants by bringing them into the reserve. The elephants had been badly treated by their previous owners and had become very aggressive towards people. They would have to be shot if a new home was not found. Lawrence agreed to take them, and when they arrived he put them in a strongly fenced area called a boma to get used to their new home.

The boma was surrounded by an electric fence, but on their first night the elephants broke it down. They escaped and ran into the nearby Umfolosi Game Reserve. The Umfolosi rangers used a helicopter to find and dart them so that they fell asleep. The 7 elephants were then safely loaded onto trucks and returned to Thula Thula. Back in the boma, Nana, the leader of the herd (called the matriarch), kept charging at Lawrence every time she saw him. She would have tried to kill him, if she could.

This is the story about a man called Lawrence Anthony. He was known as ‘the elephant whisperer’ because of his special relationship with elephants.
Lawrence was very worried that the elephants would break out again. If they did, they would be shot as they were a danger to people living just outside the reserve. So Lawrence decided to stay with the elephants day and night, camping outside the boma. He kept talking to them and telling them they had no need to fear him. Nana continued to charge him, but then, one day, something changed.

Instead of charging him Nana came to the fence, put out her trunk to smell him and allowed him to touch her. Once she had accepted him, the rest of the herd did too. Lawrence was then able to let them out of the boma to roam in the reserve.

One night Lawrence and Françoise were awakened by strange sounds. The elephants were eating the thatch off the roof of their house and the flowers in Françoise’s garden. Nana came right up to Lawrence and again reached out her trunk to him.

After that the elephants often came to the house and seemed to know when Lawrence went away. They always gathered at the house when he returned, as if they were welcoming him back. Strangely, one day he missed his plane, and the elephants, who were on their way up to the house, suddenly turned around and walked away. When Lawrence finally arrived a day later, they were all back waiting for him!

Nana had a very special relationship with Lawrence. When her baby was born she brought it to show him. He in turn showed the elephants his grandchild when he was born, and the elephants all held out their trunks to touch and sniff the baby. Lawrence always treated the elephants with great respect, and tried to understand them. But he always said they were wild animals, and had to be approached with caution.

When Lawrence died unexpectedly in March 2012 the elephants seemed to know. They gathered from all around the reserve and walked to the house in single file. They stayed there for two days, as if they had come to mourn and pay their respects.

Lawrence was a man who loved animals and developed a very special understanding of them. The book ‘The Elephant Whisperer’ is his story of how he saved the elephants, and how they in turn came to trust and accept him. Today, people can visit Thula Thula and see the herd – now grown to 24 elephants.