

PARANOIA



Herman Venter



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Herman Venter (born in 1971) is a writer of thriller novels from Johannesburg, South Africa. He has published several novels in Afrikaans and English.

He now lives in France with his wife Pascaline and dog Thalia, and continues to write novellas, short stories, and comic books.

Someone had been here again while I'd been out. I can't say exactly how I know, but I do. Something is off. Like the other times. Perhaps it's just a whiff of a scent.

Perhaps a chair that's just an inch out of place. A dress hanging in the cupboard with a slightly different fold than I'd left it with when I'd closed the cupboard door the last time. A tube of lipstick standing upright while I could swear that it had been on its side when I'd left.

I can't lay my finger on exactly what is wrong, but my subconscious is screaming it at me. Someone has been here! Again!

I close the front door behind me and I step deeper into the house. Cautiously. Listening and alert. Sniffing the air like a doe catching the scent of a wolf on the breeze.

No! I'm not prey. I'm nobody's victim. I'm the wolf. An angry she-wolf hunting whoever had dared to invade my lair.

Room by room. Closet by closet. No-one is here. Once again nothing I can point to and say: Undeniable proof.

I'm not crazy. Someone has been here.



Night comes and goes. Morning arrives. I prepare for work. Before leaving I stalk through the house. Looking at everything. Doing my best to memorize the tiniest detail. Sooner or later the intruder will make a mistake. And I will know. And I will find them and make them pay.

The workday passes slowly. I want to get home. I want to search. I want to hunt.

Finally. Time to go. The stalled traffic slows me down. Nothing moving. I curse impatiently. Very unladylike, my mother would have said. But she is gone – like everyone else.

I pull into the driveway and almost leap out of my car. The keys can't turn fast enough as I rush through the locks. I open the door and enter and I know. Someone has been here. Again.

I search. Perhaps the door to my study is slightly more ajar than I'd left it. Perhaps the mouse next to the computer is not quite where it should be. Many perhapses, but once again no undeniable proof.

I'm not crazy. Someone has been here.



Night comes. I hardly sleep. My mind won't shut down. When sleep finally comes it tortures me with feverish dreams. I wake and lie in wait for the dawn.

I rush through my morning routine. This time I have a different plan. I move through the house using my cell phone to take photos of everything I can think of. This time I will know for sure. I will have undeniable proof.

I go to work. The hours feel like days. I want to go home early, but I can't. There is too much to do and if I don't do it no-one else will.

Time to go. I take off like a kid who knows that a badly hidden surprise awaits her at home. Frozen traffic holds me up again. Why do I bother with a car? Walking would be so much quicker.

It takes me forever to get through all the locks. Then I'm in and I get the same feeling as every other time. Someone has been here. I quickly search the house. No-one here but me. I start my search again. This time with cell phone in hand. I compare every photo with its place in reality. Seemingly everything is as it should be. Nothing out of place. I still have no undeniable proof.

Yet I know.



Someone has been here. Someone devious and conniving. Someone who knew that I was hunting them and wasn't afraid of me. Someone who was playing games with me. Someone very dangerous.

I'm not crazy.

Night arrives and drags on. I want the darkness to be over. When daylight comes I will make a new plan. I will find and trap whoever comes into my den while I'm not here. I fall asleep.

Something wakes me. A sound? A whisper? Now that I'm awake I can't breathe. A stench so thick and foul that it could have come only from the bowels of Satan himself, permeates the air.

I cough and rub my tearing eyes with the back of my hands.

I hear something. I think it came from the kitchen. I hop out of bed, reach for the Glock that I keep next to my pillow, and with the confidence of having it firmly gripped in my left hand, I stalk my prey.

There is no-one in the kitchen. No-one in the rest of the house either. Just me and the horrible stench. Did I dream it or am I really going crazy?

I can't go back to sleep. I can't sleep with this horrible stench. I need some fresh air, but before going outside I need to put on some clothes.

I walk into my bedroom and discover someone going through my drawers. The arrogance. I'm right here and they don't care. The drawers of my closet are open, and someone is standing in front of them, back turned to me, silently searching. Man or woman? In the shadows of night I can't tell.

I lift the Glock, flip the safety off, and gripping it in both hands I take careful aim.

“Hey! Turn around.”

The eerie figure ignores me and continues its search as if I wasn't there.

“I'm not telling you again... Turn around! Slowly!”



No response. So be it. I have undeniable proof. It will be self-defense. Woman alone at night shoots intruder in the dark.

I fire three shots. My target doesn't go down. I know my aim had been good. There is no way that I'd missed. I fire three more rounds and those three rip off the veil and drag me back to reality.

There is no-one there. I had riddled my closet with bullet holes shooting at a phantom intruder. The fever is burning me alive, but I remember. There is no-one here. There hasn't been anyone here for a while. There couldn't be because they are all dead. The disease that had me in its fiery grip had killed them all like it would me. I don't want to die like this. I have the Glock. I lift it to my head, but before I can pull the trigger reality fades away.

I wake up with the Glock tightly gripped in my hand. I don't remember why, but I must have had a very good reason.

Something is wrong. Then I know and I'm angry. The arrogance! Someone has been here while I'd slept. I don't know how I know it, but I'm sure. Someone has been here.

I'm not crazy.



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