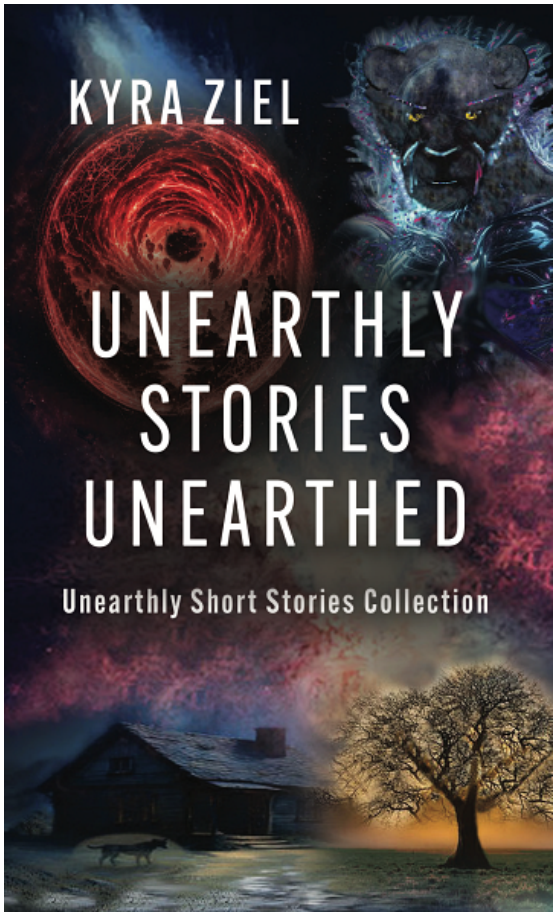


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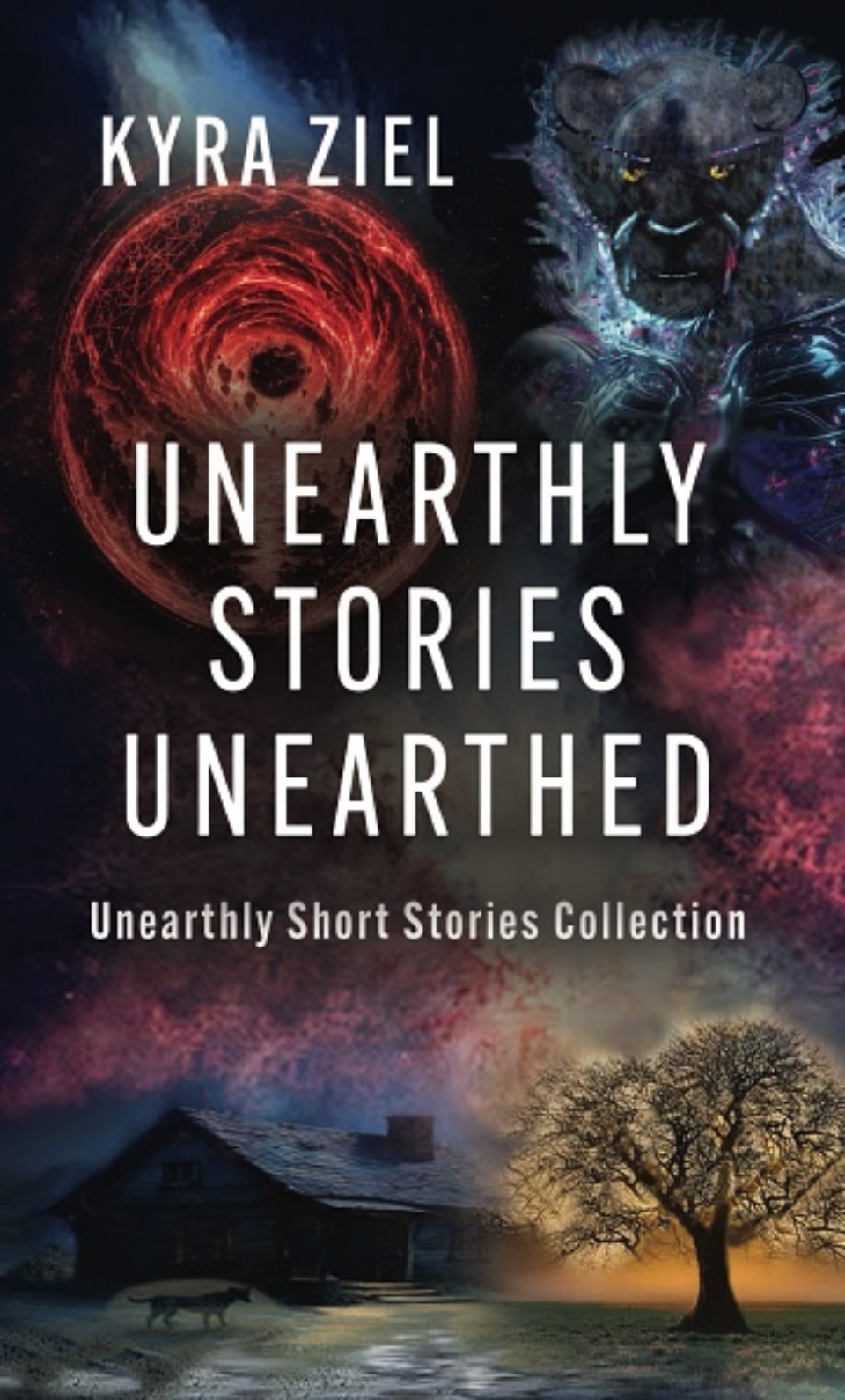
Unearthly Stories Unearthed

By Kyra Ziel

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KYRA ZIEL
UNEARTHLY STORIES UNEARTHED
Unearthly Short Stories Collection

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The Birthday Haunting

Day One

It was right after the first of the year. And the winter cold set in deeply all round, as one married couple, Pete and Joyce made plans for a birthday outing. They rented a rustic cabin, high in the mountains, about eighty miles away.

They planned the trip and stay for Pete's birthday coming up. And they packed their trusty, one-ton truck with the necessary supplies, while Joyce packed some extras. They were things she knew would help to make her husband's birthday, a thoroughly enjoyable one.

Once packed up and ready, they headed out, straight away. They hoped to arrive before dusk. And they had a limited window of time to make it in.

Pockets of snow appeared by the road, as they reached the base of the mountain. But as they climbed the grade, the snow pack became heavier. And they could see that snow plows had recently been by.

They passed many people stopped by the roadside, playing in the snow. They continued on, headed for the cabin. The couple kept their eyes open for the address. It was a cabin they had never seen before, except for the pictures, online. And both of them, impressed by a few, select reviews, felt confident in their choice for a mountain getaway.

As they found their way, the day began to wane, and a deepened cold of the snow-laden mountain set in. Then they spotted it. The cabin, set back in a clearing, amid a dense grove of pines. It had a dark wood exterior and a shadowy front porch. They pulled up and parked the one-ton.

As they arrived, the cold beset them. Though Pete made his way around to the rear porch area. That's where they should find the key to let them in. He found it, while Joyce waited back in the truck. But as getting out of the cold became the main focus now, an odd feeling began coming over Joyce.

As sun down approached, they moved expeditiously to get inside and a fire started. They mounted the porch and unlocked the front door. At the same time, the cabin's dark exterior made an almost foreboding impression on them.

But that impression barely scratched the surface of their awareness, at the time. Just the same, the thought of it may have begun swimming around, in the back of Joyce's head. Meanwhile, night set in, with its deepening shadows.

Once inside, the couple arranged their bags and took a look around. The living room spread out, with a stone fireplace, in the wall, to the left of them. And next to the immediate entry area on the right, a staircase rose to the second floor. Straight ahead, past the living room, a

large, sliding glass door stood, covered by dark drapes that lapped the floor. It seemed as though they'd never been changed, since the original owner lived there, decades ago.

A lovely arrangement of couch, chairs and side tables faced the fireplace. And the walkway continued behind, then past those furnishings. It led to a dining area and the kitchen.

Pete stacked some already-provided firewood and started a fire. With that, the fireplace provided warmth and a subtle glow in the living area.

The couple sat on the couch together, after a light meal. They snuggled and rested there, contentedly. Eventually, they fell asleep like that, for the rest of the evening.

Day Two

The next morning, at a fairly early hour, three housekeepers, two of whom spoke not a word of English, showed up. Evidently, the couple had arrived slightly ahead of schedule. Although, despite the unintended circumstance, the housekeepers went ahead with their work. Pete and Joyce politely stayed out of the way.

Soon enough, the housekeepers finished and left. Then the two of them, now alone again, wanted to satisfy their curiosity about the rest of the cabin. And they started by going up the stairs to check out the second floor.

It was at that point that Joyce began to feel as though, they weren't alone. As if someone were there with them. She felt it on the stairs. She felt it in the upstairs bedroom.

The housekeepers had all left. There simply was no one else present but them. That said, Joyce could only ignore the feeling. And after all, they were both starting to enjoy their stay, with Pete's birthday just a couple of days off.

On the main floor, in the kitchen, they discovered another staircase. It went down. Near its top, small dogfood and water bowls rested beside each other,

carefully placed against the kitchen wall. But at first, they went barely noticed, as Pete and Joyce followed the stairs. They found a large, master bedroom comfortably outfitted below.

As the day progressed, they made sure to check out the hot tub on the back patio and get some well-deserved soak-time. All the while snow kept the chill-factor high outside. White patches covered some of the patio flooring and railing, as steam rose around the couple in the tub. Later, after a great meal and quiet evening, they planned to retire to the downstairs bedroom.

Despite the settling in and relaxation they enjoyed, with day two of their stay, that feeling they were being watched came back again. A bit more pronounced now, Joyce seemed to feel it the most. Pete not as much. But neither of them acknowledged it to each other yet.

Later in the afternoon, squirrels showed up on the patio, scanning the sliding glass window, looking in. Seeing them seemed to offer up a satisfactory explanation for that feeling they were being watched. And Joyce shrugged it off, once again.

They spent the rest of day two checking out the property directly outside, feeding a few birds, and relaxing into the country vibe. Then they enjoyed a hearty meal. And both of them looked forward to spending the second night in the downstairs bedroom. It

included a roomy king size bed, bathroom and a door directly to the outside.

Pete and Joyce made their way to the master suite. Then they settled in for a good night's sleep. Joyce took the side of the bed closest to the staircase that came down from the kitchen. Pete settled in on the side facing the bathroom.

Turned on her side in bed, Joyce directly faced the staircase. And it was that first night in the master bedroom that she had the feeling come over her, again. She couldn't quite shake it…as if the stairs were being used. Like something was there watching them. No squirrels anywhere to attribute that to, this time.

Joyce, as was her habit, focused on a night prayer with Pete. She refused to let some unsettling feeling, in those moments of the evening, steal up on her. And soon enough, both of them went to sleep. They slept through to morning.

Day Three

Thank goodness the heating worked throughout the house. And the bed's covers were ample enough to keep the pair warm through a below-freezing night. But in the near-freezing high of the next morning, the couple dressed especially warm.

After breakfast, they took a brief hike, checking out the cabin grounds. But nothing seemed to shake that 'chilly undertone.' It seemed to go with them, even outside. "Something feels off," Joyce thought in the back of her mind. Even the birds and scurrying animals, on the way, seemed to know something unsettling about the place and weren't about to tell.

Back inside, Pete went about getting a fire going in the fireplace again. Then he broke out snacks for both of them to enjoy. Later on in the kitchen, Joyce washed a few dishes. And while finishing up, her eyes fell on the dog dishes.

Arranged neatly near the top of the staircase, they begged the questions that now occurred to Joyce. "Why were they there? Why, really, were they in the house at all? No pets allowed with cabin stays."

The third night of a four-night stay at the cabin approached. And Pete had not yet picked up on the oddity of the dog bowls. He eventually quelled the fire.

Then the two of them headed down the stairs, that to his wife, by now, almost seemed like they were not welcome on.

Joyce wanted Pete to enjoy his birthday, coming up the next day. She didn't want to alarm him with the strange way things started feeling to her. And again, she kept it pretty much to herself. She looked forward to turning in with Pete. Then around 9:00pm, they fell asleep. But the sleep for Joyce became restless.

As Joyce dreamt, she saw a beast. Large, lumbering, it had vicious fangs and prominent, pointy ears. It almost looked like a wolf but about the size of a bear. She tossed in the bed. Then in her dream, she saw the beast coming down the stairs!

Suddenly awake, Pete rose up in the bed. His stirring awakened Joyce. And she was glad it did.

Then Pete said, "Did you feel that?"

Joyce replied, "What?"

"It felt like something jumped on the bed."

Joyce could tell Pete was shook-up about it a little. "No…no…I didn't. Are you sure…you felt that?" she asked.

"I could swear, something jumped on the bed. But as we can see…well…nothing's there. Really strange though."

Then Joyce told him about her nightmare. And they said another evening prayer together. Afterward, it

seemed to calm their nerves. Then they settled back in and slept through ‘till morning.

Day Four

Joyce prepared a lovely meal, then had a cake and a gift ready for Pete the next day. They had a relaxing and enjoyable time. And most of the day, forgot about the events from the previous night. Then a few hours after Joyce seized the moment, to soak a while, in the Jacuzzi bathtub, sunset approached.

A new night brought their birthday enjoyment and celebration to a close. And in the early evening, Joyce walked nonchalantly over to the kitchen. She grabbed a refreshment from the refrigerator and offered one to Pete. He sat near the fireside.

As she walked toward Pete, with her hands full, she passed right by the area with the dog bowls neatly placed. As she did, her attention was drawn to them, somehow. It wasn't something she wanted to do. Instead, she found herself wanting to avoid looking at them, at all.

When Joyce passed close by the top of the staircase, the bowls seemed to actually *steal* her attention. Then as she unwillingly gazed at them, they started to look bigger, twice their size. Three times their size!

Joyce shut her eyes tight. Then she opened them again, sure she was just seeing things. At that point, what a relief to find the bowls looking as usual again.

They headed down the stairs. And by this time, Pete had caught on. It almost seemed like a brave act for them now. Something was off in the cabin.

He wondered aloud to his wife, "Why should those dog bowls be here?"

She nodded, "You're reading my mind."

Neither of them was about to let anything succeed in disturbing their final night's stay. After all, hadn't they planned this trip for some time? Hadn't they traveled some distance? They had even taken the steps in facing difficult weather ahead.

Winding down, Pete and Joyce relaxed into a lovely, romantic evening, with the weather outside calm but still bitterly cold. A little later, they settled in snugly to bed. They dozed off to sleep.

Fast asleep, Pete had one foot hanging out from the bedcovers, slightly over the edge. Meanwhile, his wife had another dream…*nightmare*. The terrifying, wolf-like beast she had seen, in her previous dream, appeared again. Only this time, it was in the room, at the foot of the stairs!

Pete woke up abruptly and shouted. With that, Joyce woke up. She looked, wide-eyed, over at her husband.

He said, "Something pulled on my toes. Then it bit my arm!"

"What?! Pete, are you sure?"

They both looked around, admittedly, a bit desperately, some panic rising in them. Nothing, No sign of anyone, anything, but them in the room! Yet, while Joyce was willing to chock it up to a bad dream, Pete wasn't willing to do the same. He believed something attacked him. Although, his wife managed to settle him down. And after a while, they even went back to sleep - until morning of the last day's stay.

Day of Flight

When the morning arrived, Pete enjoyed his usual shower. But the events of the evening before still weighed heavy on his mind. As he dried off, starting to feel a little better and in control again, something caught his eye. And to his horror, bruises started appearing on three of his toes! Then as he quickly looked closer at the underside of his arm, a set of teeth marks started forming, before his eyes!

"Joyce!" Pete cried. "Joyce, come look at this!"

She was just about to head upstairs. But she turned back, rushing to the bathroom.

"What is it, Pete?" But she fell silent, as he lifted his arm and pointed to his toes.

Then she murmured, "Oh my…what are we…looking at?"

Panic and alarm began creeping up in Joyce. And they both fell silent, in similar thoughts. Inconceivable has it seemed, he *had* been attacked, as he slept. But by what?!

Nothing around them hinted of anything capable of that. Only in the two dreams she had. Now though, it was as if they had an actual, physical *and* violent run-in…with something.

It was a ghastly thing. It was a ghostly thing. And hard as it was to admit, they both found themselves concluding that the cabin…was haunted! No, they weren't alone. And whatever it was, it wasn't human!

They didn't have to leave early. But they packed up in earnest, preparing to go promptly. They kept themselves composed, as much as possible, but wasted no time. Nothing could convince them to stay for the remaining morning. Then Pete returned the key to its place for the landlord, after shutting the front door behind them.

As they sat in their truck's cab, facing the front of the cabin, they both glanced at each other, expressing some sign of relief, without saying a word. But just as they did, something materialized on the porch. It seemed to come like mist, out of nowhere, at the front door. And it grew, until it became the likeness of a canine.

Joyce closed her eyes, in disbelief. They were seeing things. It was that simple. Then they both caught themselves saying, out loud, "That's just not real!"

Joyce opened her eyes again. But in response, as if the apparition had read their thoughts, it quickly enlarged. Then its eyes bulged, and its teeth grew savagely large. It became the beast Joyce saw in her dreams!

They were beside themselves in a panic, and truly frightened. At the same time, everything around them, outside - dead silent. No birds, no squirrels, nothing stirring.

But Pete regained control and composure, somehow. And inexplicably, almost unbelievably, stepped out of the truck's cab.

"What are you…?!" Joyce exclaimed. She was starting to sob.

He said nothing but motioned for Joyce to just hold on. Without a word, he let her know that he knew what he was doing.

He took a few steps forward. The image grew a little bigger and its eyes, fiery. But Pete kept his composure. Then he said, "You don't scare us. We're not afraid of you." And he held his ground.

It opened its mouth as if to roar! Joyce cringed and cried out. But no roar came. And Pete held his ground. Then those eyes lost their fiery appearance, while at the same time, the beastly image - began to shrink.

Pete took a few more steps carefully forward. As he did, the image continued to shrink. Then Pete made his way even nearer the porch. And Joyce looked on, in a mix of shock and slowly growing sense of relief, as the image began to fade.

Feeling safer, she exited the cab of the truck and walked slowly but resolutely over to Pete. They both

looked on. They watched, as the apparition shrank, until all that was left: the image of a rather small dog. It looked like a beagle of some kind. Then as quickly as it had formed, it disappeared. Just like that, gone.

As the couple headed back home, things were quiet between them. They didn't say much, both of them wrapped up in making sense out of all that happened. And once they made it back home, they felt a lot of gratitude for returning safely, in one piece.

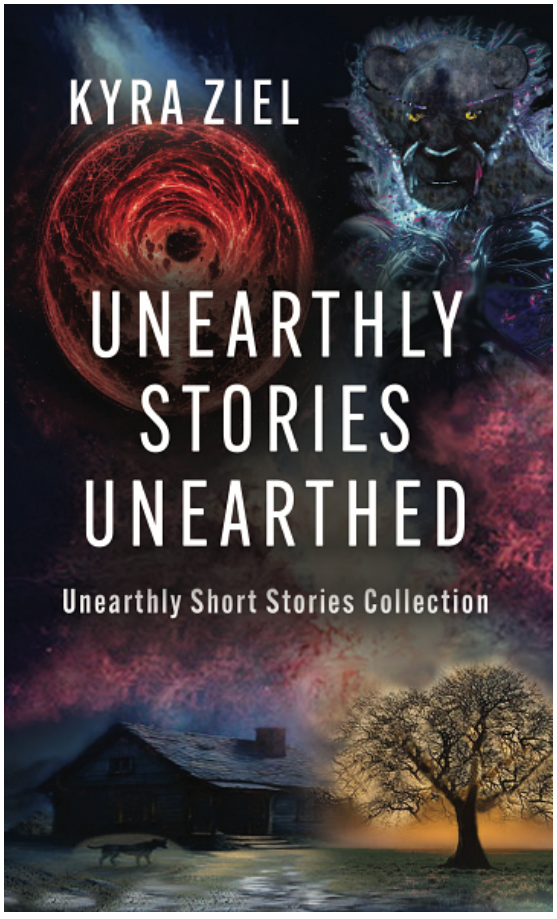
Later on, in the days following, Joyce decided to look deeper into the reviews about the cabin. And while she found nothing about it as nightmarish as what they experienced, she found plenty of relatable accounts. She found accounts of people feeling like they weren't alone, weren't welcome.

She found reviews from people complaining that the place looked like it had never been updated, since its original owners. And she found accounts of people feeling like an original owners' dog was present in the house. Others also questioned, why the ever-present dog dishes? Why always so carefully outfitted?

Needless to say, Pete and Joyce realized that the people they rented the cabin from had kept a lot from them. Too much. And both of them vowed never to vacation anywhere near that mountain 'getaway' again. At the same time, they knew they would never forget the

birthday haunting, by a spoiled little dog, with a big-dog complex, that refused to leave!

The End



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