

PROMPT #3: Looking through old family photos, multiple generations back, you notice there is a cat in almost every group photo. The same cat — color and pattern: the cat that is currently purring on your lap.

A Two Hundred Year Secret

by **Riya Patel**

It has been three months since the news of my aunts' deaths arrived and the same number of months since I've dared to step foot into their room in our apartment. The door had been closed for so long that I've often found myself forgetting there was a room beyond it.

I wish it was just as easy to forget my grief.

The news came late in the night, after my aunts had gone out of town to Connecticut visit some old friends. I had secretly been skipping ahead to a later season of the show the three of us always watched together when my phone rang. In my distracted state, I had picked it up, not really listening to the person speaking on the other end. It wasn't until I had heard the words: *I'm sorry, but your aunts have been reported as dead* that I realized the number was from a police station in Massachusetts. There had been several things that did not make sense from that terrible phone call. My aunts had gone to Connecticut, but I had gotten the call from Massachusetts. They had left just that morning, and it should have been impossible for them to get there that fast. But I was in no condition after the phone call to think straight and after enough time had passed, I told myself that there would be no way to make sense of what had really happened.

So that night, I closed the door to the room they both used to share and promised to never open it again.

Until tonight.

I released a shaky breath as I twisted the cold doorknob and pushed open the suddenly heavy door. Before my eyes could settle in the dark room, I was hit with the very faint scent of

the perfume they always wore. I fumbled for the light switch and when the light flooded the room, I nearly expected to find one of them sitting on the bed, flipping through a magazine while the other fussed over what I was wearing. Instead, it was silent.

Our apartment was small, so my aunts shared this room while I took the smaller bedroom across the hall. With their incomes, it was all we could afford. And now, with my sole income as a barista and some minor savings they left behind to me, it was time to pack up this apartment and move to a smaller, more affordable place. As my gaze ran over the various trinkets and furniture in the room, I found my chest tightening at the thought that I would have to sell or donate their stuff to strangers who never knew them. Or worse, throw it away.

Something brushed against my leg, and I looked down to find our cat Salem waltzing into the room with envious ease. I wondered how he managed to feel so comfortable in their room after everything. He had been my aunts' darling stray they found clawing at their door one stormy night, as the story went. I stood in the doorway, unable to step foot inside. It was as though my feet had lost their movement and turned to lead.

Salem tugged at my pant leg, trying to tell me to come inside. With a heavy sigh, I managed to force one foot in front of the other and, for the first time in three months, I was standing inside their room. The familiar wood creaked beneath my feet, and I was surrounded by ghosts of my aunts' memories. And as large of a feat that one step was, Salem was still relentlessly tugging at my pant leg.

"What is it, Salem?" I asked, but he let go of my pant leg and sauntered over to my aunts' dresser. He clawed at the bottom drawer. With a frown, I squatted down to his height and pulled open the bottom drawer, wondering what in the world a moody cat like Salem would want from my eccentric aunts' dresser. As soon as I opened it, he hopped inside and began pushing out neatly folded clothes, making a mess all over the hardwood floor.

"Salem!" I shouted in surprise, wondering what had gotten into him, but he doesn't stop. I was about to lift him out of the drawer, when I saw what he was looking for. It was a thick, leatherbound book of the color crimson, sitting beneath piles of their clothes. I paused, frowning as I reached in with both hands and pulled it out. It was a photo album. I carried it over to the bed, Salem in suit. He hopped onto my lap as I cracked open the book that had seemingly not been touched in a long time. What were Aunt Hilda and Aunt Zelda doing with a book like this?

The book had at least a hundred photographs within it, almost each one filled with faces of women that I couldn't recognize. The oldest pictures were on the first pages, in black and

white. There were two women with twin stern looks on their faces posing shoulder to shoulder in front of a familiar house. A man stood flanking them, an equally impassive expression over his face. In the next picture, the man was gone, but in his place was a slender black cat curled around the women's feet. It was the same two women plus another.

I flipped to the next page. The women seemed to multiply in numbers, but the original women are always there and somehow, even as the photographs began to bleed color, the women did not age one bit. The cat was there, too, his feline eyes staring directly at the camera as though he was hiding horrible secrets behind them. The man from the first picture never appeared again. I was starting to think that Aunt Hilda and Aunt Zelda had probably bought this photo album from a garage sale somewhere as a joke (they had been impulsive that way) when I turned to the final page of the book and my eyes landed on the last photograph.

I froze.

There were over a dozen women in this photograph (the cat, too), but there were two new faces that I could not look away from. Aunt Hilda and Aunt Zelda. Not only were my aunts in this picture with all these strange women, but in Aunt Hilda's arms was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed baby girl that looked frighteningly like me. With a trembling hand, I pulled out the photograph from the album and brought it closer to make sure my eyes weren't deceiving me. Salem purred in my lap quietly. There was no doubt that those were my aunts in this picture and that baby...it couldn't be me, could it? But that house...it was in the background of every photograph, and it looked awfully familiar. And all these women—there were so many more of them now, eerily similar to the fantastical stories about witches and their covens that my aunts used to tell me when I was a child.

I quickly flipped back to the first page and pulled out the first picture to compare it. When I turned it over, I found there was faded ink on the back that listed the names of the people in the picture.

Helene, Wanda, and Salem – 1809.

I was still in disbelief when I flipped over the last picture, the one with my aunts in it. There were over a dozen names scribbled on the back, but there were only a handful that caught my eye.

Helene, Wanda, Salem, Hilda, Zelda, and...

No.

Sabrina.

The picture was taken in 1998, the year I was born. I flipped the picture over again. How could Salem be in this picture when there were only women standing in it? The man from the first photograph was nowhere to be seen. It didn't make sense. The person who wrote this must have made a mistake. And Helene and Wanda had to be almost two hundred years old in this last picture. It wasn't possible. And the cat. How could the same cat have lived for that long? Salem purred in my lap again.

Salem.

My eyes shot down to the slender black cat purring quietly in my lap. His feline eyes looked as they held the same terrible secrets as the one in all the pictures. Slowly, horribly, I came to the realization. The cat that was sitting in my lap was the same one from these pictures. He was almost two hundred years old. And...And he used to be a human man? When Salem slowly turned his eyes to me, I froze.

Then Salem did the thing I had never expected him to do. He spoke. His voice was deep and old and the words he uttered terrified and excited me all at once.

"Your aunts have not died, Sabrina. But they are in mortal danger," Salem said.