

Chapter

A Reason For Leaving

"The only way to get it is to go after it."

At 4:30 a.m., on a clear morning in March of 1943, Aunt Mac left Lexington, Mississippi for a place she told everyone would grant her all of the things she wanted out of life. She said, "When I got behind the wheel of the car, all I wanted was Las Vegas in my lap and Mississippi kissing my ass." With a map and a Bible on the front seat, a sterling silver flask filled with whiskey peeking out the side of her half-zipped purse, Aunt Mac felt at the age of twenty six that *her* life had just begun.

To make sure the trip would be a safe one, she brought along a pearl handled handgun her second husband Bishop had given her, and placed it under the Bible. At the time it was an understood "law" that a black woman could get away with killing a black man. "They called it self-defense, but I call it 'shoot or get shot,'" Aunt Mac said. As Aunt Mac drove past the cotton pickers walking on the side of the road she honked and waved goodbye with both hands.

When driving through the last little town she would see before reaching the state line, she began to reminisce about her decision to leave Mississippi and about the folks back home. The first person she recalled was her mama, Leona.

Leona was a quiet woman who spoke only when she felt it was necessary. She understood Aunt Mac, mainly because she reminded her so much of herself as a girl.

Aunt Mac was the youngest, and the most stubborn, of three kids. When she was around seven years old, she discovered that all of them had different fathers. None of the men wanted to marry Leona, and Aunt Mac was told by the family to never ask about her father. So who he was and where he lived remained a mystery.

Leona was a cook for a white family called the Stewarts. Every time she reached for that old quilted coat the Stewarts gave her many Christmases ago, or had to walk down that eight-mile, unpaved road in the freezing-cold weather, it made Aunt Mac cringe. Watching her mama, she grew bitter, and she hated the fact that she worked so hard for wages that didn't allow them to make a decent living.

Aunt Mac herself learned early about doing hard work for little pay. She began to laugh at how naïve she was the first time she picked cotton.

She loved her family and she rarely got the chance to see them, mainly because they were always working. So when her mama told her the family needed her in the cotton fields, she thought it would be a fun day in the hot sun. Boy was she wrong.

At four a.m., her mama got her up, wanting to make sure she was properly dressed for the job. On her frail body, she placed two cotton shirts and a long skirt with two slips underneath. She wrapped a cotton bandana around her head several times so the large straw hat would fit comfortably on top. She added a pair of old knit gloves with the fingertips cut out, and then she laced up her black ankle boots. Now she was ready for the fields.

Lee Birda, Aunt Mac's cousin, knocked on the door and said, "Let's go pick this cotton, girl." Aunt Mac smiled and said, "Sounds good." Lee Birda just stared at her in disbelief.

While walking toward the field, Aunt Mac realized that no one murmured a word, but then again they didn't have to. Gloom and despair were etched across their foreheads and present in their eyes. She glanced at Lee's hands and noticed how red and blistered

they were, and that's when she knew this was not going to be a day of play.

"That day in the cotton field was the longest of my life. It took months for my back, and weeks for my hands to heal," said Aunt Mac. "Those darn gloves were supposed to protect my hands, but they did everything but that."

When Aunt Mac told her mama she would never pick cotton again, her mama said, "Well, it's better than nothing." This answer frustrated her and started her to think seriously about what she wanted out of life. "The first time I picked cotton for Mr. Charlie was my last time. I was ten years old and at that time I learned to be afraid. Afraid that I would have a life with no meaning and that I would have to settle for less. Since then, I was determined to make sure these fears never came true even if it would take me a lifetime."

She wanted to leave the South because she knew that if she stayed, she would end up with little or nothing in life, just like most of her relatives. The idea this might happen terrified her. As she drove past the Mississippi state line, she felt a great sense of relief. Now that she was well on her way, she began to think about her favorite pastime – men.

Aunt Mac attended Lexington Colored School of Holmes County, Mississippi, the only school available for blacks, from the first to the eighth grade. She then attended high school, which was located upstairs in the same building. Her experiences with men began in junior high.

Aunt Mac's first marriage was to a young man in Lexington named Willie Seaton. She was fifteen years old and he was eighteen. Willie was the "boy next door" who really lived next door.

Every day, Aunt Mac and Willie walked to and from school together and he insisted on carrying her books. Even after he graduated, Willie made sure he was there every morning and after her last class to escort her home. He did this until he found a full-time job.

Willie worked countless hours as a janitor at the community grocery store, which didn't allow him to spend much time with Aunt Mac. Afraid he might lose her, Willie asked her to marry him. Without any reservations, she accepted his proposal. "The reason I married Willie was to move from under my mama's feet. I wanted to make love and drink, and I knew darn well my mama wasn't going to allow it in her house."

After they were married, Willie decided they should live with his mama at least until they could save enough money to buy a house of their own. After three weeks of marriage, Willie hinted to Aunt Mac that he would like to have kids someday. Aunt Mac said, "I'll think about it, but for now, all I want is to live anywhere except next door to my mama."

Even though she didn't want kids at that particular time, she proved to be a dedicated wife. One day, the store's errand boy came over to tell her that Willie slipped and fell on a wet floor at work and injured his back. She immediately rushed to his side.

A few of her friends helped to bring him home in the car. They couldn't afford a doctor so she knew she was going to have to nurse him back to health. After a month of intensive care, Willie was on his feet and back to work.

As the months went by, Aunt Mac grew more restless about the idea of staying with Willie's mama, while he grew more content. Whenever she mentioned the idea of looking for a house, Willie turned hostile and defensive. Slowly it dawned on her: Willie was a mama's boy and there was a chance he was never going to leave his mama's side.

Aunt Mac and Willie's marriage lasted one more year. When it ended, she had no alternative but to move back home. Because she lived next door, it took only a few minutes.

The same year she divorced Willie, she married a sawmill worker named Bishop Paige. She completed two years of high school and she knew that even with a little education, she still wasn't

guaranteed a decent job. So she decided to play it safe and marry a man with one. She was seventeen and he was twenty-five.

After they were married, Aunt Mac and Bishop decided to move to Jackson, Mississippi. For \$2 a week they rented a small room, which was located inside a moderate-size four-bedroom house. She worked at a nearby café and he found work at the sawmill.

Two years later, things began to go wrong for the two love-birds. Every payday, Bishop would visit the houses known to have illegal gambling going on in the back. Sometimes he would win, but mostly he would lose.

At first she didn't mind that Bishop chose to gamble after work instead of making plans with her because it gave her the chance to go out with friends to the neighborhood juke joint. She wasn't the jealous type and although she was married, she still wanted to maintain her sense of independence. "I always promised to respect my husband as long as he didn't try to boss me around. God gave me a mind to use, and it's not meant to be misused."

What she did mind was that Bishop was coming home telling bald-faced lies. He would say that he was ahead in a poker game, but then something would happen to cause him to lose his entire winnings. "Whatever his reason was, it was never his fault."

Bishop told Aunt Mac that his eye was on the big pot, and that he wanted so much to bring it home for her. Aunt Mac laughed and said, "My eye is also on the pot, and from where I'm standing it's looking awfully peaky."

Bishop continued lying, sounding more each day like a broken record. After two years, Aunt Mac decided it was over. Once again, she found herself moving back with her mama, Leona, in Lexington. "I can do bad by myself and when a fool departs from his money, I will soon depart from him."

After her divorce, Aunt Mac began to wonder: If marriage isn't the answer, then what is? She said that in those days people respected a woman if she was married to the man she was always

seen with. Marriage was one of the few socially acceptable ways a woman was able to leave her parents' house if she wanted to begin a life of her own. Aunt Mac desperately wanted to prove there were other options from which a woman could choose. So, she gave herself one month to plan a strategy that would move her in another direction.

One day, while formulating her plan, in the middle of the afternoon, she decided to walk down the street to the nearby club for an ice-cold beer. Inside the club, a group of men were listening to the jukebox and shooting pool. She was the only woman in the place. She wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

Before she could sit down, one of the guys rushed over and offered her a drink. She accepted, ordering a bottle of Falstaff, and then she asked if he had a cigarette. He lit a hand-rolled white stick that he said was made with the finest tobacco in the South, then he introduced himself as Big John.

After a few rounds of drinks, Big John said, "I came to Lexington to pick up my cousin and a few of his friends. We're moving to a place called Las Vegas, Nevada, to work for a defense plant that's hiring black men and paying good money."

Big John's white boss at the sawmill in Tallulah, Louisiana, told him about the plant. He suggested it would be wise to give this new place a try.

Aunt Mac's interest was piqued when Big John told her that the pay was ten dollars a day. He said, "In all of my experiences in job seeking, I never heard of any employment paying that kind of money, especially in the state of Louisiana." He told her the potential of earning that amount practically forced him to leave the South.

Aunt Mac began to add his earnings in her head. Without counting the possibility of working overtime, she concluded that he could easily make fifty dollars a week. She laughed and asked Big John, "If you run out of ideas on what to do with all that money,

let me know. I have some great ones.” He said he planned to send his mama and papa money for a new roof once he got settled.

Big John had a cousin already working at the plant who said the pay was good but the living conditions were awful in Las Vegas. He also said that even though the plant was not hiring black women, there was a demand for colored women for domestic work. As long as she knew a little about cleaning and cooking, a woman could get a job in a white family’s home making around six dollars a day. Aunt Mac had no problem doing that type of work. She just wanted to be paid enough to make ends meet.

That night, when Aunt Mac went home, she knew that a move to Las Vegas would be good. A few days later, she made her decision to leave, but she kept it to herself because she didn’t want anyone trying to change her mind.

Big John was traveling with twelve men and they were taking only two cars. She knew it would be safer to go with them or have someone to make the trip with her, but she didn’t want any company. She wanted to use this time to reflect.

Aunt Mac was surprised when her mama told her she supported her decision to leave Mississippi. She wanted more out of life for Mac and told her, “The only way to get it is to go after it.”

With these words, spoken by someone she loved and respected, Aunt Mac felt she could take on the world.

After two and a half days of traveling, she finally crossed the Nevada state line. She was always confident her car would make the trip, thanks to one of her secret admirers, Engine Joe.

The day before she left, Engine Joe made sure her car was serviced and detailed. He even placed a set of new tires on the shiny, black 1939 Chevy sedan.

She wanted to look good in every way when she left. Although she didn’t anticipate returning home soon, she believed in the old Southern saying, “The way you leave is the way you come back.”

Looking ahead, all she could see was miles and miles of desert, but to her it represented the Promised Land. When Aunt Mac

realized that in less than an hour she would be in the city she bet the folks back home would change her life and was the answer to her prayers — she made a toast, “To my new beginning. . .” And then took a long sip of the 100-proof moonshine-whiskey from her sterling silver flask and added, “and to my ending as well.”