

# Meet Clay Brown

By

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## Chapter 1

“My name is Clay Brown, I’m 19, and I was born with HIV.”

Four sets of questioning eyes glared at me. This was my second meeting at Hope Church. In the first meeting, I listened as the other group members introduced themselves. It was a sort of rule for every new person: “Listen and don’t speak,” as the reverend had said. He never wanted to make anyone feel pressured at their first meeting. It didn’t matter; we all had the same story anyway. Our story. We were all under the age of 25, living with HIV.

“It’s good to see everyone again.” The reverend pulled up one of the folding chairs, joining us in the circle. “And, young lady, I’m glad you decided to return.”

I don’t know why I came back. There wasn’t anything special about this place. It was an old brick building with shabby carpet, dim lights, and a cold draft that ran all through. The only nice thing about the sanctuary was the huge gold chandelier that hung from the middle of the ceiling.

The reverend crossed his long legs, his blue jeans rising above his ankles, displaying clean, white socks. He folded his arms across his chest, looking around the sanctuary through his black-framed glasses. “Why don’t you tell us a little about yourself?”

I pulled my beanie tighter over my dreads. Wasn’t my introduction enough? Let’s see... ya already know my name. According to Jimmy, I didn’t need school because I was gonna die soon, just like my mother, so I dropped out. Turns out he was wrong ’cause right now I could have a diploma. Instead, I’m here sitting with a bunch of HIV-infected people, wondering how this is going to help me at all.

“Clay,” the reverend said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I looked around the circle, feeling the moisture under both my armpits trickle slowly down my torso. “Like I said earlier, I was born with it.”

“Man, born with it,” Isiah said as he rubbed his bald head.

“My mother had it. She gave it to me and Jimmy. She died when I was ten.”

“Who is Jimmy?” the reverend asked.

“My father,” I answered. The words felt as if they were coming from someone else.

“What brought you here?” the reverend’s voice was full of empathy, making it easy to warm up to him.

“I found the card on the train.” It was stuck in one of the metal frames that lined the train walls with advertisements. The card stuck out the corner of the frame, the words “HIV Ministry” printed in bold gold letters catching my eye.

“My cards are getting around,” the reverend said. “Well, that’s good to know.”

Laughter filled the room. The reverend had an easy presence. He had kind brown eyes. He seemed to genuinely care about people. At my last meeting, he told me he moved to Brooklyn from North Carolina in hopes of starting a healing ministry.

“Another mami in the house,” Martina said, getting out of her seat and taking a few short steps towards me, her curvy body swaying to its own rhythm. She hugged me while placing a light kiss on my cheek.

“Sit your ass down,” Brianna said. Her bright purple sweater made her short red bob stand out, both colors contrasting against her pale skin.

Martina returned to her seat, giving Brianna the finger.

“OK,” the reverend said. “Let’s not scare Clay off.”

“She’s all right, Rev,” Asher said, staring at me from across the circle. His dark hair roamed freely on his head. He was leaning back in his chair, playing with the zipper on his worn leather jacket.

I folded my hands, then quickly unfolded them.

“Updates,” the reverend said, placing both his hands to the sides of his mouth. “I need updates.” From my last meeting, I learned updates were how he asked about everyone’s week.

Martina stood, although it wasn’t required—it seemed like she tried to show off her curves whenever possible. “I’m struggling a little with my GED classes. My teacher suggested I get some tutoring.”

“I can help you,” Brianna said, stretching her legs in her seat and pulling on her sweater. Brianna, who was a part-time bartender, dropped out of law school after her first year.

“Gracias, mami,” Martina said, before sitting down.

“Who’s next?” the reverend asked.

“I’m writing a new song,” Isiah said, “about Paulina.” I wondered why he shaved his head.

“Who’s Paulina?” I asked.

Martina caught my eye, slowly pressing her index finger to her lips.

“Never mind.” I blurted regretfully.

“It’s all good, Clay,” he said. “She’s a woman I slept with. A woman who gave me HIV.”

“It’s a good first step you’re taking toward healing through your music,” the reverend said, breaking my uneasiness. “You all have to take that first step toward healing.”

Healing. As if one day the virus could magically disappear. Last time I checked, my body wasn’t curable.

“Some lady grabbed some of my incense off my table and ran,” Asher said, still playing with the zipper. “I chased her for about two blocks.”

I wanted to know where this happened but decided against asking him.

“Fuck,” Brianna said. “Did you catch her?”

Asher leaned forward. “Nah, she was too quick. She’ll probably end up selling my shit.”

“Damn, man,” Isiah said.

“Don’t stress it,” the reverend said. “You’ll earn that money back in no time.”

Asher leaned back again. “I better. It’s getting harder to sell.”

“I bet,” Brianna said, “with it getting cold and all.”

“How was your week, Brianna?” the reverend asked.

“The usual,” Brianna said, the black eye shadow around her green eyes making them glisten in the dim light. “My mother calling to harass me about all the stupid choices I made in

my twenty-three years on this earth. Who knew I messed up even at birth? Like her shit don't stink."

"She will come around," the reverend said.

"When hell freezes over," Brianna shot back.

I didn't want to share my week, but the reverend's sudden look in my direction told me otherwise.

"I worked." That was really it. That's all there ever was. Work to try and keep up with the bills. Work to keep the crappy apartment that our landlord Mr. Lee rents to us. Work to at least have some food in the refrigerator so when Jimmy tries to sell the food stamps for his next hit, we won't starve to death. That's all there ever was.

"Where do you work?" the reverend asked.

"At a Mexican café in Williamsburg."

"Mexican," the reverend said. "Interesting."

"The owners are Mexican," I added as quickly as possible. I intentionally kept it brief so we could go on to the next person.

"Doesn't necessarily make it a Mexican café," Brianna said.

"What's the food like?" Isiah asked.

Couldn't they just shut up about it?

"That's all you do?" Asher asked, his sudden forwardness catching me off guard.

"Umm, yeah," I replied hesitantly.

"What do you do there?" the reverend asked, as if sensing the sudden mood change in the room.

“I’m a waitress.” Assuming that’s what I wanted to call myself, that is. The truth was we barely got any customers for me to even consider myself one. “No big deal.”

“What we speak has power over us,” the reverend said. “We all need to have a little faith in ourselves.”

I dropped faith when my mother died. Death took the only person who loved me away. There’s nothing left to hold on to.

The rest of the hour-long meeting, the reverend told us about his week involving a hobo and some blessing oil, then we talked about politics (which none of us but Brianna really knew about), entertainment, and crazy random things we came across in the city. There was no pressure to talk about the virus. The floor was open to anything.

“Remember, guys, don’t pity yourself,” the reverend said as we folded our chairs and placed them in the center of our now broken circle. “It will get better.”

“Sorry about earlier,” Asher said, walking beside me as I headed out.

“What was that about?” I asked. He barely knew me, so what was his problem?

“I thought I saw you somewhere before here,” he said. “Just forget it.”

We made our way out the double doors. The sun was beginning to set, although it was only five p.m. I stuffed my hands into my pockets.

“Later,” I said, walking away from him to cross the street. Two cars passed by, not giving me a chance to cross sooner.

“Wait,” Asher said. “I did see you before.”

“So?” I didn’t really care when or where he thought he saw me because it was probably some other girl with dreads. People didn’t pay attention to faces—didn’t pay attention to much about each other period, really.

I crossed the one-way street.

“You was with some white girl, with short blond hair. I think it was 125<sup>th</sup> Street Station.

How do you know her?”

He meant Mimi. Why the hell did he care? Did he know her?

Asher followed behind me, ignoring the fact that I was ignoring him.

“What’s it to you?” I stopped and turned around.

He walked closer to me. “A girl like you shouldn’t be hanging with a girl like her.”

“Wait, you’re that guy that’s always selling different stuff on 125<sup>th</sup> Street near the train station.” I sensed he wanted to know if I was like Mimi. Well, I wasn’t. I wasn’t an addict or scammer. I didn’t want to think about her—at least not right now. “Mind your business.”

“I’ll back off,” he said, putting his hands up. “Come on, I’ll walk you to the train.”

Our walk was silent. The short blocks that led us to the subway seemed longer than usual. Sirens blared in the near distance before slowly fading. A girl on her bike rode toward us, waving one of her arms in a shooing motion, before turning onto the street. When we reached the subway, I was ready to say goodbye.

“For the record, I’m not like Mimi,” I blurted. “She’s just someone I know.”

“Good,” he said, a smirk crossing his lips. “What are you doing tonight?”

“Working.”

“Too bad.” His dark eyes searching mine.

“Why?”

“Nothing, forget it,” he said, looking away from me. “I’ll see you at the next meeting...right?”

“Yeah,” I replied, although not completely sure if I was going back.

He reached into his pocket and handed me a few small brown sticks in a zip-lock bag.

“It’s only three incense. Jasmine. Smells nice.”

“Thanks.”

“Later, Clay.”

I watched him run back the way we came, then I carefully put the incense sticks in my pocket before I ran down the filthy steps to the train.