

# BORN AGAIN

## K D Wentworth

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My best friend, Harmony, wanted to come over and study, so I called home and asked Jesus what was for dinner. He said he didn't know and he didn't care. Since he was fasting, he wasn't coming out of his living room niche, even if Mom baked lasagna, his favorite. I should get my mind on more important things, he said, like the state of my immortal soul.

Jesus was always going on about souls. If Mom had understood how boring he was going to be once he learned to talk, she would never have taken out the loan to buy a stupid Son-of-God clone in the first place. I would have rather had a shiny black Hummer, but I was only two at the time and no one asked me.

Dad split when I was ten and Jesus was eight, said he couldn't take it anymore. Even at eight, Jesus was a bit much, bringing home road-kill kittens all the time so he could try to raise them from the dead.

Harmony thought having your own Jesus was creepy, said you might as well live in a church and drink holy water instead of orange juice for breakfast. But she was Catholic and had to listen to the priests rant every Sunday about the holy clones biz. You'd think she would have felt connected. After all, it was the Shroud of Turin that started the whole mess, but she said Protestant scientists dreamed all this up, so we could just live with it. Even though she was my best friend, she was a pain sometimes.

As for Jesus, he didn't like Harmony either. She was always rude to him and had this spiky black hair. He said the spikes reminded him of nails, and it doesn't take a brain surgeon to know how a Jesus feels about nails. Whenever she came over, he would mutter about "suffer the little children" and all that. Harmony would get mad and point out she was seventeen, not a stupid kid! Jesus would just smile knowingly, like he wasn't a good two years younger.

After school that day, Harmony and I came in the back door and dumped our books on the table. The kitchen still smelled like bacon from breakfast, and Jesus had totally ignored the dirty dishes in the sink. How could he be home all day and never lift a friggin'™ finger? I can't believe we're still making payments on him. Mom might as well have burned that money.

I had intermediate trig for homework, while Harmony was finishing her essay on *The Scarlet Letter*, the most clueless novel ever written. I'd already turned mine in. So Hester hooked up with the minister, I'd pointed out. So what? She was young. Why shouldn't she have a good time? Those Puritan dudes seriously needed to get over themselves.

At the counter, Jesus's eyes were practically crossed as he stared at a glass of water. His acne had flared up again, and he'd let his hair get long and ratty in imitation of you-know-who. He needed to get over himself too.

"That water's not going to change," I said, just to be mean.

"Shut up, Bailee," he said defensively. "It's already turning pink!"

"Yeah, right," I said.

Harmony flipped through *The Scarlet Letter*, then stared down at the text morosely. "Every time I try to read this, I want to slap that ho, Hester," she said. "Why didn't she just tell those morons to

goâ€”"

"Tolerance,â€• Jesus said. He struck a noble stance, something at which he'd spent a lot of time practicing. â€œJudge not, lest ye be judged."

"Oh, give it a rest!â€• Harmony glared over her shoulder at his skinny ass. â€œAren't you supposed to be off in a hole somewhere?"

He picked up the glass and drained it. â€œYes,â€• he said, â€œdefinitely wine, a nice, full-bodied Cabernet."

"His hole is called a niche,â€• I said, â€œand it's for meditation and prayer. He doesn't have to sit in it unless he wants to.â€• I opened my trig book and pulled out a sheet of half-completed problems. â€œHe's not a slave."

"He's not a person either, Bailee,â€• Harmony said, â€œelse he'd have to go to school like us."

Actually, the first few Jesus clones did go to school, but officials had quickly decided their presence was â€œtoo disruptive.â€• Mom had tried to enroll him in woodworking classes down at the Vo-Tech, but he refused to attend even the first one, so these days our Jesus studied at home, when he did anything useful, which wasn't very often.

We worked for half an hour, while Jesus amused himself back in the pantry, pulling slices of bread to bits to see if he could make the pieces multiply.

Finally, the numbers in my problems were blurring. My brain was about to implode, and I couldn't stand it anymore. â€œI'm off to Holes-to-Go at the mall for another piercing,â€• I said. â€œLanie Andrews has four holes in her ears now too, and I'll just die if I don't get a fifth before she does."

"Didn't Principal Wingate say you couldn't have more than three piercings?â€• Harmony scraped back her chair. â€œYou're already pushing the envelope. Do you want to get sent home again?"

"Yeah, wouldn't that just be too bad?â€• I stretched, then glanced over at Jesus. â€œWant to come?"

"Eew!â€• Harmony said.

Jesus brushed the crumbs off his hands. I noticed he was wearing his best faded jeans, suitably saggy and ragged around the cuffs, and a new orange Hawaiian shirt, artfully wrinkled. He was big for his age, taller than either one of us, and actually didn't look too bad, for someone supposed to be so sacred. Had he planned this all along?

He smiled, flashing us a mouthful of braces that featured a football on every tooth. â€œIsn't there a fountain at the mall?"

"Oh, no,â€• Harmony said. She dabbed mousse on her black hair and ran her fingers through it. â€œNot that stupid walking-on-water stunt again! It's just too lame!"

"Promise,â€• I said to him. â€œNo water-stuff, or you can't go."

"I can't stay long anyway,â€• he said. â€œI have Group at five."

"And I suppose you want me to take you."

He shoved his hands into his pockets. â€œYou could just give me the keys to your car."

"Right," I said and rolled my eyes, "like that's going to happen."

Even though Jesus was fifteen and had a Learner's Permit, Mom didn't even let him drive with her. He took too many chances because he kept trusting to a Higher Power. Well, so far that Higher Power hadn't ever come through at the crunch, and now two totaled cars later, this particular Jesus was on foot.

Harmony made him sit in the back so we could pretend like he wasn't there. He was there all right, though. I could feel him praying by the nasty prickle crawling up the back of my neck.

"Stop it, nerd," I said. "You know this is a prayer-free zone. Don't make me come back there and hurt you!"

"The way you drive, you'd better take all the help you can get," he said.

"I told you not to bring him!" Harmony looked mulish.

I parked at the mall, and we went in the north entrance, far away from the fountain and close to the twin Meccas of Abercrombie and Fitch and the Gap, not that any of us were packing money for new clothes. Mom was so stingy, and Harmony's dad was entirely unreasonable on the subject. He'd even taken away her credit card after that little incident with the mink halter.

Jesus, of course, was hopeless about cash. The minute Mom gave him even a few cents, he frittered it away on beggars or charities. That's not to say he doesn't want a new skateboard or the latest clothes. The Lord would provide, he always said, but it was Mom who had to figure out where those kinds of things would come from, after he'd blown his allowance.

Today, I had just enough to pay for getting my ears pierced, so Jesus wasn't getting any cash out of me. Harmony decided to amuse herself by trying on all the cool clothes she couldn't afford and headed for the Gap.

I told Jesus to sit on a bench outside the store while I got my ears done. Every time he sees the least bit of blood, he's all "I can heal you!" Tr@'s embarrassing. Sometimes I could just die.

"I have Group in an hour, Bailee," he reminded me as I went in. Like I could have forgotten. Sometimes I thought his group sessions were all that kept us sane.

When I came out with my new studs, he was gone. I swore under my breath, hoping he hadn't found a podium somewhere to harass bored shoppers again about loaves and fishes.

I swung by the Gap to retrieve Harmony, only to find Jesus there too, carrying her sack. "I thought you didn't have any money," I told her.

"I didn't." She dimpled at Jesus in a disgusting way. "But *he* did."

"Jesus?" I could feel my eyebrows puckering. "You've got to be kidding."

"I found a twenty dollar bill on the floor down at the Food Court," he said, "so I was looking for a beggar, but there aren't any in the mall, and then I ran into Harmony."

"And I was in serious need of this shirt." Harmony took the sack out of Jesus's hand. "It was an awesome act of charity!"

He was staring at her with an expression he usually reserved for the pictures of saints. "We have to go," I said uneasily. "Jesus has to get to Group."

Jesus's Group is held every Wednesday afternoon at the YMCA in a room that reeks of chlorine, since it's next to the pool. I intended just to drop him off, but Harmony wanted to check out the meeting.

We were met at the door by Brad-Jesus, a more filled-out version of our own model. "Visitors are welcome," he said, "especially friends and family members, but you'll have to sit outside the circle and be quiet."

"No way." I shook my head. That many Jesuses in one place thoroughly creeped me out. "We'll pick him up when he's done."

"Oh, come on, Bailee," Harmony said. "Let's stay for a few minutes."

Brad-Jesus smiled at her with that beatific radiance they can all muster when they try, and she dragged me over to a row of metal chairs by the wall.

More Jesuses filed in, some younger than ours, others older. Each one was greeted with the assumed name he was encouraged by the group to adopt. Our Jesus had chosen Carson.

"That's a seriously cool name," Harmony whispered to me.

"He thinks he's going to be one of the Fab Five," I said. My new piercings were throbbing. All I wanted was to go home and lie down.

"Gather 'round, folks," Brad-Jesus said with a wave of his arm. "We don't want to run out of time."

One of the attendees must have been new, because he kept walking around the circle like they were playing Musical Chairs. "Don't be shy," Brad-Jesus said. "We're all Christ here. No need to stand on ceremony."

The newcomer settled next to our Jesus, who moved over to keep an empty space between them.

"Now," Brad-Jesus said, "let's get the ritual questions out of the way. First, did anyone perform a miracle this week?"

Feet shuffled uncomfortably. Heads hung.

"Not even one?" Brad-Jesus looked disapproving. "Come on, people. We have to keep trying."

Our Jesus raised his hand. "I turned water into wine," he said.

I bolted to my feet. "Did not!"

He rounded on me with a murderous glare. "I did too!"

"Liar!" I said. "It wasn't even pink!"

"It was white wine, buttface!"

"Now, Carson-Jesus," Brad-Jesus said mildly. "The Historical Jesus didn't lie or call people names."

"How do you know?" our Jesus said. His face was red, and his acne stood out like brands. "It's not like he left a blog! Besides, I'm not him. None of us are!"

"You've got that right." I crossed my arms and sank back into my seat. "Stupid clones."

"We don't use the C-word here," Brad-Jesus said reproachfully.

"Look!" One of the Jesuses pointed at me. "Her ear! It's bleeding!"

Damn. I scrambled in my backpack for a tissue.

As though they had but one mind between them, the whole circle lurched to their feet. "I can heal it," one of them said fervently.

"No, let me!"

"Let me!"

"I want to do it!"

"Uh, Bailee? Harmony tugged at my arm. "Maybe we should go?"

I scanned the approaching faces. They looked like they'd seen a half-price sale at Banana Republic. "Yeah," I said. "I think you're right."

We sprinted for the exit, while, behind us, Brad-Jesus exhorted his troops to regain their seats. "Anyone have a revelation this week?" he said, raising his voice to make himself heard. "Or maybe a precognitive event? Anyone know when the world's going to end?"

"I do," one said, and half of our pursuers stopped to listen. We lost the rest when we ducked through the pool area and left them with their mouths open as they watched the girls' synchronized swim team stand on their heads underwater.

Jesuses are so predictable.

Of course, our own Jesus wasn't so easily shaken off. "I'll never be able to show my face at Group again," he said as he threw himself into the back seat of my car.

I buckled my seat belt with a click. "I don't know why not. It looks just like every other face already there. How could they tell it was you?"

"That's harsh," he said.

"Yeah," Harmony said, "harsh." She turned and looked at Jesus over the seat. "I think you're way more handsome than the rest."

"Give me a break," I said.

"I'm hungry," Jesus said. "Let's stop at McDonald's."

I pulled out onto the street. A car I hadn't noticed screeched its brakes, and I shot it the finger. "I thought you were fasting."

"That was earlier," he said. "I'm done now."

I sighed. "Aren't you supposed to be able to turn stones into bread? I bet we could find some tasty pebbles at the park."

"Don't be dense," he said. "I want a Big Mac."

"Like you could pay." I turned the corner on two wheels.

"There's a little left from the twenty he found at the mall," Harmony said. "We could split one of those combo meals."

He leaned forward. "Supersized?"

So, of course, we had to pull in at Mickey D's and line up at the counter with all the other dweebs for a ten-block radius. I wasn't clogging up my arteries with that stuff. No way, but I had to keep an eye on Jesus, and Harmony was acting funny, like she'd thawed toward him. That twenty back at the mall had seriously messed up her judgment.

She pulled out a five and a handful of change, then gave the money to Jesus while she searched the bottom of her purse for loose quarters.

Over by the napkins, Jesus spotted one of those silly plastic cash traps for the unwary, this one purporting to finance camps to teach underprivileged children how to "dress for success" in order to boost their self-esteem. Before I could stop him, he'd stuffed Harmony's entire cash reserve through the center slit.

Harmony looked up. "Here's another thirty-five...."

Jesus was beaming.

She stared at his empty hands. "What did you do with my money, fool?"

"Nothing he hasn't done a hundred times before," I said. "Come on. Let's blow this dump."

She couldn't get past it though. "You threw it all away?"

"I didn't throw it away; I donated it to a worthy cause," he said. "Don't you know that it's way easier to smooch a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich dude to get into heaven?"

"Barfbag!" She punched Jesus on the shoulder, then tipped the plastic charity bin, trying to maneuver the five dollar bill back to the slot.

"Hey," the manager called from behind the counter, "put that down!" He was a big guy with the build of a bowling pin.

Harmony shook the bin like a terrier with a rat. Two pennies and a metal washer fell out and rolled across the tile floor. "I want my money back!"

"You put it in, sweetcheeks, it stays in." The manager darted through the counter, then pushed her aside and righted the bin. All the change clinked back to the bottom. Sweat rolled greasily down his cheeks. "Now, do I call the police or are you three leaving?"

Then he squinted, taking a closer look at Jesus. "Another one of those damn holier-than-us boys. I should have known it. Get out of my store! We only serve real people here!"

Jesus got that bullheaded look that always meant there was going to be trouble. If the first Jesus was half as stubborn as this one, Mary and Joseph had their hands full. "Pharisee!" he said.

"Right, the police then." The manager pulled out his cell phone and started dialing.

"No, we're leaving." I snagged Jesus by his shirt and dragged him toward the door. "See? This is

us, leaving now."

"Let go!" Jesus aimed a punch at me that missed. I bet the other Jesus was a wuss when it came to fighting too.

I shook him until his braces rattled. "You get arrested again, and Mom will flip. I swear, if you don't get your ass back in the car right this minute, I'm going to tell your group about your cherub collection!"

He paled. "You wouldn't!"

"Try me," I said with all the deadly coolness I could muster.

"Cripes!" He shook off my hands. "You can be such a bitch sometimes."

"I bet the real Jesus didn't say 'bitch,'" Harmony said.

"That's because the real Jesus didn't know you!" He gave her a look that would have slagged steel, then slunk out to the parking lot. Harmony huffed along behind.

"Man, I can't take you anywhere!" I said as he slid into the back seat.

We dropped Harmony at her house because she had a date, someone she'd met through an online dating service, of all places. How smart was that?

Then we went home. Mom was already there, putting away cans of peas from out of a grocery sack. "Hi, kids," she said as we came through the door, "how was Group today?"

"Bunch of candy-ass whiners," Jesus said. "I can't stand any of them."

"I see," she said, as though she did, when, take it from me, she never had and never would. On the other hand, she had bought two fresh loaves of bread, so she did have his number in certain respects. Jesus was hell on bread and don't even get me started on him and fish.

"I'm going to my niche," Jesus said and stomped out of the room.

"Did something happen at Group?" Mom asked. "He seems grouchier than usual."

"How can you tell?" I said under my breath as I helped empty the grocery sacks.

"Bailee," she said, "we have to be patient with Jesus. It's hard on him. He has a lot to live up to, and he didn't ask to be here."

"Yeah, well, I didn't ask for him to be here either," I said.

"I know," she said, putting an arm around me, "but it will all come out right in the end. We just have to hold on until it does."

"Does that include Dad?" I asked. "Is he out there somewhere holding on too?"

And of course she didn't have an answer for that.

Mom had gone to bed, and I was just finishing my trig problems about midnight, when Jesus slunk through the kitchen, all tricked out in black leather pants and a black T-shirt. I put the pencil down on the table with an irritated click. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"None of your business," he said. "Go back to your stupid *ho*-work."

"Oh, that's so funny," I said. "See me *not* laughing."

He didn't answer, just unlocked the door and disappeared into the night. Great, I thought, just great. When he was missing in the morning, Mom would blame me. I grabbed my keys and followed.

Half a block ahead, he stalked down the sidewalk without looking over his shoulder. I tracked him to a grocery store parking lot six blocks away, then hung back behind a telephone pole across the street and observed.

A bunch of cars had parked over there, even though the store had been closed for hours. More Jesuses had gathered than I'd ever seen in one place before, at least thirty, all milling and laughing, talking just like regular people. Most of them were dressed in black leather, and ours blended right in. He actually looked happy.

I thought I saw a girl in the middle of the crowd, but all the rest were clones. The hair stood up on the back of my neck when I realized they each wore a cross on a chain around their necks or in their ears. Some of the crosses were even jeweled and glittered under the street lights. That was seriously creepy. I mean, if I were a Jesus, the last thing I'd want to see would be a stupid cross.

"All right, let's get started!" one of them yelled over the general din, and the conversation died away. "Who's got the test case?"

"Here she is," a voice said and dragged a girl forward by one hand. She had spiky black hair just like Harmony.

"Let go!" she said in a high, squeaky voice, and I realized it *was* Harmony, dressed in her tightest, shortest black dress. My hands tightened on the telephone pole. What was she doing mixed up with this bunch? She didn't even like *our* Jesus.

She was wearing a ton of purple eyeshadow, too. "Where's the band?" she said, gazing around in dismay.

"So, go ahead and kill her," a tall older Jesus said. He gazed down at his spread fingers. "I feel like I can really do it tonight."

"Everybody gets a turn," another Jesus said. He was wearing red leather and his cross was studded with rubies.

"What do you mean, 'kill'?" Harmony tugged the clingy black skirt down over her hips. "You said we were going to a rave."

A nasty snicker ran through the crowd.

"This *is* a rave," someone said. "A Jesus rave!"

They all laughed louder.

"I'm going home!" I could hear tears in Harmony's voice. "You all are just as stupid as I thought!"

"Come on, guys," the red-leather guy said. "We can't raise her unless she's dead first. Let's get it done!"

Harmony tried to push through the crowd, but several Jesuses caught her arms. I closed my eyes and tried to think. The best bet would be to call 911, but I'd left my cell phone at home to recharge. And if I



took the time to go back, it would be too late before the police got here.

Think, Bailee, think! I told myself. You've lived with a Jesus practically your whole life. Come up with something!

Harmony shrieked, and I bolted across the street. "Oh, this is so brave, yeah, real macho!" I said and shoved my shaking hands in my pockets. "The papers will just love this."

"Another candidate," Red-Leather said. "This is shaping up to be a bountiful night."

Harmony looked up at me from the ground, mascara running down her cheeks. Someone had stuffed a souvenir Vatican bandana in her mouth.

"The police are on their way," I said as a knot of grinning Jesuses advanced on me. "I just thought you studs might like to know."

"Go home, Bailee!" It was our Jesus, standing off to one side. "No one wants you here."

"Yeah, not even me," I said. I caught and held his gaze. "Go home yourself."

"This is important stuff," he said. "Don't meddle in what you can't understand."

"All those dead kittens you used to drag in," I said. "They didn't get dead by themselves, did they?" I bent down and pulled Harmony onto her feet. She was sobbing, and her wrists were tied with shoelaces.

The mob of Jesuses pressed in.

"No," he said, hands jammed into his pockets. He looked sullen. "That's part of the initiation."

"Just like Harmony here?" I wrenched at the shoelaces but they were knotted too tight. Dammit, I needed a knife.

"We have to practice, stupid," he said, "or we'll never get it right."

"Well, practice on something else," I said. "If Mom hears about this, you'll be grounded for life!" I took Harmony by the arm. "We're leaving."

"You're not going anywhere," Red-Leather said.

All the years of trying to cope with a Jesus hit critical mass inside my brain. I'd had it with the whole lot, all these weirdos trying to live up to the historical Jesus, which was stupid, because who knew really what He'd done, or why He'd done any of it. "Get out of my face, Mr. I'm-So-Holy, or I'll rip you a new one!"

Red-Leather stepped back, surprised.

"You're idiots," I said, "all of you! Always trying to be someone else instead of who you really are! I'm sick of all of you!"

"Two deaths instead of one!" someone in the back shouted. "Lots more practice tonight!" The crowd laughed and surged forward.

I shuddered. "Come on, Harmony," I said under my breath. "Let's get out of here."

She swayed against me, too terrified to move.

"Look!" a voice cried from the back. "Over there! A burning bush!"

The horde of Jesuses hesitated.

"No, wait!" the voice called again. "I was wrong. By all that's holy, it's *two* burning bushes!"

They turned and saw smoke rising greasily from a pair of forsythia bushes in the landscaping strip on the other side of the parking lot. "Dad!" one of them cried, then they were all running toward the bushes, yelling demands.

Except for one Jesus in black leather pants and braces, and sporting a bad case of acne. Left behind, he watched his fellow clones gather around the two fires, hopping up and down, gesticulating and laughing. "Clueless, the whole lot of them," he said and stuffed the book of matches back into his pocket.

It took a Jesus to know how to get to the rest, I guess. "Are you coming home?" I said.

He cut the shoelaces binding Harmony's hands with his pocketknife. "Yeah," he said, "might as well."

Supporting Harmony between us, we hurried across the street and around the corner before the Jesuses noticed their burning bushes were strangely incommunicado.

"You know those dead kittens?" he said as we walked in and out of the pools of light from the street lamps.

"Yeah?"

"I got them from the pound, after they were already dead," he said.

"I know," I said, and all along I really had.

I called the police when we got back to the house and told them what had happened. Harmony's father tried to press charges, but the police lineup the next day was a joke. She'd been lured to the gang meeting by a Jesus she'd met online, but it wasn't Red-Leather, and who could tell the rest apart?

Despite the gang's boasts about "practicing," the police had no unsolved disappearances on the books within the last six months, so it was most likely just big talk. We had to be satisfied with breaking up the Jesus gang. Later, though, I did hear they formed a touch football league for the whole lot as a more appropriate outlet for their aggressive feelings.

Mom grounded our Jesus, of course, but only for a month, not too bad, considering his part in the affair. He'd made it right in the end, she said, and he had. I couldn't argue with that.

She says he needs to get out of his living room niche more and is making him attend that woodworking class down at Vo-Tech. It's been two weeks, and he's actually passing, so who says there aren't any real miracles anymore?

As for me, I'm trying to cut him a bit of slack. I guess we all get the Jesus we deserve.

And it could have been worse. Mom might have been able to contract for a Virgin Mary instead.

"THE END"