**For the Children**

*[Abbi is a widow living in Jerusalem. She makes a living from selling fruit and vegetables from a stall just off the main street between the Temple and the Roman fortress of Antonia. It is a good sales pitch, visited by both the religious and the military. Her supplies are brought in daily by her brother in law, Jacob, who farms out beyond Bethany. She is specially busy in this week before Passover and not a little annoyed that Jacob is late with his delivery]*

Abbi did not try to disguise her feelings. As soon as Jacob appeared pulling a reluctant mule through the crowd she shouted out to him.  *Where have you been? You know its my busiest time of year. I sold yesterday’s leftovers ages ago and I’ve missed half my best customers.* Before Jacob could reply she was pulling sacks from the mule, muttering her complaints all over again with a great deal of sighing and tongue clicking. *This isn’t your mule.*

*No.* said Jacob with the slow drawl of a very patient man. Abbi’s sister was as sharp tongued and fussy as herself. *If you’d give me a chance I was going to explain. I set out at my usual time but my mule went lame. I had to go back and borrow this one from Laban. He didn’t want to come. The mule that is, not Laban.* Abbi gave him a look which would have stopped a Roman officer in his tracks. *Come on now, help me get the stuff down.* Jacob did as she said.

*It wasn’t just the mule,* he went on. *I’ve never seen the city so busy. I get the idea this year’s Passover will be busier than ever … and more dangerous,* he added. *Why don’t you come back with me? You know how your sister worries. You’re right in line for trouble here. A rioting mob would turn your stall over and trample you and your goods in minutes.*

*You don’t have to worry about me,* replied Abbi. *Tell Rachel I’m all right. I’ve got friends here will look after me. And I’m certainly not going to lose all the extra trade. Passover week sets me up and pays the rent for the whole year. Now get that bag of dates down … and mind those grapes! Here! Wait a minute. This is only half a bag of pomegranates.* She looked at Jacob accusingly while he fumbled in the folds of his tunic.

*I was going to tell you. We had to wait ages at the gate. Soldiers were checking everybody even the children. I was thirsty and helped myself to a pomegranate, and then everybody wanted one. I got a good price for them.* He offered her a handful of coins. He looked pleased about his initiative. But Abbi didn’t see it quite like that.

*Good price! You were robbed!*

It was time for Jacob to change the subject. While Abbi drew breath for her verbal assault he quickly stemmed the flow by saying, *Speaking of mobs and turning your stall over. Is there anymore news of the Rabbi from Nazareth. They say he was out at Bethany last night with Lazarus. Now that’s the strangest thing. I can’t believe that man was really dead!*

*O, stop prattling on.* Abbi dismissed him as customers arrived. *Go and sit in the shade.* She attended to her clients before joining him by the Temple wall. *Look, that Roman woman gave me as much for two melons as you got for half a bagful of pomegranates!*

Abbi sat with Jacob and gave him a drink from her wine flask. *I did hear more about the Nazarene this morning.* Jacob returned the flask. He was eager to hear the latest news. *Our Joram stopped by. He’d been in the Temple. He said how everyone’s been talking about Jesus. Crowds have come from all over to listen to him. Joram made me laugh when he told me about old Benjamin. He was seething about the procession with a donkey and all the children singing in the Temple, but you should have seen him when Jesus turned those tables over, and pigeons flew into the crowd, and everyone was scrambling for temple money as though it was their lucky day. Benjamin was furious. Joram says he thought he would explode. His face was red as an over-ripe pomegranate!*

*But what are they doing about it?* Asked Jacob. *I can’t believe they’ve let him carry on teaching. They’re bound to get rid of him.*

*No.* Abbi looked at him with that superior air of someone who knows. *They’re afraid of the people. They know people love him as much as they hate old Benjamin and his cronies. They can tell Jesus is in the Temple for the right reason - a house of prayer he called it. Benjamin’s only there for himself. We reckon he lost a lot of money when Jesus turned the tables over - they make a fortune out of the exchange rate. Losing money would have hurt him more than any worries about blasphemy! Ordinary people may not have the learning of the priests but they know the simple truth when they see it. Jesus will be all right.*

*Don’t you be so sure,* Jacob frowned, as Abbi got up for her next customer. *Benjamin and his crowd are dangerous men, and if they get together with that lot up there.* He nodded his head towards the fortress.

*That’s what Joram said this morning on his way back from the Temple.* Abbi’s wizened face spread into a grin. *But the likes of old Benjamin and his lot are just wind and pomegranate juice!*

*So Joram’s got to going to the Temple now has he?* asked Jacob.

*Only since Jesus came.* Abbi broke off to attend to a child who asked for a pomegranate. *You can have that one free. It looks as though Jacob dropped it somewhere!* The child ran away happily peeling the top from the fruit.

*No,* she continued.  *Joram seems quite convinced that Jesus is the Messiah.*

Jacob looked about him and spoke quietly, *Be careful what you say out here. These are big walls and they have keen ears.*

Abbi lowered her voice. *Joram said the priests were demanding to know what authority Jesus has for what he says and does in the Temple.*

*And what did he say?*

*You’ll have to ask Joram. I was too busy to listen to all he was babbling on about. He did say he thought it was obvious that Jesus had God’s authority and the priests ought to be listening to him.*

*Hush!* Jacob glanced about him. *Anyone in this crowd could want to make a shekel informing on you.*

*You can make anything out of words,* Abbi looked him squarely in the face. *But you can’t argue about Joram. He’s a different person to who he was last week. He’s content, happy … like he’s in love .. If you can remember what that’s like!*

*I’m warning you,* said Jacob. *You’ll be better coming out to us for Passover. I think this could all end in a lot of bloodshed.*

*I’m all right.* Abbi re-arranged the herbs on her table. *I want to stay. In any case I’m quite drawn to the man myself.*

Just then a little face peered over the table edge. News had got around about free pomegranates. Abbi sorted another bruised one and gave it to the boy. She turned back to Jacob who had started re-loading the mule and said, *He got the children singing praises. A man who’s for the children will get my support every time.*