

Little Zsolti Goes to the Christmas Market

by Catherine Brunelle

CHAPTER ONE

Story

One day, Little Zsolti decided to borrow Lady Bug's flying umbrella and float down to the town of Buda. He was on a mission to find the perfect Christmas present for Lady Bug.

That evening, after the fishermen giants had sent their load of fish down to the city below (*in a big shower of trout, mackerel, salmon, and tuna*), Zsolti wrapped himself in the warmest coat he had, and put on the biggest hat he could find, and floated down into the town.

You might remember that Zsolti came from a city originally, before he set off on his adventures. So when he landed in the busy streets of Buda, he wasn't afraid at all. There were horses with carts that were piled high with barrels, clomping down the streets; There were masses of people moving sidewalk to sidewalk as they wound their way home; There were men with chestnut stands stationed on the street corners and yelling out to the crowd, "Chestnuts, get your hot chestnuts!"

Little Zsolt knew where he was going. Not too far away he could see the tip of a very tall tree wrapped in fairy lights, and the glowing star at the top of its branches. As he walked through the masses of people and wound his way past the street sellers and rumbling carts, he thought to himself, *what would be the perfect Christmas gift?*

Lady Bug didn't own many things. As far as little Zsolti knew, all Lady Bug actually owned was the small umbrella that he had borrowed to float down to Buda. Little Zsolti saw this as a good thing since there were so many possible gifts she didn't yet have, and a hard thing, since there were so many possible gifts she didn't yet have.

The Christmas Market was the most beautiful place in all of Buda. Looking over the scene was a massive cathedral that every half an hour filled the Buda Square with the sound of its chiming bells. Strung between the wooden stand that made the market were lines and lines of Christmas lights, white and twinkling in the darkness. The lines decorated the wooden huts where people sold their crafts and food. Everywhere you looked, there were people sipping steaming cups of punch, and children chasing each other through the crowd, and vendors showing their goods. And there in the middle of it all was a giant Christmas tree standing high and bright amongst the busy little scene. It was a beautiful Christmas Market.

Little Zsolti began to visit the little wooden huts with goods for sale. He walked up to one stand with a very merry looking granny at its table, who was handing out slices of cheese for the people to taste. One slice after another, she would hold the cheese out and smile at people passing by.

Little Zsolti caught her eye, and she motioned him to try. Very politely, with a "thank you" he took the piece of cheese and savoured the flavour. It was woody and smoky and cheesy.

“How much is your cheese?”

“30 dollars a kilo, young man.”

“Thank you,” replied Zsolti before turning away. The cheese was too expensive for him, even though Lady Bug would only need a small piece.

He wandered around a little bit more, then stopped at a stall with some beautiful ornaments. They hung all around the man in the middle who was busy sewing together even more decorations. Looking over the ornaments, little Zsolti saw felt sheep dogs, wise men, Hussars, stars, trees, turtles – and right there, hanging next to the sewing man’s ear, a felt lady bug!

“Excuse me sir,” said Little Zsolti.

“Yes, young man?” The seller continued his sewing even as he looked down at Zsolti.

“How much for the Ladybug?”

“Two dollars, young man.”

Little Zsolti shook his head. It was still too much.

“Thank you, anyhow.”

Some of the fishermen had tried to explain bargaining to Little Zsolti before he had gone down to the market. They said that you never took the first price offered. Zsolti had nodded along as they explained how to get a lower price, but the goods at the market were so wonderful that he didn’t want to bargain or give less than the sellers asked. This is why Little Zsolti is an explorer and not a business man.

The next stall seemed very promising. A young lady was at the table drinking a steaming cup of punch and selling Christmas cookies. These were heart-shaped cookies covered in beautiful icing patterns. Some of the hearts said, “I love you,” while others said, “Happy Birthday,” and other read “Merry Christmas.”

“These are cookies for good luck,” said young lady between her sips of punch. “You put them on the shelf or in your Christmas tree.”

“Can you eat them?” asked little Zsolti.

“You *could* eat them,” replied the young lady. “But many people don’t.”

Lady Bug had a very big appetite, and Little Zsolti though she might enjoy eating a lucky Christmas cookie. He found the smallest cookie on the table, a tiny red-painted heart with decorative icing all along the edges, and he asked, “How much for this cookie?”

“Fifty cents,” replied the young lady.

Little Zsolti nodded, and said, “Thank you very much.” Then turned away from the table.

This was beginning to be a problem, he thought to himself. Here he was in the most beautiful square in all of Buda, at the wonderful Christmas Market full of lights, food, drink and cheer, and he wasn’t able to afford a single thing!

At this point, little Zsolti began to feel cold. It wasn’t the normal happy cold on a winter day full of activity and excitement, but instead the tired cold that starts in your toes and soon works up to your shoulders, where it sits very heavy and makes your shiver.

He needed to warm up, and warm up quickly if he was going to solve this Christmas present puzzle.

Little Zsolti looked around. Most people warmed up with a hot cup of punch, but that cost too much and he wasn’t old enough to drink punch, anyhow. He kept looking around. The horses by the cabs looked warm in their winter coats next to the open fire, but they had a way of stamping their feet that made Little Zsolti a little nervous.

Then, near the cathedral, he saw the perfect place to rest and get warm. At the start of the

path that lead toward cathedral entrance, was a beautiful little manger with baby Jesus sleeping on a bed of hay beside his mother, Mary and his father, Joseph. Hay was a great place to keep warm, particularly under lights were the ceramic baby Jesus was sleeping. So over to the manger went little Zsolti, weaving through the people.

He stepped around the adults and other children admiring the manger scene, and crawled right up between Mary and Baby Jesus for a rest. Just as he was about to tuck himself into the hay, he noticed – right behind Baby Jesus’ ear was Lady Bug herself, sound asleep!

“Lady Bug?” he whispered. “Lady Bug, won’t you wake up?”

Lady Bug gave a loud snore, then a snort.

“Lady Bug, it’s me, Zsolti!”

With that, Lady bug’s snore turned into a smile as she opened her eyes and sat up. “Hello Zsolti, what a nice surprise to see you here at the Christmas Market.”

“But what are you doing here?” asked Little Zsolti.

“What are *you* doing here?” asked Lady Bug.

Suddenly, Little Zsolti felt embarrassed in front of his best friend. “I was trying to shop for a Christmas gift for you, but all I have is one penny and that can’t buy anything here.”

Lady Bug sat up and nodded.

Little Zsolti continued. “It’s so frustrating because all you have is your umbrella, and I wanted to get you the best gift in the entire world for Christmas.”

“And so you have!” replied Lady Bug.

“What do you mean?” asked Little Zsolti.

“I mean, here I was at the Buda Christmas Market all by myself, eating the crumbs that fell from the pastries, and having no fun at all because you weren’t with me. But here you are now, and it’s the best Christmas present I could have asked for!”

“Really?” asked Little Zsolti.

“Without doubt,” replied Lady Bug. “Now we can enjoy the market together.”

And she jumped from behind the ear of baby Jesus, and onto the shoulder of Little Zsolti. Suddenly the cold that had settled onto Zsolti’s shoulders lifted away, and he found himself smiling once again. “This *is* the perfect Christmas present,” he said. “I’m glad I found you here, Lady Bug.”

“I’m glad you found me too, Little Zsolti.”

And they climbed out of the manger and went to enjoy the Christmas Market, but not before dropping little Zsolti’s penny into the charity box. Together they ran around the Christmas tree full of lights, and looked at all the stalls, and listened as the cathedral bells rang out through the square with their familiar song.

It was the most perfect Christmas present either of them had ever received; the gift of being together.

CHAPTER TWO