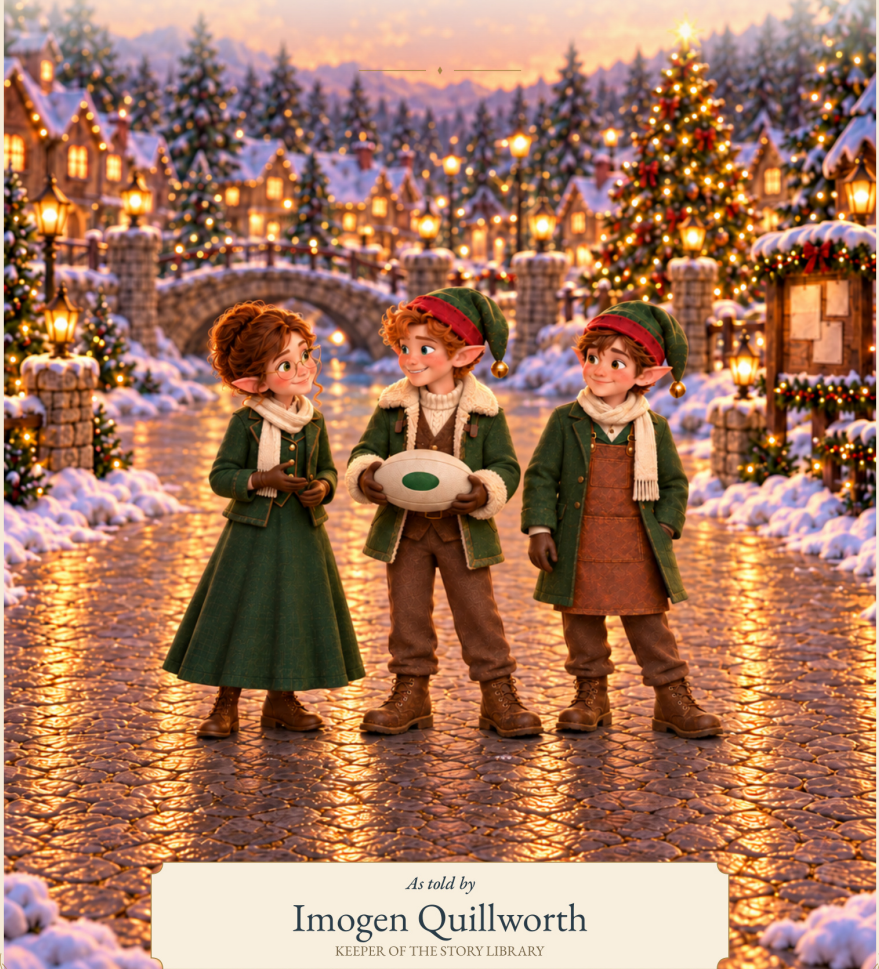


Santa's Workshop

ADVENTURES FROM THE NORTH POLE

BOOK 07

Immy Plays Rugby



As told by

Imogen Quillworth

KEEPER OF THE STORY LIBRARY

Immy Plays Rugby

Adventures from the North Pole

Book 7

Told by Imogen Quillworth, Keeper of the Story Library

SantasWorkshop Press

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1. A ball without instructions



Immy found Lockie and Jasper in Lantern Square, looking down at a rugby ball.

Jasper nudged it with his boot. It rolled a little way, changed direction and stopped.

“That's an awkward shape,” he said.

“Excellent for carrying,” said Lockie, picking it up. “Would you like to join us, Immy? I've a little time while the reindeer are being looked after.”

She had meant to stretch her legs. This looked more interesting than stretching them by herself.

“Yes. I've read about rugby.”

She held out her hands. She wanted to feel a pass land in them, then send one on to somebody else.

Lockie's smile widened. "Then we could try eight passes across the square, with a turn at the end, and perhaps another eight coming back."

"Perhaps two to begin with," said Immy.

"Two," he agreed, tucking the ball under his arm. "I do get ahead of myself."

They chose dry, cleared cobbles away from the tree, noticeboard and passing elves. Lockie checked for ice and loose stones, then drew two short chalk marks several paces apart.

"We'll walk towards that second mark," he said. "No tackling, no racing. Just gentle passes."

"We can carry the ball forwards," Immy said. "But we pass sideways or back to someone behind us."

Lockie led, with Immy behind to his right and Jasper another pace behind her, to her left. They faced the finish.

"Me to Immy, Immy to Jasper," said Lockie. "Then Jasper carries it over the chalk. Everybody gets the ball."

They began walking. Lockie turned towards her and sent the ball gently back into her waiting hands.

She caught it against her middle.

Now for her pass.

"Two hands," she murmured. "Look at the receiver. Turn towards the receiver. Move the arms, release the ball..."

Her feet slowed. Her arms started. Her fingers stayed wrapped round the ball a moment too long.

When she finally let go, it dropped short of Jasper and bumped onto the cobbles.

Jasper stopped and bent to pick it up.

“The receiver was ready,” he said. “Though I was expecting it somewhere above my boots.”

Immy looked at her empty hands. She had remembered every instruction. Somehow the ball had missed the important part.

Jasper turned it over, brushing dust from the side.

“You caught Lockie's pass,” he said.

“I did.” She had liked the weight of it arriving against her palms. She wanted Jasper to feel that too.

He held it out to her.

She held her hands above it for a moment, remembering how tightly she had gripped. Then she looked at Lockie.

“Again?” asked Lockie.

“Yes,” she said. “But first, could you show me when your hands open? Slowly.”

Jasper passed the ball into Lockie's hands.

2. The part between holding and letting go



They stayed on the cleared patch. Lockie held the ball at his waist, with Jasper to his left and slightly behind him.

“Watch this bit,” Lockie said.

He turned towards Jasper. His arms swung gently across his body, carrying the ball towards Jasper's hands. Then his fingers opened and the ball left them.

Jasper caught it and returned it by hand.

“Would you like that again?”

Immy nodded. This time she watched Lockie's fingers instead of trying to watch his shoulders, elbows and boots all at once.

“Oh,” she said. “I was holding on until the movement was nearly over.”

Lockie offered her the ball and moved aside as she took his place.

She tried the swing without letting go, then once more with her knees loose. That felt easier.

“Ready?” she asked Jasper.

“Very.”

He held his hands beneath his chin, fingers spread so wide that he could have caught a small cushion.

Immy lowered the ball to her waist.

“Could your hands come down a little? That's quite a climb.”

Jasper looked from her hands to his. “Of course.”

He lowered them towards his middle and took half a step closer.

“My chin can watch,” he said. “It wasn't helping much.”

Immy smiled, looked at his waiting hands and swung the ball towards them.

It left her fingers sooner this time. A little too soon. Jasper touched it, but couldn't hold it, and it dropped between them.

He bent to retrieve it. Dust from a cobble marked the palm of his glove.

“Nearly,” said Immy.

“It touched my fingers,” said Jasper, showing her which ones.

She took a breath before the next try. There was no need to squeeze the ball quite so fiercely. It wasn't trying to escape while she held it.

She swung her arms. Her fingers opened while they were still moving towards Jasper.

The ball travelled the short distance into his hands.

For a moment they both stayed very still.

Then Jasper hugged it to his coat.

“There you are.”

Immy grinned. “There it is.”

Jasper handed the ball back and held up his hands again.

“Shall I keep these ones?”

“Yes, please.”

“Good. They're the only ones I've brought.”

Lockie chuckled. Immy's smile stayed while she settled her grip.

They practised at the same short distance. One pass reached Jasper's hands; another dipped, and he gathered it against his middle. The next landed on the ground. Immy bent and picked it up herself, rubbing a dusty streak across her own glove.

“I'd like to try walking now,” she said.

Lockie glanced at the chalk marks. “We can make the finish nearer.”

“Let's keep it,” said Immy. “But go slowly.”

Jasper returned to his place behind her.

“I'll keep my hands where you can see them. And I won't go wandering off towards the finish.”

“You can do that once you've got the ball,” she reminded him.

“I've been looking forward to that bit.”

3. Across the chalk



They went back to the first mark.

Lockie had the ball. Immy stood to his right, a pace behind, with Jasper on her left and another pace back. The finish waited a little way ahead of them.

Immy glanced down the dry strip, then back at Jasper's hands.

“Two passes,” she said.

“Two,” said Lockie. He sounded as pleased about two as he had sounded about sixteen.

They set off at an easy walk.

Lockie turned and passed back to Immy. She caught the ball with both hands and drew it against her middle. Her boots kept moving, a little more slowly than Lockie's.

Jasper matched her pace. He was close enough for a short pass, still behind her, with his hands ready at waist height.

Immy began to think, Two hands, look, turn...

Then she stopped reciting. Jasper's hands were right there.

She turned towards him and swung her arms across her body. This time she let the ball go while her hands were moving towards his.

It travelled backwards and sideways, away from the finish and towards Jasper.

He caught it.

Immy's fingers remained spread for an instant after the ball had gone. There was nothing in them now but cold air.

"Got it," said Jasper.

He tucked it securely against his middle and walked on. Lockie and Immy came with him, leaving room between them. Jasper reached the chalk and stepped across it with the ball.

They stopped together.

"Finished!" Lockie said.

Jasper looked back at the place where Immy had passed.

"That came straight to my hands."

Immy flexed her fingers. She couldn't be sure they would let go at the right moment next time. There was still that little urge to squeeze.

She looked at Jasper, holding the ball beyond the chalk, and found herself grinning again. She had helped get it there.

Lockie checked the time.

"I need to get back for the reindeer now."

Jasper handed him the ball, and Lockie tucked it under his arm.

They rubbed out the chalk marks with their boots. At the edge of the cleared patch, Immy stood still and pressed her dusty glove into a little bank of clean snow. It left a grey palm print with five short fingers.

“Could we play again another day?” she asked.

“I'd like that,” said Lockie.

“So would I,” said Jasper.

Immy brushed the last dust from her gloves and waved as Lockie set off.