I suppose a bit of a personal introduction is in order before we get too deep into this thing. After all, it doesn’t just happen that a little girl grows up in Philadelphia rooting for the Eagles, only to wind up marrying an Eagles quarterback. But that’s the short version of how it happened for me.

Here’s the (somewhat) longer version. My dad was a big-time football fan. It was his thing. It wasn’t his only thing, mind you, but it was a big deal. Man, he loved his Eagles, and I grew to love them right alongside him. Again, it wasn’t the only thing we shared, but it was something special.

My father’s name was Matt Robinson, and he was an incredible writer. He wrote and produced a bunch of local television shows in
Philadelphia, but he also commuted to New York for a lot of the time I was growing up. He wrote scripts for *Sanford and Son*, and *The Waltons*, and *Eight Is Enough*, and he wrote several children’s books, plays, and screenplays. Later on, he was a writer and producer on *The Cosby Show*. But he was probably best known for creating the role of Gordon, which he played from 1969 to 1972 on the original *Sesame Street*. He still turns up from time to time in the repeat segments they sometimes air, with his big pork chop sideburns and bushy moustache. Could a 4-year-old have asked her daddy to have a cooler gig?

He’s gone now, my dad, after a long, difficult bout with Parkinson’s disease, but football is at the heart of my memories of him. It was our common ground. I watch his old *Sesame Street* tapes with my children and think about how it was when I was their age, when my dad first started hanging out with Oscar, Big Bird, and the rest of the gang—and when I first discovered Harold Carmichael and Norm Snead, who were two of the more popular Philadelphia Eagles players throughout my growing up. My dad had a pretty busy taping schedule up in New York as I recall, but he was around on weekends and we made the most of our time together. Sundays were our special time during football season. My brother and I would sit at his knee, watching the game on television. Plus, we loved to watch him roll over in laughter each draft day as he scouted the proceedings—not for the best players, mind you, but for the hippest, most unusual names of the latest crop of college stars. Remember William “The Refrigerator” Perry? Well, we knew all about him in our household even before he burst onto the NFL scene, thanks to my dad’s love for crazy-cool football names. That was always one of his favorite things, to collect the wildest and most unique football names that crossed his radar. And as a special tribute, I’ll present a list of some of his all-time favorites (plus a few new ones he would have loved) a bit later on in these pages.

My earliest football memory (to which I alluded earlier) is from when I was 5 or 6 years old and more interested in spending time with my father than in the game he was watching or the players on the field. The game itself was probably nothing more than background noise to me when I was that little. If you’d
have asked me, I’d have told you Jim Ringo was a Beatle before I pegged him for an Eagle.

Anyway, one late fall afternoon, I heard the jangle of the Good Humor ice cream truck coming up the block in my Mount Airy neighborhood, and I started tugging on my father’s shirt to get his attention at some crucial point in the game. All I cared about was a strawberry shortcake ice cream bar. All he cared about was a field goal the Eagles were attempting, to take the lead as time ran out on the clock. In an effort to hush me up for another beat or two, he turned to me and said, “Honey, if that kicker makes this field goal, you can get your strawberry shortcake.”

I started cheering for Dad’s Eagles right then and there, and from that moment on, I think I associated everything I ever wanted in life with an Eagles’ victory. (I guess that explains a lot.) In any case, there was usually a strawberry shortcake ice cream bar to help us celebrate at the end of each win. We started watching games together every week during the season; and in the beginning, it really did have more to do with my love of ice cream than my love of football. Soon after that, it was more about hanging with my father than anything else; but after a while, the lines got blurred and I was hooked on the game. I loved the adrenaline rush of excitement that seemed to flow from that field, the artistry of the wide receivers, and the crunch of brute strength at the line. I loved the sheer thrill of an open field run. I wasn’t the most sophisticated fan in the world right out of the gate, but my father was a patient teacher and I paid close attention. In time, I learned the basic rules, and eventually I was able to pick up a little strategy and subtlety. When I moved from Philly to L.A. at the age of 9, and years later when I left the house after high school, I still managed to follow the Eagles. They were my team by that point, and it didn’t matter if I was away at school or studying for a year in Paris—whenever the Eagles were playing, I was doing my best to catch the game and cheer them on.

And then life just kinda happened. I caught my first big break in 1986 on a television show called *21 Jump Street* for the upstart Fox Network, opposite a then-unknown Johnny Depp, and from there I managed to keep finding steady
work. My mom, Dolores Robinson, already a prominent talent manager started managing my career—and she kept me busy and out there and happening. And all along, I kept my eye on my Eagles. My dad was a true die-hard fan, who counted it a real frustration whenever his team came up short. But I was turning out to be more of a die-easy fan (not quite sure if that’s the opposite of die-hard, but you get the idea). If the Eagles managed to win a couple of games, that was just fine with me. If they managed to string together a successful season, even better. And if they lost a heartbreaker, I still treated myself to a strawberry shortcake ice cream bar at the other end. Why not? Life went on, pretty much as it would have if they had won the heartbreaker. Truth is, it wasn’t always so easy to root for the Eagles; and if you ask any of today’s fans, it hasn’t gotten any easier—no matter how well they’re playing. Anyway, I kept at it. I never lost faith. I figured if the Philadelphia Eagles could go to the trouble of suiting up and giving it their all each week, the least I could do was pull for them from my couch in L.A. or wherever I happened to be at the time.

In 1993, while I was shooting a sitcom called *Hangin’ with Mr. Cooper*, I was introduced to a quarterback. His name was Rodney Peete, and he was something—good-looking, God-fearing, and more charming than any man had a right to be. Plus, he had a golden arm and a killer smile—in all, a totally winning package. He won me over in about the time it took to run a 2-minute offense. (Well, okay, maybe not that quick. There was a female friend—or 10!—I had to send into exile first, but that’s for another book....)

Rodney had been drafted by the Detroit Lions out of USC and had started on a promising career before the Lions cut him loose. He eventually wound up in Philadelphia, calling the plays for my beloved Eagles. I thought, “How cool is that?” Just think, to root for your hometown team as a star-struck little kid and somehow wind up with the quarterback on your arm. Let me tell you, it was a fairy-tale wrapped inside a storybook wrapped inside a dream. I couldn’t wait to introduce Rodney to my father—not least because he’d given me a lot of crap about the guys I’d been dating, and because short of Dr. J (Julius Erving, the Philly basketball legend who was a bit too old and a bit too married for me), I couldn’t have brought home a more perfect guy than the new
Eagles quarterback.

We got married in 1995, but I’ll save the details of our courtship for our grandchildren and keep the focus on the football aspects of our time together. You see, for the longest while I’d thought of myself as a football fan; but now that I had met Rodney and listened in on his conversations with his friends and his teammates, I came to realize that I didn’t know all that much about the game. Sure, I could recite the rules, identify most of the Eagles starting roster, and run about three or four deep into the rosters of our opponents, but that was about it. I didn’t know from play-calling, or defensive schemes and formations, or West Coast offenses. And keeping up with Rodney was one thing; I also had to contend with his entire family. There was my father-in-law, Willie Peete, an assistant coach in the NFL from 1983 to 1999 for the Chiefs, Packers, Bucs,
and Bears; my brother-in-law, Skip, currently the running-backs coach for the Oakland Raiders; and my mother-in-law, Edna, the coach’s wife, the coach’s mother, and the quarterback’s mom! (Let me tell you, Edna has had to endure countless Peete vs. Peete match-ups, and watching those games with her could be nerve-wracking, to say the very least.) I scrambled to keep up. At first, I was out of my element; but eventually I picked up a thing or two, and with that extra effort I was able to send Rodney the all-important message that what he was doing was all-important to me as well.

And now, jumping ahead to my best football memory: 1995, wildcard play-off game, Eagles vs. Lions. Rodney’s new team up against the team that let him go. My father couldn’t have written a better script to set up this showdown. The Lions had just gone on an incredible late season run to win a play-off spot, and they came into the game as the heavy favorites, with all kinds of momentum. The talk in the press and all over Detroit was that the Lions were going to really take it to Rodney and the Eagles. But Rodney and the Eagles weren’t having any of it. They came out like they were on a mission.

As it happened, Rodney’s personal mission happened to coincide neatly with the team’s objective: To win—big. You have to realize that whenever a player is cut or traded by a team, he really wants to stick it to them, to get his former employers to think they made a terrible mistake. And here Rodney felt he had something to prove. All week long leading up to the game, he kept hearing, “Oh, Rodney Peete can’t do this,” or “Rodney Peete can’t do that,” and it lit him up inside. So he came out and did this-and-that-and-then-some to those Lions. By the end of the first half, the Eagles were leading with a delicious score of 38–7, the icing on the cake coming from Rodney’s “Hail Mary” pass that somehow wound up in the hands of one of his receivers in the end zone as time ran out. He ended up throwing for three touchdowns and over 300 yards, that’s how fired up he was about this game.

Next day, I scoured the Internet for everything I could find in the Detroit papers about the game and about Rodney. I entered every Lions chat room I could find online and basked in everyone’s misery. Evil as it makes me sound, I
just loved it. Posts like “How could we let Peete destroy us?” absolutely made my day. Rodney had a play-off game with Dallas to worry about, but I reveled in that win over the Lions for the longest time, because those Detroit fans were so hurt by the loss. They were devastated, but it wasn’t just the loss that got them going: It was the fact that they had been run ragged by a guy they had written off and sent packing. That was the strawberry shortcake ice cream bar for me.

My worst football memory also involves Rodney in an Eagles uniform, and it reinforces how fickle we fans can sometimes be—especially in a hard-nosed city like Philadelphia. It was a Monday Night Football game the following season, and the Eagles had gotten off to a flying start. Rodney was playing with a big new contract, which I’m sure had a lot to do with that kick-butt performance against his old team in the 1995 play-offs. There were great expectations all around. And then, all of a sudden, Rodney dropped back to pass and somehow got his cleat caught in that godawful AstroTurf they used to have at Veterans Stadium. (I used to call it “loopy green cement.”) He twisted his knee in all kinds of weird ways. I couldn’t see what happened from where I was in the stands; but later on, when I caught a replay on television, I had to look away—that’s how painful it was just to watch. That night at the stadium, all I could see was this big huddle around Rodney, and the trainer calling for a stretcher, and Rodney laying on the field in obvious agony. I knew it wasn’t good. The real tell, though, was when I got waved down from the stands to join Rodney in the locker room. Even a newlywed football wife knows that’s not a good sign—they don’t wave you down from the stands to the locker room unless it’s serious. Right there, I knew Rodney’s season was over. I just prayed his career wasn’t through as well.

By the time I got down to the locker room, the team had already made plans to rush Rodney to the hospital. I sat next to him while trainers and coaches and players swarmed around him on the table. My poor honey’s kneecap was up in his thigh. As a rookie wife, I was panicking, and I struggled to say and do all the right things. To make matters worse, I remembered I was in the locker
room—that forbidden vat of testosterone into which no woman (with the exception of a few brave female sportswriters) was allowed. There I was, the only woman among some 40 (mostly) naked men, all of them more concerned with their QB than where my eyes might uncontrollably shift. Whew, it was some litmus test for me that night.

Rodney needed surgery straightaway, and I jumped in the ambulance right along with him. What else was I gonna do? We had no kids at that point, so I was very much standing by my man—which of course I still do to this day, only it was a lot easier back then without four kids to worry about as well. My focus was completely on Rodney. I was frantic with worry. Plus, I hadn’t thought to grab a comb or brush, or any lipstick or makeup, and the only reason I mention my appearance at all is because 3 or 4 days into Rodney’s unexpected hospital stay, I looked a mess. I hadn’t left Rodney’s side, and at one point I walked into one of the waiting room areas and noticed a television tuned to an episode of *Hangin’ with Mr. Cooper*. The nurse on duty took one look at me, and then she looked up at the screen, and then back at me. Then she crinkled up her face as if to say, “That can’t be you.” Really, I looked more like a homeless woman than a sitcom star, and it must have made an incongruous picture—but there it was.

Turned out Rodney had torn his patellar tendon, and we were in that hospital for 5 days while he recovered from surgery, and at the end of those 5 days, I looked even more of a mess. It was such a terrible time, and adding to the anguish of those long days in the hospital was the way the talk-radio guys kept hammering Rodney like his career was over. No question, his season was over, but he still had a ton of football left in him (8 more seasons, to be exact). He’d just come off a terrific season. His doctors didn’t see any reason why Rodney couldn’t be back at full strength by training camp, and I didn’t see any reason why all these sportswriter-types couldn’t just leave him alone until then. No one deserves that kind of negative energy, but I guess that’s part of the deal when you sign on to play in an over-the-top, sports-mad city like Philadelphia.

Eagles fans can be the best fans on the planet when things are going well,
but they’ll turn on you in a flash when things go sour. Men, women, children . . . across the board. They’re tough, and this knee injury was a prime example. One night, we were watching the local news in Rodney’s hospital room when the sports anchor went to a man-on-the-street piece on the Eagles’ uncertain quarterback situation in the wake of Rodney’s injury. Some folks ex-

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**THE MODERN CONNECTION**

According to most football historians, the early Greek form of football found its way to England in the 19th century, where it branched off in two distinct directions. One branch developed into the sport we now know as rugby, in which players advanced the ball by running with it or kicking it, and defenders stopped their opponents’ forward progress by running with them and kicking them to the ground. There were also full-body tackles and thinly disguised blows to the head—and both sides took turns generally beating the tar out of each other in the name of sport.

The other branch developed into what we Americans call soccer and the rest of the world calls football, in which players also advanced the ball by kicking it but were forbidden to use their hands. Eventually, they were banned from kicking each other. Both games became wildly popular throughout Europe.

All of which takes us to the late 1800s, when versions of these two time-honored schoolboy games began to be played on American college campuses. In Princeton’s version, players used their fists to ward off tacklers. At Harvard, the game—typically played between freshmen and sophomores on the first Monday of the school year—was called “Bloody Monday” for the way its players looked when they left the field at its conclusion. Accounts of those early games read more like slugfests than anything else, and I don’t know that I’d have had the patience or the stomach to marry the guy on the target end of most of those blows. And yet over time there emerged a series of rules and innovations that helped to standardize play from one region to the next, to level the playing field, and to protect the players.
pressed concern that the backup quarterback was unproven. Others hoped Rodney might be back in time for the play-offs. And then they cut to a woman in a shoe store who said, “Kneecap or no kneecap, he shouldn’t have dropped the ball.”

Now, Rodney happened to fumble the football when he went down on that Astroturf, and the loss of possession turned out to be key; but I stared at that television and thought, “Man, what a rough place to play!” That was harsh. The guy’s kneecap all but popped off his knee, he winced in pain and grabbed at it, and this woman in a shoe store was on him about dropping the ball. I’d like to see how she’d react if someone took a tire iron to her knee in that shoe store to see if she would’ve dropped those shoes in her hand!

The truth is, when it comes to defending my man, my knowledge of the game has served me better than any weapon I could ever imagine. Here’s an example. In 2002, Rodney was several weeks into a resurgence-type season with the Panthers, after most everyone in football had written him off. I was watching Fox NFL Sunday during a game in which Rodney had struggled a bit in the first half, along with the rest of his Carolina teammates. At halftime the show’s hosts—Howie Long, Terry Bradshaw, Jimmy Johnson, and my buddy “J.B.” (James Brown)—were talking up a storm about the game. At one point, Coach Johnson started running his mouth about “that rag-armed Rodney Peete,” suggesting Rodney might want to forget about Gatorade and start drinking Geritol, and I grew livid. I know these guys joke around all the time and that the players are fair game, but Rodney had been on such a tremendous roll. He’d led the team to a 3–0 start and helped turn things around for the Panthers after an abysmal 1–15 season the year before, and the talk struck me as mean and personal and below the belt. Right or wrong, it got my back up.

So what did I do? I put a call in to J.B., assuming that he was doing his thing on live television and wouldn’t get my message until later that evening. Still, I needed to vent, so I left a message. “J.B.,” I said, “you tell Coach Johnson to stop picking on Rodney. This is the first bad half he’s had this season.”
About an hour later, after the Panthers had lost and the late afternoon games had begun, my phone rang. Sure enough, it was J.B. on the line.

He was still in the studio, still taking in all the live feeds from the games around the league, still preparing his updates and recaps.

“I’ve got some guys here who want to talk to you,” J.B. said, clearly bemused.

Then Terry Bradshaw got on the line. “Coach Johnson wants to talk to you,” he said in that infectious drawl of his. “Give ’em hell, Holly!”

Then Howie Long got on the line and told me not to go easy on Coach.

Then it was Coach’s turn. “Now, Mrs. Peete,” he said, like he had it rehearsed, “comes a time in every player’s career when he can’t perform the way he used to . . .”

I cut him off. “Come on, Coach,” I shot back. “With all due respect, did you see how porous that offensive line was? He was getting killed back there.”

Coach Johnson hadn’t expected me to challenge him on his opinion. After all, he was one of the best coaches to ever roam a sideline, and I was just a lowly wife. What did I know? But I kept at it. I told Coach that Rodney had been hitting his receivers square between the numbers, and they were dropping balls left and right. I told him a mess of other things, too, and when I was finally done, he made a sheepish reply.

“I have to admit, you do know your stuff, Mrs. Peete,” he said, and in the background I could hear the other guys laughing at the way they’d hung Coach out to dry. They’d fed him to the lioness wife and let me tear him to pieces.

The next week, J.B. invited me to the Fox studios in Los Angeles, so I drove over to meet him. I took a seat off-set and started watching all the games that were playing on the many monitors. The Panthers were playing well, and Rodney was having a nice game.

At one point, during the on-air halftime show, the Fox NFL Sunday guys started baiting Coach all over again, asking him how he thought Rodney Peete was doing. Of course, Coach knew full well that I was in the studio that day and ready to pounce on him if he sold my man short a second time, but he also
knew that Rodney was kicking butt on the field. And so he said, “Fellas, Rodney Peete keeps playing like this and he’s going to the Pro Bowl.”

Next thing I knew they cut away to an off-set shot of this sweet-suffering wife to let the audience at home in on their little inside joke. Thank God I looked halfway presentable, and I was able to laugh the whole thing off as they explained to the viewers what was going on, counting myself lucky that I could stand up for Rodney in such a cool (and informed!) way.

The point here is that a woman can be just as hard-core and hard-hearted and hardheaded as any man when it comes to football. This can be a good thing and a not-so-good thing, depending on your perspective; but for the purposes of this book and these opening remarks, let’s just accept it on its face. We’re
fans, no different than any guy—except we usually smell better. We may have learned the game at our daddy’s knee, and in some cases we might have awakened to the harsh realities of the game in a Philadelphia hospital—but a lot of us have come to the game in our own way, on our own terms.

And my terms are these: Play hard and play fair, and ease up on the quarterback if he can’t hang onto the ball in the midst of a season-ending injury. Oh, and while you’re at it, pass the ice cream.