

HAYDEN
PANETTIERE

This Is Me

A RECKONING

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GRAND
CENTRAL

NEW YORK BOSTON

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every obstacle that strengthened me,
and every lesson that led me here.*

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Note to Readers

This book encompasses my life stories as I remember them. My intention is not to drag anyone through the mud, so in an effort to protect the privacy of some individuals, I've changed names and identifying characteristics throughout these pages.

Prologue

It's almost spring in New York, just a few days after we set our clocks ahead. I grew up here, but after nearly twenty years living elsewhere, I somehow forgot how the light creeps in and the ground softens, readying itself for flowers to come up. I've been reminded that when the trees start to blossom, winter's grayness fades away as splashes of color fill the horizon. When the clouds rise high and blue skies break through, this part of the world doesn't feel so heavy. Whatever happened before—when we hunkered down in the cold or sought refuge inside—doesn't matter. Winter is practically over. It's time to renew, regrow, and start life fresh.

I've come back to my hometown in Rockland County, just north of New York City, to live with my dad and stepmom for a few months. I didn't expect to stay as long as I have, but after a few hard years, I needed to give my mind, body, and soul some rest. I've settled into that relaxation, but I've also felt awake, alive, and hungry to challenge myself again. I've hiked, traveled to see friends, and golfed with my dad. I love to read fantasy and science fiction, and I've spent entire days reading about dragons and vampires and strange beings from another dimension. I've taken long walks past my childhood home, remembering the little girl who did cartwheels in the backyard and the teenager who once threw a party when her parents were out, then forced all the guests to hide in a closet when they came home early. One of my childhood best friends owned peacocks, and some are still wandering through the neighborhood, scattering green and blue feathers as they pass. Dorothy was right: *there is no place like home*, and as winter turns to spring, I'm settling into the comfort I'm finding here.

I'm grateful for the time I've had with my dad. We've always managed to find humor in everyday moments, and as we've talked through my childhood

memories and our family stories, we've laughed till our sides hurt. But I'd be lying if I said I haven't shed tears. One of the main reasons is because my dad's house is filled with happy, smiling pictures of my little brother Jansen, who we lost on February 19, 2023. Jansen excelled at everything he put his mind to, but he was a uniquely gifted artist, and Dad's hung his paintings on almost every wall. These reminders of my brother are so vibrant and present that I feel like he might walk into the room at any minute, talking a little too fast and a lot too loud, flashing a shit-eating, ear-to-ear grin after saying something to annoy me.

Jansen's art may still be alive, but he's not. While seeing his life's work breaks my heart all over again, I'm grateful to have something of him to hold on to. Learning to live in a world where he doesn't exist has often brought me to my knees, but he would want me to remember that death and loss are a part of life, but they allow rebirth if you let them.

Sitting with my brother's spirit in every room of Dad's house, I've come to grips with the fact that I've spent much of my life coping with some kind of loss, from massive traumas to small hiccups. My mom got me into acting when I was eight months old, and I haven't stopped since. From a very young age I lost the chance to have a "normal" childhood, friends, relationships, and my privacy because instead of fighting it, I leaned into the talent I was somehow blessed with and that she helped me realize. I've always held myself to a high standard, and Mom never let me settle for anything less. Disappointing her was one of my biggest fears. Because of that, I sometimes don't believe in myself as much as I'd like to. Mom and I have had our share of issues, but I'm not going to blame her for my problems. She can be tough, but she's pushed me to be my best, and all the lessons I've learned along the way have made me believe that moments of good can come from self-doubt. Sometimes, life has been *really* hard, but through those difficult times, I've always made the choice to grow.

My daughter, Kaya, has lived with her dad, Wladimir Klitschko, since 2018. Not being under the same roof with her every day has been the most gut-wrenching experience of my life, and it's hard to describe the layers of

emotion—including sadness, resentment, and anger—I’ve felt because of it. But I know anger springs from hurt, depression often masks as rage, and grief is a long, complicated journey. I grieve that I’m not the mother I thought I’d be and definitely not the mother I want to be (trust me, no one should *ever* have to raise a child on FaceTime), and although I miss Kaya so much my heart aches, I know how blessed I am to be her mom. She is the greatest gift of my life, with all the best parts of her father and me, and, today, I believe I have the opportunity to be a different kind of parent than most. Despite it all, the bond I have with Kaya is incredibly strong.

Kaya is talented and wise beyond her years, but she didn’t ask to be born into the limelight or my chaos, and she didn’t get to choose her parents. I want her to have every choice that I didn’t, including the ability to live a private life. So out of respect for her right to normalcy, my stories of motherhood will be through my eyes only, and I’ll keep personal details of her life to a minimum. I also want to make clear that I don’t blame Wlad for any of my wrongs; I take full responsibility for my part in our relationship and my shortcomings as a mom. Wlad is one of the most courageous people I’ve ever met and a true hero in so many ways. Time and again he’s built me up when others would have knocked me down. Wlad, you are a wonderful human being and an amazing father to Kaya, and if you read this book, I hope it’s with an open heart and that strength and stoicism I’ve always teased you about.

I’ve always strived to be a positive person, but I grieve all the hours I lost to addiction, my broken relationships, and my loved ones who are no longer here. I also know I’m not alone when I say that the fact my family fell apart still stings. I’ve spent years in treatment trying to make sense of these losses, and I’ve concluded that the only thing I can change is myself and the person I want to be. If only that was easy! I’m a complex person whose thoughts can feel fractured at times, and discussing my past isn’t straightforward or easy. As my friends will tell you, I tend to talk in circles, but I always try to get back to my original point.

I never want to stop evolving and changing for the better, and I’ll forever

be a work in progress, but one thing I know from my thirty-six years in the public eye is this: Life is a process that evolves day by day, year by year, and—like it or not—you are engaged in a cycle of growth until the moment you take your last breath. In any kind of growth, there may be failures, mistakes, grief, and pain. Trees lose their leaves, endure cold winters, then come back majestically the next spring. We're meant to shed our dead skin and the parts of ourselves that don't serve us, and sometimes it's immensely painful. Believe me when I say, I've felt this pain.

There's no easy way to share your story with the world, but the last thing I want to be is a downer. I'm an optimist to the core and refuse to be defined by my tragedies. So, I try to think of these tumultuous moments in my life not as losses, but as "lifequakes." It's a funny little word for a serious thing, meaning "a major life change from internal or external disruption, that precipitates personal evolution or rebirth." A lifequake has the ability to completely derail you, but it can also be temporary and help make you stronger if you choose to let it. Life can shake you up and tear you down, but even when you're at your worst, there's hope, and you have an opportunity to rebuild.

In her book *On Death and Dying*, the legendary psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I've been through all these stages, sometimes fast, other times slowly, and often out of order. What Kübler-Ross doesn't propose, though, is a sixth stage of grief described by one of my favorite authors, David Kessler. That stage is meaning, and he writes about it in his best-selling book, *Finding Meaning*. My traumas have offered me meaning through a sense of humor, some ridiculous stories, prioritizing my health, a deeper relationship with my parents, pets I adore, animal rights and environmental activism that gives me purpose, and now, this book. All the heartaches I've endured have allowed me to come to a place of empathy and understanding for everything my loved ones have come up against and—most importantly—for myself. They've also given me determination. I'm like Dory, the resilient little fish in *Finding Nemo*, who "just keeps swimming"

even when she comes face-to-face with a bunch of sharks. I'm far from perfect, but my lifequakes and moments of struggle are little miracles that have helped me grow.

Thank you for coming along with me on this journey through all its ups and downs.

—Hayden Panettiere, spring 2025

PART ONE

ONE

Non Sono Francese

I'm going to let you in on a secret right here, right now, in the first chapter of this book.

Ready?

I'm not French.

My great-grandparents came to America from Italy—specifically Bari, a midsize city right at the tip of the heel. When they arrived at Ellis Island, someone there misspelled their name “Panettiere” instead of “Panettieri,” and it stuck. They made their way to Bay Ridge, Brooklyn—home to a huge population of Italian immigrants at the time—and settled into an apartment. Then they had eight kids, one of whom was my Poppa. Poppa met and married my grandma in the early 1960s, and he adopted her curly-haired toddler son. That was my dad, Alan, aka Skip.

Grandma, Poppa, and all our friends and family pronounce our last name “Pan-a-TEERY,” not “Pan-a-TEE-air,” which is the pseudo-French pronunciation my mom, Lesley, came up with after listening to people butcher my name for years. But I'm never offended. Regis Philbin even referred to me as “Hayden Planetarium.” Poppa sure cared, though. When he watched me make my first talk show appearance in the nineties and learned that I was calling myself Pan-a-TEE-air, he stood up, started waving his arms, and ranted in Italian. Poppa did that anytime he was mad. But trust me, no one was afraid of him.

After my dad graduated high school, Grandma and Poppa expected him to get a job, so he took the NYPD entrance exam and became a cop. Mom's path was different; every member of her family went to college, including fifteen of them who graduated from Duke. Mom's mom had Northern Italian