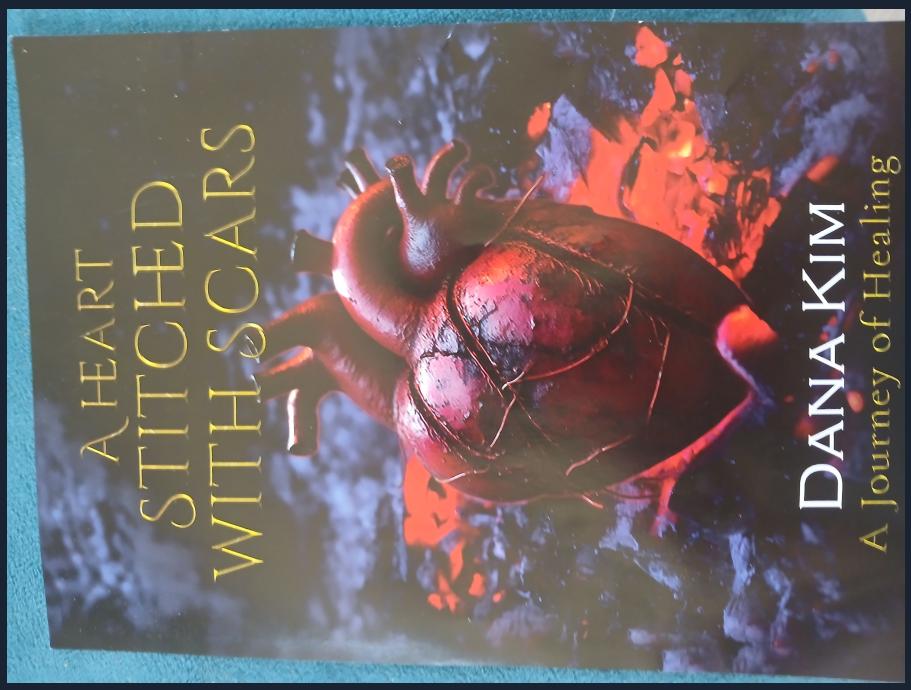


A heart stitched with scars

Dana kim

BookGist Summary

A heart stitched with scars

by Dana kim

Genre: Biography & Memoir

Key Takeaways

• Trauma can echo across decades: early childhood fear, adolescent sexual coercion, family instability, and later abuse all compound into long-term anxiety, depression, OCD, and panic symptoms.

• The memoir distinguishes between what happened and how the author interpreted it at the time, showing how shame, confusion, and lack of language can delay recognition of abuse for years.

• Consent and coercion are central themes; the author emphasizes that intoxication, fear, isolation, and power imbalance can make sexual encounters non-consensual even when no physical force is used.

• Silence is a survival strategy that eventually becomes a burden: the author repeatedly hides abuse and distress to preserve housing, relationships, and family stability, but secrecy worsens her isolation.

• Healing is portrayed as nonlinear and practical: therapy, medication, support groups, journaling, and learning triggers are what make recovery possible, not a single breakthrough moment.

• The memoir shows how marriage can be both refuge and challenge: Jake becomes a source of safety and later a partner in healing, but his military PTSD and alcoholism create a second major crisis.

• Parenting is depicted with hard-won honesty: the author admits mistakes, overcompensation, and guilt, while also showing how family love and accountability can still support children through hardship.

• The book repeatedly argues that identity is shaped by response, not just events—choosing to keep going, seek help, and practice gratitude becomes an act of agency.

• Generational cycles of hurt can be interrupted: despite a painful family history, the author builds a more open, compassionate environment for her children and grandchildren.

• The final message is one of endurance rather than neat closure: scars remain, but they can coexist with peace, gratitude, and a meaningful life.

Who Should Read This Book

This memoir is ideal for readers interested in survivorship narratives, trauma recovery, and the long emotional afterlife of abuse, depression, anxiety, and PTSD. It will resonate especially with people who want an honest, unvarnished account of how trauma can be misunderstood for years, how therapy and medication can help, and how healing often happens in stages rather than all at once. Readers who appreciate memoirs that blend family history, marriage, parenting, military life, and mental health will find it especially compelling. It will also appeal to readers looking for a compassionate, practical companion to books about recovery, self-acceptance, and resilience. Compared with memoirs that focus only on a single crisis, this one traces an entire life arc: childhood fear, young adulthood, marriage, motherhood, grandparenthood, and a partner's PTSD and addiction. What stands out most is its emphasis on survival through ordinary routines, gratitude, boundaries, therapy, and truth-telling. If you want a memoir that is emotionally direct, deeply personal, and centered on endurance rather than neat resolution, this is a strong fit.

Chapter Summaries

Prologue

The prologue frames the memoir as an act of reckoning rather than blame. Dana Kim explains that she would not change her life if she could travel back in time because every hardship contributed to who she became. She introduces a vivid earliest memory: as a toddler, she repeatedly dropped her pacifier until her father angrily threw it into the stove. That moment becomes a symbol of how early experiences can shape a child's inner world, especially when

fear and helplessness are present. She also outlines the memoir's purpose. This is not a story of accusing parents or others, but of understanding how trauma, mental health, and choices interact over a lifetime. She acknowledges that writing was difficult and required pauses because revisiting memories was emotionally taxing. The prologue closes by establishing the core metaphor of the book: life as a bridge, a path, or a garden gate—each representing possible responses to pain, but ultimately the need to keep moving forward.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 begins by challenging the idea that the author had a completely normal childhood. Dana recalls two major childhood traumas: a fatal school bus stop accident involving close friends, and a forest fire that threatened her home and village. The car crash leaves one friend dead, one seriously injured, and another in a coma, while the fire creates long-lasting fear around safety, fire, and nighttime routines. These incidents are presented as the first serious fractures in her sense of security. The chapter also paints a picture of her upbringing in the 1970s: outdoor play, tomboy energy, sports, and a household shaped by a strict father and a passive, emotionally constrained mother. Dana describes feeling physically awkward and socially out of place, which deepened her insecurity. She also begins to connect later emotional instability to these earlier experiences, arguing that unprocessed childhood stress can shape adulthood. The chapter ends with an early lesson in self-worth, urging readers to love themselves, even when they feel different or flawed.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 centers on the author's first major understanding of sexual violation and its psychological consequences. Dana revisits her teenage relationship and explains how pressure, alcohol, and vulnerability blurred her ability to recognize what was happening. Drawing on the language of the #MeToo era, she emphasizes that consent can be withdrawn and that intoxication or fear can eliminate real choice. Her description of dissociation—leaving her body and mentally retreating—is a key mechanism of survival. The chapter also traces the delayed recognition of her experience as rape. Because the abuse was not recognized at the time, she carried years of shame, self-blame, and confusion. This pain eventually contributed to severe depression, thoughts of suicide, and the collapse of her emotional functioning. Dana credits family, work friends, her children, and therapy with keeping her alive. The chapter reframes survival not as weakness but as endurance under extreme psychological strain.

Chapter 3

This chapter explores how the author began to understand consent, self-esteem, and first love in the aftermath of trauma. After therapy helped her define rape more clearly, she reflects on the earlier incident and notes that the young man later apologized. She then shifts to her first real relationship with Hank, which felt deeply meaningful and foundational. The relationship gave her joy, but it also reinforced patterns of self-erasure, dependency, and fear of losing

love. Dana explains that she became whatever Hank wanted in order to preserve the relationship, which slowed her emotional development. She now sees this as a period when she was blinded by love and too inexperienced to recognize warning signs or assert herself. Still, she frames the relationship with tenderness rather than regret. The chapter closes with the larger question that recurs throughout the memoir: what if she had taken another path? Even so, she repeatedly emphasizes that she does not regret the life she ultimately built.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 describes the author's departure from home and the collapse of her early ambitions. She wanted to become a journalist or actor, but financial limitations and her father's control made those dreams impractical. Instead, she studied travel and tourism because it was more acceptable and affordable. Her relationship with Hank continued through this period, and the emotional high of first love was intertwined with the beginning of independence. Leaving home, however, was not clean or simple. Dana describes cutting the relationship over the phone, then later revisiting the decision in sadness and confusion. Her father had long insisted that she needed to leave, work, and build her own life, but she experienced that as rejection. Even now, she struggles to know whether she was pushed out or simply grew out of the old life. The chapter closes by emphasizing the feeling of being a lone captain steering into rough waters.

Chapter 5

The fifth chapter follows Dana's difficult early attempts at independence. She stays with relatives after leaving home, hoping to find work and eventually reunite with Hank. But the practical realities of housing, finances, and family expectations are harsher than she expected. When her relationship with Hank ends over the phone, she is left untethered—jobless, without money, and unsure of her identity outside of partnership. Dana eventually finds work in a hardware store and a room in a shared home, where she begins to build an adult routine. She buys used furniture, navigates bus routes, and learns how precarious her finances are. The chapter highlights how survival requires humility, improvisation, and persistence. Her experimentation with weed, alcohol, and cigarettes is presented less as rebellion than as coping in a life that felt unstable and lonely.

Chapter 6

This chapter contains the second and most detailed account of rape, occurring during a camping trip with roommates. Dana is drawn into a confusing and frightening situation in the dark, intoxicated, and disoriented among a party crowd. She initially thinks she is being helped to the restroom, but realizes too late that her roommate Derrick is assaulting her. The scene is described as surreal and dissociative, emphasizing her paralysis and inability to understand or stop what was happening. What follows is the long aftershock of the assault. The abuse continues in the home she shares with Derrick and Sonya, and Dana is too

ashamed, afraid, and confused to tell anyone. She internalizes the violence as evidence that she is “dirty” or “used goods,” and she repeatedly blames herself. The chapter shows the connection between trauma and obsessive cleaning: her need to control the home becomes a response to feeling contaminated. Physical illness, weight loss, emotional numbness, and silent endurance all mark this period, culminating in her decision to block her bedroom door with a dresser as a small act of resistance.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 emphasizes the role of friendship and unexpected kindness during one of the darkest periods of Dana’s life. A coworker named Helen invites her to Easter with her family, giving her relief from home and a glimpse of care without judgment. Helen’s parents offer food, warmth, gifts, and even a place to stay, which Dana declines out of guilt and a sense that she should not burden them. The chapter demonstrates how small acts of generosity can have lasting effects. Dana remembers the Easter basket and the feeling of being seen, and these memories become a moral anchor for her later life. She explains that receiving compassion made her more compassionate in return, especially toward children and friends who needed a safe home. The chapter’s deeper message is that kindness can interrupt cycles of isolation and shame, even if only temporarily.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 introduces Jake, the man who becomes Dana’s husband and central support. They meet through a social connection linked to work and instantly connect at a bar, talking for hours. Dana is drawn to his patience and steadiness, and she marvels that he does not reject her despite her insecurities and discomfort around intimacy. He becomes, in her words, a savior, best friend, and eventual father of their children. At the same time, life remains unstable. Dana loses her job, becomes effectively homeless, and returns to her parents’ home temporarily. She eventually tells her mother a partial version of the abuse she suffered, and her mother is shocked and protective. This becomes one of the first moments in which the truth is acknowledged within the family, though Dana still keeps much of it hidden. The chapter balances hope and fragility: Jake offers a path toward healing, but the wound remains secret.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 marks a major transition: Dana leaves the old apartment, visits Jake’s family, and begins to create a new life. His family accepts her warmly despite religious and cultural differences, and their kindness gives her a rare sense of belonging. She moves in with Jake, finds new work, and eventually becomes engaged. For the first time in years, she feels purpose and emotional safety. The chapter also highlights the physical and symbolic act of leaving behind the old life. She retrieves her bed and dresser from storage and is determined to be done with the people and events tied to her trauma. Yet emotionally she is still burdened

by self-blame and shame; she has not told Jake the full truth. The chapter closes on optimism, with a summer wedding planned and a sense that she is finally moving toward a stable future.

Chapter 10

In Chapter 10, Dana finally attempts to tell someone close to her about the rape: her favorite aunt. After attending a family event at Derrick and Sonya's apartment, she pulls her aunt aside and begins to explain what happened. Instead of empathy, she receives dismissal and disbelief. The aunt cuts her off and says she does not want to hear it, a moment that deeply wounds Dana and delays further disclosure for years. The chapter then contrasts that rejection with the rest of her life improving. Dana marries Jake, experiences strong sexual desire in the early years of the marriage, and later recognizes this as a common trauma response rather than a sign of being "bad." She also becomes pregnant and loses her beloved grandmother to cancer soon after the birth of her son. The emotional mix of joy, grief, and unresolved trauma deepens. Dana eventually seeks medical help after postpartum-related anger and anxiety, beginning formal treatment for depression, though she still does not fully understand what she has lived through.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 focuses on a new move, a miscarriage, and Dana's worsening mental health. The family settles into a large city where Dana feels isolated, unable to drive comfortably, and alone for long stretches while Jake works away. A miscarriage and D&C surgery trigger renewed depression, fear around sex, obsessive cleaning, and a growing sense that she is spiraling. She becomes ashamed of her behavior and feels she is failing as a wife and mother. At night, she finally tells Jake about Derrick and the abuse. His anger confirms how serious the situation was and pushes her toward further care. She attends a mental health center and speaks in a group about rape, though no lasting resolution comes immediately. The chapter portrays the fragility of family life from the outside and the inner turmoil that remains invisible. Dana's daily routines—cleaning, caring for children, managing the home—become both coping strategy and symptom of deeper distress.

Chapter 12

This chapter shows Dana's gradual return to work and school as the children grow older. She works in a bakery and later retrains as a hairstylist, a career she keeps for years. The family appears more settled, but Dana realizes she has made parenting mistakes, especially with her daughter, whom she treated more like a friend than a child who needed firm boundaries. She offers this as a lesson to others: kindness matters, but so does parental authority. The chapter also marks a turning point as global events and military life begin to affect the family more directly. After 9/11, Jake is sent on a long posting to Dubai related to the Afghanistan war, and Dana again becomes the primary caretaker at home. Her depression remains managed through medication, but OCD and anxiety continue to shape her behavior. The

chapter emphasizes resilience and duty, but also the cost of carrying too much alone.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 focuses on family shock as Dana's father reveals an affair. What begins as a routine visit from her mother turns into one of the memoir's most devastating scenes. The family learns that Dad has been caught with another woman and has effectively ended the marriage over the phone. Dana is stunned and deeply hurt, especially by the image of her mother collapsing emotionally. The chapter examines the ripple effects of betrayal across generations. Dana feels responsible as the eldest child and tries to manage her own feelings while supporting her mother. She also later recognizes that what she was experiencing—racing heart, sweating palms, panic—were panic attacks, though she did not know it at the time. The family's foundation is shaken, and the emotional consequences of the affair become another major strain layered on top of Dana's existing trauma.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 deals with the aftermath of the affair and the family's attempt to keep functioning. Dana's mother returns home, and the father briefly moves in with the other woman before coming back. The household is changed permanently: trust is broken, sleeping arrangements shift, and the emotional climate becomes tense. Dana does not view her father the same way again, even though she still loves him. The chapter also reflects on the brutal pain of abandonment and public humiliation. Dana remembers her father telling her mother over the phone and leaving her on the floor crying in the closet. The memoir does not present easy forgiveness; instead, it shows the complexity of loving someone who has caused harm. At the same time, Dana implies that karma and consequence will eventually follow, suggesting a moral order to the suffering that has entered the family.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 turns to the family's changing geography and the emotional burden of staying connected. Jake receives another posting, but the house does not sell, so he leaves alone while Dana and the children remain. The move is postponed, and Dana finds herself stuck between past and future, losing touch with pieces of her mother and father as their own lives shift. The chapter ends with news that her father has non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Dana initially underestimates the severity, not realizing how close to death he is. She is caught between caring for her own household and the need to support her mother and father through illness. The tone is one of delayed realization: life has entered a new phase, but Dana does not yet fully know how dire things have become.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 reveals how sick Dana's father has become and how much has been hidden from her. An email from her father's sister-in-law includes a photo of him looking frail and defeated,

and Dana learns that he is undergoing chemotherapy, unable to walk properly, and dependent on help for basic tasks. She feels shocked and guilty for not understanding the severity of the illness earlier. She also learns, through her mother, that the prognosis is grim. Jake is away, and Dana must figure out how to travel home before Christmas to see her father one last time. The chapter is full of constrained urgency and regret. When she returns home, she sees her mother worn down by caregiving, and she experiences the painful reality that family members often shield each other from the worst truth until it is almost too late.

Chapter 17

This chapter covers the father's funeral and Dana's grief. The church is crowded, the coffin is personalized with a carved fishing boat, and Dana stands to give the eulogy, though she cannot later remember what she said. The funeral becomes a blur of public mourning, family pain, and overwhelming loss. The family is visibly shattered, even if they continue to function afterward. After the funeral, Dana returns to ordinary life but begins to feel a stronger pull toward home and her mother. She wants to be closer to the place she once longed to escape. Soon, the family receives a posting back to her hometown, and although this seems like a hopeful return, it brings new complications. Her son is thriving academically but will live with grandparents to save money, while her daughter will struggle with the transition. The chapter ends by hinting that the move will reveal hidden problems.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 shows the emotional strain of returning home and the unexpected distress it causes within the children. Dana experiences homesickness for her old hometown even while living near it, proving that "home" is not a simple geographic idea. Her daughter begins skipping school, and her grades fall, while her son feels left behind living with grandparents. Dana also describes how her own depression affects the family atmosphere. She stops working temporarily and sleeps more, and her daughter interprets this as neglect. Dana only later learns that her daughter is being bullied and struggling in the new town. The chapter is an example of how trauma and transition can become misread across generations. The family is physically close again, but emotionally disconnected, and the stage is set for the next crisis.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 reveals the daughter's pregnancy. Dana takes her daughter and a friend shopping when the friend nervously discloses the news. Dana's immediate reaction is anger and shock, but she quickly realizes this is a turning point, not something that can be undone. She breaks the news to Jake, who responds with a blunt acceptance: "Well, it's done now." The chapter explores parental conflict between fear and support. Dana considers abortion but focuses mainly on protecting her daughter's future. She is also forced to reckon with the daughter's choices, the boy involved, and the town's gossip culture. Though shocked, Dana decides the family must rally around the teenager and help her through the consequences. The chapter

introduces the memoir's recurring idea that life can change in an instant and that response matters more than blame.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 expands on the emotional and social fallout of the teenage pregnancy. Dana confronts her daughter about sexual choices, feels she has failed as a parent, and learns that the daughter's behavior had been changing for months. The girl is using drugs and alcohol, then stops once she knows she is pregnant. Dana is furious at the judgmental reaction from peers, parents, and even some family members who treat the pregnancy as shameful. Despite the stigma, the family works toward a plan so the daughter can finish school. But the situation becomes more difficult when Jake announces another deployment to Afghanistan. Dana suspects he may be escaping the family crisis, though she later acknowledges he had long wanted to go. The chapter ends with an image of emotional free fall: after years of surviving trauma, she now feels like she might drown.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 shows Dana's anxiety spiraling under the pressure of Jake's deployment and her daughter's pregnancy. She feels alone in a judgmental town, while her daughter is angry and her son is away at university. Dana's guilt grows because she cannot be fully present for anyone, and she becomes overwhelmed by the expectation that she should hold the family together. The turning point comes during a visit to the hospital with her sister and mother. Dana realizes she needs immediate help and approaches triage on her own. In a stark, chilling moment, she admits to having dark suicidal thoughts while waiting for the psychiatrist. The chapter captures the frightening bodily reality of a panic crisis—racing thoughts, despair, and the temptation to end everything. It is a crisis point that leads directly into intervention.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 details Dana's psychiatric assessment and the beginning of a more structured treatment plan. The psychiatrist recognizes the seriousness of her suicidal ideation and suggests observation, but Jake worries about the long-term consequences of being labeled. They settle on medication adjustments and weekly therapy sessions instead. Dana finds the therapy highly beneficial and begins to learn coping strategies for the many overlapping family crises. The chapter portrays the stabilizing power of professional support. Under therapy, Dana becomes more capable of handling her daughter's pregnancy, Jake's deployment, and her own fear. The family settles into a routine as they prepare for the baby's arrival. This chapter marks an important shift from silent endurance to active care, showing that asking for help can make survival more sustainable.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 follows the birth of Dana's first grandchild and the social pressures around teen pregnancy. The baby's father has a bad reputation and a troubled background, but Dana tries to respond without cruelty. She is struck by how harshly the town treats her daughter, who is pregnant, underage, and bullied online. Even a teacher participates in public shaming, revealing how pervasive judgment can be. The baby is born healthy, and Dana initially hopes the daughter will be able to bring him to school while continuing her education. But the school reverses its promise, and Dana becomes the primary full-time caregiver. This shifts the family dynamic significantly: her daughter becomes more detached, and Dana once again takes on the emotional and physical load. The chapter shows how one crisis becomes another caregiving role, and how love often turns into labor.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 centers on Jake's return from Afghanistan and the emerging signs of PTSD. Dana sees that he is changed—hollow-eyed, distant, and carrying emotional weight he does not know how to name. He describes witnessing so many dead young men during repatriation ceremonies, and only gradually does Dana understand the depth of the trauma he has absorbed. The family reshuffles again: the daughter is sent back to Ontario, the grandson remains with Dana and Jake, and the house becomes a space of mixed joy and strain. Jake's drinking intensifies, and Dana begins to recognize it as PTSD-related distress. She pushes for help, but the military culture of stoicism and silence has left him ill-equipped to seek it. The chapter highlights how war trauma can enter domestic life and demand long-term care from the whole family.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 describes the family's relative stability after the move to a place they consider home. Dana is caring for her grandson, her daughter finishes high school, and her son completes university. Yet beneath the routine, Jake is increasingly absent emotionally and drinks more. Dana largely focuses on the children and on maintaining the home, while Jake retreats further into his own struggles. The chapter also underscores Dana's second chance at parenting through her grandson. She feels she can do better this time and invests deeply in his daily care, becoming for him a mother-like figure. At the same time, she recognizes that her daughter is again heading toward self-destructive choices. This dual role—nurturer and worried observer—becomes central to the remainder of the memoir.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 brings another teenage pregnancy, this time involving Dana's daughter again. Dana had encouraged her to study photojournalism and helped her access financial support for young mothers, but the daughter's relationship with a shady partner leads to another pregnancy. Dana is shocked because her daughter was on birth control and had already promised not to repeat the earlier pattern. Despite the surprise and disappointment, the family

eventually welcomes a second grandson, and the tone shifts toward long-term redemption. The boyfriend leaves after infidelity and legal trouble, and a custody battle follows. Over time, however, both parents mature and become able to co-parent civilly. Dana emphasizes that a bad beginning does not guarantee a bad ending, and she celebrates the child's strength, talent, and support system.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 pivots back to Jake's drinking and the emotional cost of untreated PTSD. The children are now adults with their own homes and jobs, leaving Dana and Jake alone together more often. Jake's alcohol use grows severe, reaching extreme levels, and his behavior becomes dangerous, including threats of suicide and episodes that require emergency room visits. Dana describes living in constant vigilance, hiding objects, and fearing what she might find when she comes home. The chapter also reveals how the family has normalized damage in order to function. Dana works long shifts, tries to support Jake, and wonders why she has become the keeper of everyone's pain. She knows he is suffering, but he refuses help for a long time. This chapter starkly depicts the burden of living with addiction and PTSD, especially when love and duty make leaving feel impossible.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 marks a chain of major losses and a sharp decline in Jake's health. Dana has become used to the drinking and physical aftermath—falls, stitches, exhaustion—but now Jake is diagnosed with thyroid cancer after quietly checking a lump. She suppresses her fear and continues functioning because she believes someone has to hold the family together. The chapter then turns to the death of Jake's father, followed by the death of Dana's uncle. With these losses, the emotional "stick" she has been bending for years feels close to snapping. Despite this, the family continues forward, helping Jake's mother move closer and reorganizing life around new realities. The chapter reinforces the memoir's central theme: people keep moving through grief because life does not pause for them to recover.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 follows Jake's medical release from the military due to PTSD and Dana's own increasing instability. Jake can no longer tolerate even wearing his uniform without being triggered, and his physical health is impacted by years of drinking. Dana, meanwhile, is on the highest dose of depression medication and depends on sleeping pills, shopping, and withdrawal to get through the day. The turning point is not a dramatic event but a sustained breaking point. Their daughter finally confronts Jake, telling him he must get help if he wants to remain in his grandchildren's lives. That appeal succeeds where Dana's warnings did not, and Jake enters treatment for alcohol abuse. Dana's body has been showing stress for months—eye twitching, jaw clenching, exhaustion—and she recognizes that she is on the edge of a severe breakdown herself. The chapter sets up the final crisis and recovery arc.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 is the climax of Dana's mental health crisis and recovery. While Jake is in rehab, Dana's long-suppressed anxiety and depression erupt into full panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, and inability to function at work. She describes the experience as a pressure cooker finally boiling over. Even though her children and home life are stable on paper, internally she feels empty, exhausted, and close to collapse. She finally takes decisive action: she asks for help, restarts treatment, attends group therapy, and learns coping tools for triggers and stress. As Jake completes rehab and returns sober, Dana begins to understand that recovery is not just about one person—it is a family process. She also reinterprets her trauma with more self-compassion, no longer seeing herself as dirty or shameful. The chapter ends with a message of gratitude, resilience, and realistic healing: the pain does not disappear, but she now has the tools to carry it differently.

Notable Quotes

> *"“To those who were not brave enough to tell their story, and to those who did and were not believed.”"*

> *"“if you are fierce, brave, loving, and kind, you will have conquered most things in life.”"*

> *"“I would not change a thing.”"*

> *"“our memories and experiences shape us into who we become as adults.”"*

> *"“Love yourself. Look into that mirror, call yourself beautiful, and wear that crazy outfit that others may not like.”"*

> *"“It's rape if you are too drunk to know what's happening or if you are coerced into an uncomfortable situation and have no way out.”"*

> *"“Ask for help. Not because you are weak. But because you want to remain strong.”"*

> *"“Crossing the bridge and not looking back was my path; I would never change a thing!”"*

Full Summary

Dana Kim opens by framing her life as something she would not rewrite, even with the chance to travel back in time. The memoir begins with a childhood memory she can barely see but can vividly feel: as an infant in her crib in the hallway, she kept dropping her pacifier and crying for it until her father, angered by the repetition, threw it into the stove. Her mother later insists she cannot truly remember it, but Dana treats it as proof that even the earliest experiences leave marks. She presents trauma not as a single event but as something that

shapes personality, body, and mind across decades. From there, she explains that her story is not about blame but about how she survived what happened and how she learned to live with the consequences. She writes that it took years, and many pauses, to put these memories into words because her mind could not always handle them. Names and places are changed, but she insists the story itself is true to her memory.

In childhood, she believes she was relatively normal, yet two events before adolescence deeply affected her. One was a fatal car accident at a school bus stop in 1978, when her best friend and two other girls were struck by a car as they looked at report cards. One friend died, one was badly injured, and her best friend was left in a coma for months and had to relearn basic functions. Dana did not know what had happened until after school, when she was told the details, and she remembers only the sour stomach and sleeplessness that followed. The second event was a forest fire that swept through her village later that same year, forcing the family to flee to safety while firefighters battled the blaze. Afterward she became afraid of fire, unplugged things around the house at night, and began screaming in her sleep and sleepwalking. She does not connect the incidents until later, but she recognizes that they helped create the anxiety and inner demons that surfaced in adolescence.

As a teenager, Dana describes herself as a gangly tomboy, physically insecure and always feeling like the odd one out. She loved rough-and-tumble outdoor play, fishing with her father, and sports, but she also felt unattractive and self-critical, judging her nose, hair, chest, and even eye color. Her father was authoritarian and critical, while her mother had become subdued in marriage, leaving Dana without much emotional support or confidence-building. When she finally had her first boyfriend around age 17, he seemed friendly at first but quickly revealed that he saw her as a conquest and took her virginity without real care. At the time she did not have language for what happened. Instead she wrote poetry because she could not tell her friends or her mother how hurt and ashamed she felt. She later reflects that the poems were the only way she knew to express pain, sadness, and regret.

Chapter 2 broadens that understanding of harm and consent. Looking back through the lens of #MeToo and later therapy, Dana explains that rape is not limited to physical force: being too drunk to know what is happening, being coerced, drugged, frightened, or trapped can make a sexual encounter non-consensual. She names her own response as “fright,” one of the three Fs, and describes how trauma can cause a person to leave their body and drift somewhere safer in their mind. That is how she experienced a second rape years later by a different man, someone known to her, and the abuse was repeated over time. She did not speak up because she was too deep inside the situation and did not recognize it for what it was. Even later, when she confided in her husband, she still needed years of therapy and several different therapists before she could believe she was not at fault. The memoir ties this to the humiliation and shame that keep survivors silent long after the assaults themselves.

Dana then moves into a first serious relationship with Hank, whom she loved deeply but whose importance also highlights her own vulnerability and low self-esteem. They were young and grew up together in many ways, and she thought the relationship would last forever. But she also says she allowed him to control the relationship and that her desire to be loved kept her from being fully herself. Leaving home became part of that breakup, and she still wonders about the “what if” of their future. Chapter 4 shows how her father’s control shaped her path again: he refused to pay for journalism school, so she had to take out loans, and she chose travel and tourism instead. After college, she knew she had to leave home and build a life elsewhere, though she had not planned to do so so soon. A drunken phone call ended things with Hank, and though she later visited him hoping for reconciliation, he would not commit, which left her feeling rejected and alone. She came to see that she had been pushed out of a small-town life she no longer wanted, but the transition was still painful.

In the next chapters, independence begins to look like survival. Dana first stays with relatives, then is moved to another set of relatives after the first arrangement does not work out. She finds work in a hardware store, rents a room with acquaintances of her relatives, and buys a used bed and dresser from the want ads. Money is scarce; sometimes she scrounges for bus fare, and she does not tell her parents how hard it is because she does not want to appear like a failure. She experiments with weed and liquor but does not like them much, though alcohol and cigarettes become her crutch. These chapters present the fragile early version of her adult life: lonely, precarious, and defined by buses, work shifts, and the effort to keep moving forward.

That precariousness becomes terrifying in the summer of 1986, when Dana attends a camping trip and open-field biker party with roommates. After drinking, she leaves the tent in the dark looking for a restroom, becomes disoriented in the grass, and is seized by her roommate Derrick, who drags her into the bushes and rapes her. The next day she wakes with no memory, only vomiting and feeling unwell. The abuse continues for months, sometimes a year, always when she is vulnerable, half-asleep, or alone in the house. She does not tell anyone because she fears not being believed and fears losing housing if she speaks up. She also calls herself names, wondering whether she is an adulteress or a whore. The shame is so strong that she blocks out what is happening. Eventually she begins placing a dresser against her bedroom door and cleaning obsessively, an early sign of the OCD she will later understand as part of her trauma response. When she finally sees a doctor for feeling sick, she is told she is anemic, and she still cannot say why she feels so unwell.

After finally disclosing what Derrick had done, Dana is met not with comfort but with disbelief from her favorite aunt, who cuts her off and refuses to hear the story. The rejection lands hard, but Dana still keeps the secret hidden for years afterward, continuing to present herself as fine because she has a good job, new friends, Jake, and a safe place to live. Even then, the aftermath of the abuse is not gone. Her sexuality becomes heightened for a time, something

she later understands as hypersexuality connected to psychological pain, and both of her planned pregnancies with Jake are shadowed by postpartum depression. The wedding itself is a bright spot, a large summer celebration in her hometown, and when she becomes pregnant with their first child she is also carrying the emotional weight of her grandmother's diagnosis with skin cancer. The grandmother's illness and eventual death from a heart attack mark a devastating rupture in Dana's life. After the baby is born, she begins having intrusive anger and anxiety, snaps at her infant son when he breaks something in his crib, and finally tells Jake and her GP enough to get help. The doctor prescribes medication and sends her for blood work; only later does Dana realize it was likely to test for HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, a reminder of how little language she had for what she had endured. A psychiatrist then treats her for generalized depression, and although medication helps, her OCD still rules her days through compulsive cleaning and fear of dirt.

The family's next posting moves them to a huge, unfamiliar city where Jake is frequently away and Dana feels isolated with a small child and, eventually, a miscarriage that requires a D&C. The loss triggers her depression again, and fear around sex and pregnancy makes her behaviors more erratic. In the middle of a dark night, while pregnant again, Jake gently asks what is wrong, and Dana finally tells him about Derrick. Far from minimizing it, Jake reacts with anger and wants to protect her, but Dana worries about revenge and instead agrees to seek medical and psychological help. She attends a rape group at a mental health center, though the timing and family pressures keep the healing incomplete. After their daughter is born, Dana describes the early years as a time when she looks externally like a happy mother of two with a loyal Labrador retriever, while inside she is still in turmoil. Jake is away often, their daughter is colicky, and Dana responds by cleaning instead of resting, overcorrecting and trying to control everything around her. She later admits she was not the kind of mother she believed she should be, and while she eventually apologizes to her children, the guilt lingers.

When the family is posted again, Dana is happy to be closer to Jake's family and finally near the place she can imagine as permanent home. Back there, life is busy and relatively stable until her parents' marriage collapses. Dana's mother, who had become deeply involved in the church, is devastated to learn that Dana's father has left her by phone for a younger woman about Dana's own age. The betrayal hits the family like a death. Dana sees her mother break apart and recognizes she has become the oldest child, the one expected to hold things together even as her own anxiety returns in the form of racing thoughts, sweating palms, and panic that she does not yet understand. The mother returns home immediately, the father briefly moves in with the other woman, then comes back to the marriage in a tense, damaged state. Dana's trust in him changes forever, even as she still loves him and wants her family back. Then comes more upheaval: Jake is posted east for a year while the house remains unsold, and the family stays put. During that time Dana learns her father has non-Hodgkin

lymphoma, but because her mother has tried to shield her, she does not understand how sick he really is. When she goes home in November, she finds him frail, unable to walk, and dependent on her mother for even the most basic care. He is in denial about dying, and Dana struggles to say goodbye. A final family photo captures them smiling, and her last words to him are a promise to see him soon. Weeks later he dies on 26 December 2007, and the funeral is packed, the coffin marked with a carved fishing boat, but everything feels blurred and unreal to her.

When Jake leaves for his Afghanistan tour, Dana is left in a town that feels small enough for gossip and large enough for her to feel invisible inside it. Their daughter is back in school and outwardly coping, but Dana is constantly on edge, absorbing the anger the girl sometimes turns on her and trying to hold the family together while also carrying guilt over their son being away and doing so well academically. Her mother and sister visit briefly, bringing concern but not relief, and a hospital appointment for her sister becomes the moment Dana can no longer keep her fear contained. In the waiting room, her anxiety spikes so violently that she approaches triage on her own, shaking and overwhelmed, and eventually reveals that she has thought about killing herself by wrapping a phone cord around her throat. The psychiatrist recognizes the seriousness immediately and suggests 48-hour observation, but Jake panics at the idea of her being labeled and promises to help her through it. A new medication is prescribed, weekly therapy begins, and for the first time in a while she starts to learn practical ways of managing her family's chaos instead of simply enduring it. Those sessions help her steady herself through the months as Jake remains away and the baby's arrival approaches. When the grandson is born in February 2010, Dana is exhausted but relieved, and when her daughter is blocked from bringing the baby to school after only one day, it falls to Dana to become the child's full-time caregiver. Her daughter pulls away, resumes teenage independence, and Dana finds herself running on empty, getting up at night and carrying the emotional and physical work of raising her grandson while her daughter drifts. Jake returns from his tour changed, carrying a hollowness Dana can see in his eyes before he even speaks. He tells her about young men being sent home in boxes after repatriation ceremonies, and over time it becomes clear he is suffering from PTSD, even if she does not yet have that language for it. Their daughter is eventually sent away to finish high school with a family friend, while Dana and Jake keep the little boy with them for months. Jake's drinking escalates, his outbursts become more frequent, and the military's clearance process offers only a superficial check-in after deployment. Dana watches the signs of trauma and alcoholism accumulate, but still tries to keep functioning as a military wife, hoping that routine will somehow contain the damage.

After they move to what they have long thought of as home, Dana settles into a new routine with her grandson and daughter living with them, their son away at university, and Jake often back on base. Their daughter finishes high school and then begins dating again, while Dana

becomes so absorbed in childcare, bills, and work that she misses how far off track the girl is drifting. She sends the daughter to college to study photojournalism, partly because it matches Dana's own old ambitions, but the young woman soon announces she is pregnant again, this time while in college and on birth control. Dana is shocked, especially because she had tried to warn her daughter about medication interfering with contraception and feared the boyfriend had manipulated the situation. The boyfriend is a heavily tattooed man with a poor reputation, and the pregnancy leads to a child born healthy and strong, but also to a custody battle later on after the relationship breaks down over infidelity and other illegal behavior. Through it all, Dana holds the household together, and over time the two grandsons become central to her life. Her daughter eventually leaves the bad relationship, the parents grow more civil, and co-parenting becomes possible, but Dana never forgets how easily a family can be pulled apart by repeated bad choices and old pain. Meanwhile, Jake's drinking becomes increasingly severe. By around 2015 he is consuming impossibly large amounts, blacking out, urinating on himself, needing stitches after falls, and talking darkly about hanging himself. Dana begins hiding dangerous objects and living in dread of coming home to his corpse. She repeatedly asks him to seek help, but he refuses until the pressure becomes unbearable.

The crisis finally turns when Jake is diagnosed with thyroid cancer after checking a lump in his throat. Dana shoves her fear into the same mental box she has used for so many other catastrophes, because she believes the family will fall apart if she stops functioning. After treatment and radiation, another blow comes when Jake's father dies in his sleep, closely followed by Dana's uncle after a long illness. The family home is sold, Jake's mother moves nearby, and the sense of stability keeps eroding. Jake is eventually medically released from the military with a pension because of PTSD, and wearing the uniform itself becomes a trigger. Dana is placed on the highest dose of antidepressants and sleeping medication, but she also slips into online shopping as another way to numb herself. Their daughter finally confronts Jake after yet another hospitalization, warning him that if he does not stop drinking, she will take the boys away from him. That threat works where years of pleading did not, and Jake goes to the veterans' system asking for an inpatient program for substance abuse and PTSD. Even then, Dana is nearly at her breaking point. While he is in rehab, with no contact for the first weeks, the pressure she has been holding for everyone else finally bursts. At work, she cannot function; panic attacks hit her body like fire, making it hard to breathe or think. She feels useless, exhausted, and increasingly convinced that death would be easier than continuing. Only when she realizes Jake is finally in a place where she does not have to monitor his drinking, his nightmares, or the possibility of suicide does she understand why her own collapse happens then. She asks for help, returns to psychiatric care, begins a new medication, and attends weekly group therapy for anxiety where she learns about coping skills and triggers. She also joins family sessions for spouses of people in rehab, learning how to live with sober support and to understand Jake's PTSD without destroying herself. Journaling and gratitude become part of her recovery, and when Jake comes home sober after two

months, he remains sober. Dana is able to see, with time and therapy, that she has triggers too, especially around the old sexual abuse, but she is no longer ashamed in the same way. What happened still hurts, yet she has language, tools, and the knowledge that she can survive it.

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