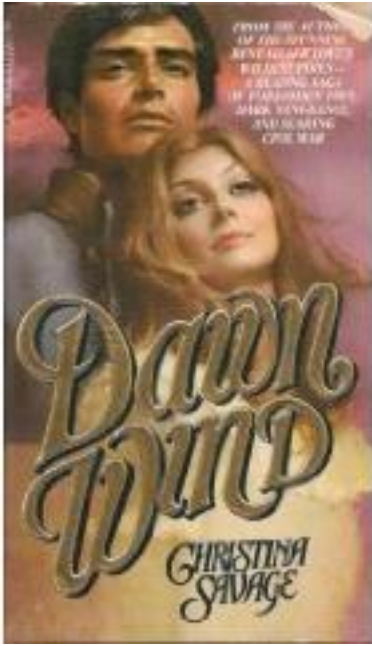


Dawn Wind



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Jennifer Blackheath danced naked in a forest of towering evergreens. Around her, tiny multihued butterflies darted, spun, and floated in tremulous circles like all the flowers of the earth come to life. A thousand, ten thousand diaphanous, powdered wings brushed lightly against her flesh. Entranced, she opened her eyes, laughed, and said, "Oh! Pretty!"

And then nothing.

Sewal Blackheath placed his wife's slim, fragile hand beneath the sheet and brushed the tips of his index and middle fingers across her eyelids. When he straightened, the black horsehair upholstery pricked through his white shirt. Face bland, he ran still calloused fingers through his iron-gray hair.

"Goddamn it, Jenny," he said, trying to divest himself of the unavoidable guilt stemming from his relief that her six months dying had at last ended. He was angry with himself and with her and with himself all the more, and repeated, "Goddamn it, Jennifer. Goddamn it!" The words helped alleviate the terrible ache in his throat, but not by much. He told himself that Blackheath men were not given to crying.

Guilt. Enough of guilt, he admonished himself. Unable to bring his lips to her thin, pale ones, he leaned forward and lightly kissed her forehead. Seventeen years and three months earlier he had kissed her for the first time. This would be the last. That she had not yet reached her thirty-fifth birthday-Jennifer had been so full of life and laughter-was a sorrow Sewal held at arm's length.

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