

To Face the Sun

Also by Frances Patton Statham

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Frances Patton Statham

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ISBN: 978-0-9895007-2-2
(Previous ISBN: 0-449-90140-8)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013917667

Cover Design by Steve McAfee

First Edition: May 1986 by Ballantine Books,
a division of Random House
Second Edition: April 2014 by Bocage Books

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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To the valiant Allied men and women
who fought for freedom in the Pacific
during World War II

Chapter 1

WITH ENGINES AT FULL THROTTLE, THE U.S. NAVY hospital ship *Good Hope* sliced through the deceptively tranquil waters of the Pacific.

Amanda "Sunny" Fitzpatrick stood at the railing and watched the foaming waves as they parted in the wake of the moving ship. She had come on deck to escape the heat and to hide her tears from the others. Navy nurses were supposed to be tough, but the death of the nineteen-year-old marine corporal in her care had devastated her.

Now, in the setting sun that cast a sepia glow over the seascapes and gave an unearthly, eerie quality to the distant coral islands rising out of the sea, Sunny fought for composure before returning belowdecks. Hungrily, she gulped the clean, pure air and felt the cooling breeze, like a comforting whisper, touching her face.

From his vantage point on the bridge, Lt. Commander Kirk Singleton watched the young nurse. At first, she was indistinguishable from any other white-uniformed woman aboard ship. But then she moved, and an aureole of light encircled her, setting fire to the pale blond hair. Sunny Fitzpatrick. It could be no other.

"Take over for me, Mister Brogdon," Kirk requested, and immediately left the bridge.

As the sandy-haired officer traversed the hospital ship

that had once been the luxury liner *Lelani*, he was aware that no trace of the ship's ancestry was apparent. Her elegant staterooms had been turned into sick bays, her chandeliered dining rooms into blacked-out mess halls. And her passenger lists, once boasting the privileged scions of society, now contained only name, rank, and serial number of the wounded being transported to the base hospital in Auckland, New Zealand.

The war in the Pacific was not going well. Wake Island had fallen to the Japanese; the Dutch East Indies had been invaded; the British surrender of Singapore was imminent. And MacArthur was being pushed to the very edge of starvation as the siege against the Bataan Peninsula continued.

The roar of the ocean disguised Kirk's footsteps on deck. "Here, I thought you might need a mug-up, Fitzpatrick," he said in a gruff manner as he held out a coffee mug for Sunny.

At the sound of the familiar voice, she quickly brushed a lingering tear from her cheek and faced the ship's officer.

"Thank you, Singleton." She accepted the mug and cradled it in both hands before taking a sip.

Seeing the remnants of tears marring her almost flawless complexion, and her topaz eyes unable to hide the vast sadness, Kirk guessed the cause of her distress. Losing a patient was always hard for the men and women charged with the care of the wounded. But losing Hurdy, the little guy who had cheered the entire ship, despite his grievous wounds, had been especially difficult to reconcile.

"It wasn't your fault. Don't take it so..."

The lift of her chin warned him that she wanted no sympathy. "Isn't it strange," she interrupted, "that it's the middle of winter at home, and yet summer in this part of the world."

He took his cue from her words and responded in kind. "Not so strange, actually, when you realize we're upside down on the globe." With a sudden, teasing grin he warned,

"But enjoy this luxury sea voyage, Fitzpatrick, because it's going to be hotter than Texas chili once we reach land."

She smiled in gratitude at his feeble attempt at lightness for her sake.

The drone of a plane and the clanging of bells cut through the stillness of twilight. "Enemy approaching at five o'clock. All hands take cover."

The voice from the loudspeaker came too late. With coffee mugs flying, Kirk Singleton pushed Sunny to the deck just as the Japanese Zero dived for attack.

To the Japanese pilot, the red cross of mercy painted on the deck of the undefended hospital ship *Good Hope* merely served as a practice target, until a U.S. destroyer, escorting the vessel through Japanese infested waters, retaliated, opened fire and drove the plane away.

Getting up from his protective position, Kirk said, "That was close."

Sunny pushed herself up from the deck also, until she was almost at eye level with Kirk. "You knocked the breath out of me," she accused.

"What are you complaining about, Fitzpatrick? I saved your life, didn't I? What more do you want me to do?"

"You can recommend me for a Purple Heart."

His laughter stopped when he saw blood marring the knee of her white stocking. "Were you hit?" he demanded.

"Don't look so frightened. It was the broken coffee mug—not the Zero—that did it."

The relieved naval officer chided, "And you want a medal for your altercation with a cup of coffee?"

"No. Just warn me, Singleton. That's all I ask before you attempt to save my life another time."

Lt. Commander Kirk Singleton suddenly grinned. Sunny Fitzpatrick was braver than he thought. Yes, she was going to be all right after all.