

Dance Track
Mercedes Lackey and Larry Dixon

Dora blew her hair out of her eyes with an impatient snort and wiped sweat off her forehead. And simultaneously adjusted the timing on the engine, yelled a correction on tire selection to her tire man, and took a quick look out of the corner of her eye for her driver.

He wasn't late—yet. He liked to give her these little heart attacks by showing up literally at the last possible moment. She would, of course, give him hell, trying to sound like the crew chief that she was, and not like his mother, which she was old enough to be—

—And most certainly not like an aging lover, which half the Bugatti team and every other team assumed she was.

The fact that they weren't had no bearing on the situation. Dora had been well aware from the moment she joined Bugatti at the end of the war that her position in this part of Man's World would always be difficult. That was all right; when had she ever had an easy life?

"All right!" She pulled clear of the engine compartment, hands up and in plain sight, as she had taught all her mechanics to do. Too many men in Grand Prix racing had missing fingers from being caught in the wrong place when an engine started—but not on her team. The powerful Bugatti engine roared to life; she nodded to the mechanic in Jimmy's seat, and he floored the pedal.

She cocked her head to one side, frowning a little; then grinned and gave the mech a thumbs-up. He killed the engine, answering her grin, and popped out of the cockpit—just as Jimmy himself came swaggering up through the chaotic tangle of men and machines in the pits.

She knew he was there by the way the men's eyes suddenly moved to a point just behind and to one side of her. They never learned—or else, they never guessed how they gave themselves away. Probably the latter; they were mostly Italian, steeped in generations of presumed male superiority, and they would never even think that a woman could be more observant than they, no matter how often she proved it to them.

She pivoted before Jimmy could slap her butt, and gave him The Look. She didn't even have to say anything, it was all there in The Look.

He stopped, standing hip-shot as if he were posing for one of his famous publicity shots, his born-charmer grin countering her Look. The blue eyes that made millions of teenage girls suffer heart-palpitations peered cheerfully at Dora through his unruly blond hair. He'd grown a thatch over his eyes for his last movie, and hadn't cut it yet. He probably wouldn't, Dora reflected. His image as a rebel wasn't just an image, it was the real Jimmy.

She pulled her eyes away from his, and The Look turned to a real frown as she took in the dark ankle-length trenchcoat and the flamboyant, long silk scarf he wore.

"Out," she ordered, and watched his grin fade in surprise. "You heard me," she said when he hesitated. "You know the pit-rules. Nothing that can get caught in

machinery! God help us, that scarf could get your neck broken! I told you once, and I meant it; I don't care how many movies you've made, in here you're the Bugatti rookie-driver, you're here on probation, even if you are the best damn driver I've ever seen, and you toe the line and act like a professional. And if you think you're going to make me break my promise not to compete again by getting yourself strangled, you can think again! Now get out of here and come back when you're dressed like a driver and not some Hollywood gigolo."

She turned her back on him, and went back to the crew changing the tires, but she did not miss his surprised—and suddenly respectful—"Yes ma'am!" She also didn't miss the surprised and respectful looks on the faces of her mechanics and pit-crew. So, they didn't expect me to chew him out in public. She couldn't help but see the little nods, and the satisfaction on the men's faces. And she hid a grin of her own, as she realized what that meant. The last rumors of her protege being her lover had just gone up in smoke. No lovelorn, aging female would lay into her young lover that way in public. And no young stud would put up with that kind of treatment from a woman, young or old, unless the only position she held in his life was as respected mentor.

She raised her chin aggressively, and raked her crew with her stern gaze. "Come on, come on, pick it up," she said, echoing every other crew chief here in the pits. "We're running a race here, not an ice cream social! Move it!"

"Ready, Miz Duncan," said a sober voice at her shoulder. She turned to see Jimmy was back already, having ditched the coat and scarf for the racing suit of her own design. His helmet tucked under one arm, he waited while she looked him over critically. "Nothing binding?" she asked, inspecting every visible seam and wrinkle. It was as fireproof as modern technology could make it, asbestos fabric over cotton, covering the driver from neck to ankle. Thick asbestos boots covered his feet, which would be under the engine compartment. It would be hotter than all the fires of hell in there, but Jimmy would be cooler than most of the other drivers, who shunned her innovations in favor of jerseys and heavy canvas pants.

And he would be safer than she had been, who'd won the French Grand Prix in '48 in a leotard and tights.

And if she could have put an air-conditioner in there, she would have. Temperatures in the cockpit ran over 120 Fahrenheit while the car was moving—worse when it idled. In the summer, and at those temperatures, strange things started to happen to a driver's brain. Heat exhaustion and the dangerous state leading up to it had probably caused more crashes than anyone wanted to admit.

She finished her inspection and gave him the nod; he clapped his helmet on—a full head helmet, not just an elaborate leather cap, but one with a face-plate—and strolled over to his car, beginning his own inspection.

Just as she had taught him.

While the mechanics briefed him on the Bugatti's latest quirks—and Grand Prix racers always developed new quirks, at least a dozen for each race, not counting intended modifications—she took a moment to survey the nearest crews. To her right, Ferrari and Lola; to her left, Porsche and Mercedes.

Nothing to show that this was Wisconsin and not Italy or Monte Carlo. Nothing here

at the track, that is. She had to admit that it was a relief being back in the U.S.; not even the passing of a decade had erased all the scars the War had put on the face of Europe. And there were those who thought that reviving the Grand Prix circuit in '46 had been both frivolous and ill-considered in light of all that Europe had suffered.

Well, those people didn't have to invest their money, their time, or their expertise in racing. The announcement that the Indianapolis 500 would be held in 1946 had given those behind the project the incentive they needed to get the plans off the drawing board and into action. The Prince in Monaco had helped immeasurably by offering to host the first race. Monte Carlo had not suffered as much damage as some of the other capitals, and it was a neutral enough spot to lure even the Germans there.

She shook herself mentally. Woolgathering again; it was a good thing she was out of the cockpit and on the sidelines, if she was going to let her thoughts drift like that.

Jimmy nodded understanding as the steering-specialist made little wiggling motions with his hand. Dora cast another glance up and down pit row, then looked down at the hands of her watch. Time.

She signaled to the crew, who began to push the car into its appointed slot in line. This would be a true Le Mans start; drivers sprinting to their cars on foot and bullying through the pack, jockeying for position right from the beginning. In a way, she would miss it if they went to an Indy-type start; with so little momentum, crashes at the beginning of the race were seldom serious—but when they were, they were devastating. And there were plenty of promising contenders taken out right there in the first four or five hundred yards.

She trotted alongside Jimmy as they made their way to the starting line. "All right, now listen to me: save the engine, save the tires. You have a long race ahead of you. We've got a double whammy on us," she warned. "Remember, a lot of drivers have it in for Bugatti because of me—and the Europeans aren't really thrilled with the Bugatti preference for Yankee drivers. The other thing: this is Ford country; Ford is fielding six cars in the factory team alone. None of the other chiefs I've talked to know any of the drivers personally, which tells me they're in Ford's back pocket."

"Which means they might drive as a team instead of solo?" Jimmy hazarded shrewdly. "Huh. That could be trouble. Three cars could run a rolling roadblock."

"We've worked on the engine since the trials, and there's another twenty horse there," she added. "It's just the way you like it: light, fast, and all the power you need. If I were you, I'd use that moxie early, get yourself placed up in the pack, then lay off and see what the rest do."

She slowed as they neared driver-only territory; he waved acknowledgment that he had heard her, and trotted on alone. She went back to the pits; the beginning of the race really mattered only in that he made it through the crush at the beginning, and got in a little ahead of the pack. That was one reason why she had given over the cockpit to a younger driver; she was getting too old for those sprints and leaps. Places where she'd hurt herself as a dancer were starting to remind her that she was forty-five years old now. Let Jimmy race to the car and fling himself into it, he was only twenty-five.

The view from her end of pit-row wasn't very good, but she could see the start if she

stood on the concrete fire-wall. One of the men steadied her; Tonio, who had been with her since she was the driver. She handed her clipboard down to him, then noticed a stranger in their pit, wearing the appropriate pass around his neck. She was going to say something, but just then the drivers on the line crouched in preparation for the starting gun, and her attention went back to them.

The gun went off; Jimmy leapt for his car like an Olympic racer, vaulting into it in a way that made her simultaneously sigh with envy and wince. The Bugatti kicked over like a champ; Jimmy used every horse under that hood to bully his way through the exhaust-choked air to the front of the pack, taking an outside position. Just like she'd taught him.

The cars pulled out of sight, and she jumped down off the wall. The stranger was still there—and the pits were for the first time today, quiet. They would not be that way for long, as damaged or empty cars staggered into the hands of their keepers, but they were for the moment, and the silence impacted the ears as the silence between incoming artillery barrages had—

She headed for the stranger—but he was heading for her. "Miss Duncan?" he said quickly. "Jim got me this pit pass—he came over to see us do *Death of a Salesman* last night and when he came back-stage and found out I race too, he got me the pass and told me to check in with you."

"What kind of racing?" she asked cautiously. It would be just like Jimmy to pal around with some kid just because he was an up-and-coming actor and saddle her with someone who didn't know when to get the hell out of the way.

"Dirt-track, mostly," he said modestly, then quoted her credentials that made her raise her eyebrow. "I'll stay out of the way."

The kid had an open, handsome face, and another set of killer blue eyes—and the hand that shook hers was firm and confident. She decided in his favor.

"Do that," she told him. "Unless there's a fire—tell you what, you think you can put up with hauling one of those around for the rest of the race?" She pointed at the rack of heavy fire-bottles behind the fire-wall, and he nodded. "All right; get yourself one of those and watch our pit, Porsche, and Ferrari. That's the cost of you being in here. If there's a fire in any of 'em, deal with it." Since the crews had other things on their minds—and couldn't afford to hang extinguishers around their necks—this kid might be the first one on the spot.

"Think you can handle that—what is your name, anyway?"

"Paul," he said, diffidently. "Yeah, I can handle that. Thanks, Miss Duncan."

"Dora," she replied automatically, as she caught the whine of approaching engines. She lost all interest in the kid for a moment as she strained to see who was in front.

It was Lola, but the car was already in trouble. She heard a tell-tale rattle deep in, and winced as the leaders roared by—

Jimmy was in the first ten; that was all that mattered, that, and his first-lap time. She glanced at Fillipe, who had the stop-watch; he gave her a thumbs-up and bent to his

clipboard to make notes, as he would for almost every lap. She let out her breath in a sigh.

"Miss Duncan, how did you get into racing?"

She had forgotten the kid but he was still there—as he had promised, out of the way, but still within talking distance.

She shook her head, a rueful smile on her lips. "Glory. How fleeting fame. Retire, and no one's ever heard of you—"

"Oh, I know all about the Grand Prix wins," the kid said hastily. "I just wanted to know why you stopped dancing. Jimmy told me you were kind of a—big thing in Europe. It doesn't seem like a natural approach to racing. I mean, Josephine Baker didn't go into racing."

She chuckled at being compared to the infamous cabaret dancer, but no one had ever asked her the question in quite that way. "A couple of reasons," she replied, thoughtfully. "The biggest one is that my dingbat brother was a better dancer than I ever was. I figured that the world only needed one crazy dancing Duncan preaching Greek revival and naturalism. And really, Ruth St. Denis and Agnes de Mille were doing what I would have been doing. Agnes was doing more; she was putting decent dancing into motion pictures, where millions of little children would see it. When I think about it, I don't think Isadora Duncan would have made any earthshaking contributions to dancing." Then she gave him her famous impish smile, the one that peeled twenty years off of her. "On the other hand, every Grand Prix driver out there does the 'Duncan dive' to hit the cockpit. And they are starting to wear the driving suits I've been working on. So I've done that much for racing."

The kid nodded; he started to ask something else, but the scream of approaching engines made him shake his head before she held up her hand.

Jimmy was still there, still within striking distance of the leaders. But there was trouble developing—because the Ford drivers were doing just what Dora had feared they would do. They were driving as a team—in two formations of three cars each. Quite enough to block. Illegal as hell, but only if the race officials caught on and they could get someone on the Ford team to spill the beans. Obvious as it might be, the worst the drivers would get would be fines, unless someone fessed up that it was premeditated—then the whole team could be disqualified.

Illegal as hell, and more than illegal—dangerous. Dora bit her lip, wondering if they really knew just how dangerous.

Halfway through the race, and already the kid had more than earned his pit-pass. Porsche was out, bullied into the wall by the Ford flying-wedge, in a crash that sent the driver to the hospital. Ferrari was out too, victim of the same crash; both their LMCs had taken shrapnel that had nicked fuel-lines. Thank God Paul'd been close to the pits when the leaking fuel caught fire. The Ferrari had come in trailing a tail of fire and smoke and the kid was right in there, the first one on the scene with his fire-bottle, foaming the driver down first then going under the car with the nozzle. He'd probably prevented a worse fire—And now the alliances in the pits had undergone an

abrupt shift. It was now the Europeans and the independents against the Ford monolith. Porsche and Ferrari had just come to her—her, who Porsche had never been willing to give the time of day!—offering whatever they had left. "Somehow" the race officials were being incredibly blind to the illegal moves Ford was pulling.

Then again . . . how close was Detroit to Wisconsin?

It had happened before, and would happen again, for as long as businessmen made money on sport. All the post-race sanctions in the world weren't going to help that driver in the hospital, and no fines would change the outcome of the inevitable crashes.

The sad, charred hulk of the Ferrari had been towed, its once-proud red paint blistered and cracked; the pit crew was dejectedly cleaning up the oil and foam.

On the track, Jimmy still held his position, despite two attempts by one of the Ford wedges to shove him out of the way. That was the advantage of a vehicle like the Bugatti, as she and the engineers had designed it for him. The handling left something to be desired, at least so far as she was concerned, but it was Jimmy's kind of car. Like the 550 Porsche he drove for pleasure now, that he used to drive in races, she'd built it for speed. "Point and squirt," was how she often put it, dryly. Point it in the direction you wanted to go, and let the horses do the work.

The same thing seemed to be passing through Paul's mind, as he watched Jimmy scream by, accelerating out of another attempt by Ford to pin him behind their wedge. He shook his head, and Dora elbowed him.

"You don't approve?" she asked.

"It's not that," he said, as if carefully choosing his words. "It's just not my kind of driving. I like handling; I like to slip through the pack like—like I was a fish and they were the water. Or I was dancing on the track—"

She had to smile. "Are you quoting that, or did you not know that was how they described my French and Monte Carlo Grand Prix wins?"

His eyes widened. "I didn't know—" he stammered, blushing. "Honest! I—"

She patted his shoulder, maternally. "That's fine, Paul. It's a natural analogy. Although I bet you don't know where I got my training."

He grinned. "Bet I do! Dodging bombs! I read you were an ambulance driver in Italy during the war. Is that when you met Ettore Bugatti?"

She nodded, absently, her attention on the cars roaring by. Was there a faint sound of strain in her engine? For a moment her nerves chilled.

But no, it was just another acceleration; a little one, just enough to blow Jimmy around the curve ahead of the Mercedes.

Her immediate reaction was annoyance; he shouldn't have had to power his way out of that, he should have been able to drive his way out. He was putting more stress on the engine than she was happy with.

Then she mentally slapped her own hand. She wasn't the driver, he was.

But now she knew how Ettore Bugatti felt when she took the wheel in that first Monte Carlo Grand Prix.

"You know, Bugatti was one of my passengers," she said, thinking aloud, without looking to see if Paul was listening. "He was with the Resistance in the Italian Alps. You had to be as much a mechanic as a driver, those ambulances were falling apart half the time, and he saw me doing both before I got him to the field hospital."

Sometimes, she woke up in the middle of the night, hearing the bombs falling, the screams of the attack-fighters strafing the road— Seeing the road disintegrate in a flash of fire and smoke behind her, in front of her; hearing the moans of the wounded in her battered converted bread-truck.

All too well, she remembered those frantic moments when getting the ambulance moving meant getting herself and her wounded passengers out of there before the fighter-planes came back. And for a moment, she heard those planes— No, it was the cars returning. She shook her head to free it of unwanted memories. She had never lost a passenger, or a truck, although it had been a near thing more times than she cared to count. Whenever the memories came between her and a quiet sleep, she told herself that—and reminded herself why she had volunteered in the first place.

Because her brother, the darling of the Metaphysical set, was hiding from the draft at home by remaining in England among the blue-haired old ladies and balletomanes who he charmed. Because, since they would not accept her as a combatant, she enlisted as a noncombatant.

Some noncombatant. She had seen more fire than most who were on the front lines.

Bugatti had been sufficiently impressed by her pluck and skill to make her an offer.

"When this is over, if you want a job, come to me."

Perhaps he had meant a secretarial job. She had shown up at the decimated Bugatti works, with its "EB" sign in front cracked down the middle, and offered herself as a mechanic. And Bugatti, faced with a dearth of men who were able-bodied, never mind experienced, had taken her on out of desperation.

"It was kind of a fluke, getting to be Bugatti's driver," she continued, noting absently that Paul was listening intently. "The driver for that first Grand Prix had broken an ankle, right at starting-lineup, and I was the only one on the team that could make the sprint for the car!"

Paul chuckled, and it had been funny. Everyone else was either too old, or had war-injuries that would slow them down. So she had grabbed the racing-helmet before anyone could think to object and had taken the man's place. In her anonymous coverall, it was entirely possible none of the officials had even noticed her sex.

She had made the first of her famous "Duncan dives" into the cockpit; a modified grand jete that landed her on the seat, with a twist and bounce down into the cockpit itself.

"I can still hear that fellow on the bullhorn—there was no announcer's booth, no loudspeaker system—" She chuckled again. "And coming in third—Isadora Duncan?"

The next race, there had been no doubt at all of her sex. She had nearly died of heat-stroke behind that powerful engine, and she had been shocked at what that had done to her judgment and reflexes. So this time, she had worn one of her old dancing costumes, a thick cotton leotard and tights—worn inside-out, so that the seams would not rub or abrade her.

The other drivers had been so astounded that she had gotten nearly a two-second lead on the rest of them in the sprint—and two seconds in a race meant a quarter mile.

For her third race, she had been forbidden to wear the leotard, but by then she had come up with an alternative; almost as form-fitting, and enough to cause a stir. And that had been in France, of course, and the French had been amused by her audacity. "La Belle Isadora" had her own impromptu fanclub, who showed up at the race with noisemakers and banners.

Perhaps that had been the incentive she needed, for that had been her first win. She had routinely placed in the first three, and had taken home to Bugatti a fair share of first-place trophies. The other drivers might have been displeased, but they could not argue with success.

Bugatti had been overjoyed, and he had continuously modified his racing vehicles to Isadora's specifications: lighter, a little smaller than the norm, with superb handling. And as a result of Isadora's win, the Bugatti reputation had made for many, many sales of sportscars in the speed-hungry, currency-rich American market. And it did not hurt that his prize driver was an attractive, American lady.

But in 1953 she had known that she would have to retire, and soon. She was slowing down—and more importantly, so were her reflexes. That was when she had begun searching for a protege, someone she could groom to take her place when she took over the retiring crew-chief's position.

She had found it in an unlikely place: Hollywood. And in an unlikely person, a teenage heartthrob, a young, hard-living actor. But she had not seen him first on the silver screen; she had seen him racing, behind the wheel of his treasured silver Porsche.

He had been torn by indecision, although he made time for her coaching and logged a fair amount of time in Bugatti racing machines. She and the retiring crew chief worked on design changes to suit his style of driving to help lure him. But it was Hollywood itself that forced his choice.

When a near-fatality on a lonely California highway left his Porsche a wreck, his studio issued an ultimatum. Quit driving, or tear up your contract. We don't cast corpses.

He tore up his contract, took the exec's pipe from his mouth, stuffed the scraps in the pipe, slammed it down on the desk and said "Smoke it." He bought a ticket for Italy the same day.

"Miss Duncan?" Paul broke into her thoughts. "We have company."

She turned, to see the crew-chiefs of Ferrari, Mercedes, Lola, and a dozen more approaching. Her first thought was—What have we done now?

But it was not what she had done, nor her crew, nor even Jimmy.

It was what Ford had done.

"Isadora," said Paul LeMond, the Ferrari crew-chief, who had evidently been appointed spokesman, "We need your help."

Ten years of fighting her way through this man's world, with no support from anyone except Bugatti and a few of her crew had left her unprepared for such a statement.

She simply stared at them, while they laid out their idea.

This would be the last pit-stop before the finish, and Dora was frankly not certain how Jimmy was going to take this. But she leaned down into the cockpit where she would not be overheard and shouted the unthinkable into his ear over the roar of his engine. How the crews of every other team still on the track were fed up with the performance of the Ford drivers—and well they should be, with ten multi-car wrecks leaving behind ruined vehicles and drivers in hospital. The fact that one of those wrecks had included one of the Ford three-car flying wedges had not been good enough.

"So if Ford is going to play footsie with the rules, so are we," she shouted. "They think you're the best driver on the track, Jimmy. The only one good enough to beat cheaters. So every other driver on the track's been given orders to block for you, or let you pass."

She couldn't see Jimmy's expression behind the faceplate, but she did see the muscles in his jaw tense. "So they're going to just give me the win?" he shouted back.

That was not how Jimmy wanted his first Grand Prix to end—and she didn't blame him.

"Jimmy—they decided you're the best out there! Not only your peers, but mine! Are you going to throw that kind of vote away?" It was the only way she would win this argument, she sensed it. And she sensed as his mood turned to grudging agreement. "All right," he said finally. "But you tell them this—" She rapped him on the top of the helmet. "No, you listen. They said to tell you that if you get by Ford early enough, they're going to do the same for Giorgio with the old Ferrari and Peter for Citroen. And as many more as they can squeeze by."

She sensed his mood lighten again, although he didn't answer. But by then the crew was done, and she stood back as he roared back out onto the track.

When he took the track, there were ten laps to go—but five went by without anyone being able to force a break for Jimmy, not even when the Ford wedge lapped slower cars. She had to admit that she had seldom seen smoother driving, but it was making her blood boil to watch Jimmy coming up behind them, and being forced to hold his place.

Three laps to go, and there were two more cars wrecked, one of them from Citroen. Two laps. One.

Flag lap.

Suddenly, on the back stretch, an opening, as one of the Ford drivers tired and backed off a little. And Jimmy went straight for it.

Dora was on the top of the fire-wall, without realizing she had jumped up there, screaming at the top of her lungs, with half the crew beside her. Ford tried to close up the wedge, but it was too late.

Now it was just Jimmy and the lead Ford, neck and neck—down the backstretch, through the chicane, then on the home run for the finish line.

Dora heard his engine howling; heard strain that hadn't been there before. Surely if she heard it, so would he. He should have saved the engine early on—if he pushed it, he'd blow the engine, he had to know that—

He pushed it. She heard him drop a gear, heard the engine scream in protest—

And watched the narrow-bodied, lithe steel Bugatti surge across the finish-line a bare nose ahead of the Ford, engine afire and trailing a stream of flame and smoke that looked for all the world like a victory banner.

Dora was the first to reach him, before he'd even gotten out of the car. While firefighters doused the vehicle with impartial generosity, she reached down and yanked off his helmet.

She seized both his ears and gave him the kind of kiss only the notorious Isadora Duncan, toast of two continents, could have delivered—a kiss with every year of her considerable amatory experience behind it.

"That's for the win," she said, as he sat there, breathless, mouth agape and for once completely without any kind of response.

Then she grasped his shoulders and shook him until his teeth rattled.

"And that's for blowing up my engine, you idiot!" she screamed into his face.

By then, the crowd was on him, hauling him bodily out of the car and hoisting him up on their shoulders to ride to the winner's circle.

Dora saw to it that young Paul was part of that privileged party, as a reward for his fire-fighting and his listening. And when the trophy had been presented and the pictures were all taken, she made sure he got up to the front.

Jimmy recognized him, as Jimmy would, being the kind of man he was. "Hey!" he said, as the Race Queen hung on his arm and people thrust champagne bottles at him, "You made it!"

Paul grinned, shyly. Dora felt pleased for him, as he shoved the pass and a pen at Jimmy. "Listen, I know it's awful being asked—"

"Awful? Hell no!" Jimmy grabbed the pen and pass. "Have you made up your mind about what you want to do yet? Acting, or whatever?"

Paul shook his head, and Dora noticed then what she should have noticed earlier—that his bright blue eyes and Jimmy's were very similar. And if he isn't a heartbreaker yet, she thought wryly, he will be.

"I still don't know," he said.

"Tell you what," Jimmy said, pausing a moment to kiss another beauty queen for the camera, "you make a pile of money in the movies, then go into racing. Get a good mentor like Dora."

And then he finished the autograph with a flourish—and handed it back to the young man.

To Paul Newman, who can be my driver when I take over the chief mechanic slot from Dora, best of luck.

And the familiar autograph, James Dean.