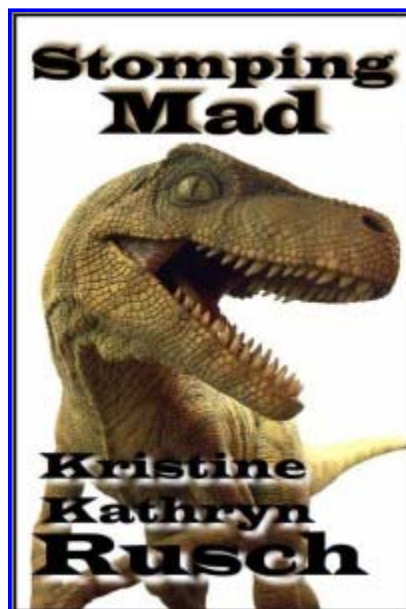


Free Fiction Monday: Stomping Mad

January 17th, 2011 | [Add a Comment](#)

When a dead body turns up at the first ever Dinocon, Secret Master of Fandom and Private Detective Spade knows just who might be behind it all: Lucinda Danielle Stanhope who calls herself the Martha Stewart of Science Fiction. Now he just has to prove it. "Stomping Mad" marks the first appearance of Spade, who along with his sidekick Paladin, is one of Rusch's most popular characters.

A story by Ellery Queen Reader's Choice winner Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Available for 99 cents on [Kindle](#), [Smashwords](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), and in other e-bookstores. And if you like this story, look for the first appearance of Spade with Paladin in "The Case of the Vanishing Boy," also available in e-book format.



Stomping Mad

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Published by WMG Publishing

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She called herself the Martha Stewart of Science Fiction, and she looked the part: Homecoming-queen pretty with a touch of maliciousness behind the eyes, a fakely tolerant acceptance of everyone fannish, and an ability to throw the best room party at any given Worldcon in any given year.

So when a body was found in her party suite, the case came to me. Folks in fandom call me the Sam Spade of Science Fiction, but I'm actually more like the Nero Wolfe: a man who prefers good food and good conversation, a man who is huge, both in his appetite and in his education. I don't go out much, except to science fiction conventions (a world in and of themselves) and to dinner with the rare comrade. I surround myself with books, computers, and televisions. I do not have orchids or an Archie Goodwin, but I do possess a sharp eye for detail and a critical understanding of the dark side of human nature.

I have, in the past, solved over a dozen cases, ranging from finding the source of a doomsday virus that threatened to shut down the world's largest fan database to discovering who had stolen the Best Artist Hugo two hours before the award ceremony. My reputation had grown during the last British Fantasy Convention

when I — an American — worked with Scotland Yard to recover a diamond worth £1,000,000 that a Big Name Fan had forgotten to put in the hotel's safe.

But I had not faced a more convoluted criminal mind until that Friday afternoon at the First Annual Jurassic Parkathon, a media convention held in Anaheim.

The convention was officially called Dinocon I because Crichton's people, or Spielberg's people, or some studio's people wouldn't give permission to use the Jurassic Park name with a non-sanctioned project. I normally don't get involved with a media con, especially one held in Anaheim, but this one had a million dollar budget and a state-of-the-art computer system, and I simply couldn't resist the challenge.

So I was in Ops with most of the folks running the con when the call came through. Ops, for those of you who've never seen one, is a hotel function room with most of the furniture removed, replaced with tables covered with computer equipment, too many chairs, and tons of print out paper. Most of the people working Ops look haggard and stressed by the time the convention starts, and many of them are ready to collapse by the time it's over. So we really didn't need to hear some security person, young by the sound of him, on the two-way radio:

"Hey, ah, we got a, um, Situation X, here."

Everyone in Ops snapped to attention. The actual term was a File X — always a pun, everything a pun — and it was only supposed to be used for an extreme emergency.

"Copy that," Doris, a muscular woman the size of Stallone, said. She headed security, and had at every major con I'd ever worked on. Security is important at sf conventions, perhaps *the* most important thing, because these cons, as most of you know, aren't your simple suit-tie-and-briefcase affair. The big conventions have three levels: the fans, most of whom dress in costume (some medieval barbarians, some Captain Kirk, some space aliens); the pros, most of whom write, act, or somehow work in the science fiction field; the dealers, most of whom sell sf paraphernalia — books, videos, posters, and the ubiquitous Bajoran earrings. Media cons had more earrings, videos, and actors; fewer books, writers, and intellectual discussions. Behind it all is the con-com, the army of people who run the entire shebang, and put out any and all fires along the way. Security deals with most of those: from regular hotel guests who are scared by the werewolf in the elevator to the teenagers who've stayed up all night playing the card game *Magic*, and who suddenly think it fun to pull the fire alarm on the second floor.

Never, in my twenty years of fandom, have we gotten a call for this kind emergency, and never have I heard a security person sound so scared.

"It's in room 4708. Can someone come here?" The security kid's voice cracked, confirming my suspicion: he was a volunteer, and he was eighteen at most.

"What's the nature of the emergency?" Doris asked.

"I don't think you want me to describe it on an open channel," the kid said.

"All right, be right there," Doris said, and left.

We mused about the "Situation" X for a moment. "Maybe," Ruth, the con chair, said, "he saw a fur bikini for the first time."

"It's the masquerade tonight," John said behind her, and we all laughed. He probably saw a costume, got scared, and decided to call it in. We'd all had that happen before.

scared, and decided to call it in. We'd all had that happen before.

“Or maybe it’s pea soup,” said Ben, and I, being most senior on the staff, groaned. I remembered that one, which had now eased into fannish legend. Just after The Exorcist came out, some fans in Baltimore held a room party and served pea soup along with the usual potato chips, cheese, and beer. After midnight, when the crowd got really drunk, someone had the brilliant idea of imitating Linda Blair in the famous vomit sequence. Of course, everyone had to do it, and by the time security arrived, a sea of pea soup was running down the corridor like the Blob without the assistance of the special effects people.

“Please, ghod, anything but that,” I said.

At that moment, the phone rang. Ruth answered, and handed it to me, her tired face filled with confusion and surprise. “It’s Doris,” she said. “For you.”

I slid my chair back and grabbed the phone, feeling as confused as Ruth looked. Doris could have radioed me. That would have been procedure. Maybe something was really up in 4708.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Spade,” she said — my fannish friends had called me Spade since I solved the first case almost twelve years before — “you’ve gotta come up here. Now.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“An absolute disaster,” she said, and hung up.

“Why didn’t she use the radio?” Ruth asked.

I shrugged. “I guess she didn’t want anyone else wandering up to the room.” I eased myself out of my special chair, the one that I insist a con-com bring to every convention if they want my services, and with a push of a button, shut down the financial files on Dinocon’s main computer. Then I made my way slowly — because I never hurry — to the fourth floor of the main convention hotel.

Dinocon had 8,000 registered attendees, and it was only Friday afternoon. The convention was scheduled to go through Sunday, and another 2,000 people were expected at the door on Saturday. Most of these folks were already crowding the halls, having conversations with friends they hadn’t seen for a while and trying to discover where that night’s parties would be held. I squeezed my way through — negotiating packed hallways was never easy for a man of my bulk — and made it to the elevator in time to nab the last spot. No one complained, though, as I squooshed people toward the back. Part of that was my con-com badge — regular con attendees knew better than to harass a person in a con-com badge — and part of it was my reputation.

“Hey, Spade!” someone yelled from the back. “You get a piece of that diamond?”

“I don’t charge for my services,” I said, in a gently chiding voice. I made my money years ago as an early employee of Microsoft. I took all my bonuses in stock, and then retired at the age of 31, not as rich as Bill Gates, but rich enough.

“He’s a gentleman detective,” someone else said from the back, and the entire elevator chuckled.

“Imagine,” I said as the doors opened on four, “a gentleman — and a scholar.”

I got off, but not before I heard more giggling as the doors closed. Fannish humor was not the stuff of stand-up routines, but it was usually full of sweet, if not always socially adept, affection.

The room 4708 was on what had been designated by the hotel as a party floor. On these floors, it was okay to have loud conversation all night, to serve beer in rooms, and to talk in the hallways. Other floors, the non-party floors, were for people who actually wanted to sleep during the con, something I hadn't done in the last thirteen conventions I had attended.

Photocopied 8"x11" signs were taped onto the wallpaper, most of them announcing bid parties for other conventions. The signs on 4708 looked professionally done on slick glossy paper. They announced the first annual Literature Con to be held in an ancient Hilton an hour outside of Manhattan. I stared at the signs for a moment, frowning. Anyone with half a brain knew that most of Dinocon's attendees weren't likely to attend a literature con, especially one held all the way across the country. But the posters had another draw besides their slick appearance.

Food.

Come to our bid party, the sign read, and dine at your heart's content. Award-winning chocolates, Lucinda's World Famous Chili, and gourmet dishes from the farthest reaches of the Solar System. Come to the party of the convention. You'll talk about it for the next three lifetimes.

Curiouser and curiouser. Lucinda was Lucinda Danielle Stanhope, also known as the Martha Stewart of Science Fiction. Lucinda hated media cons, thinking that they ruined "pure" science fiction. Pure science fiction, to her, was anything beautifully written with long treatises on science. She thought plot-driven fiction an abomination, and sf on movies and television beneath her notice.

Although she might have changed that opinion, since her current boyfriend, who had started as Science Fiction's answer to James Joyce, had gotten a job as a story consultant for a major studio. ("A guy has to make a buck," he said to me at the last Worldcon. "Besides, since *Independence Day*, everyone is hot for sf properties.")

She might have changed her opinion, but I doubted it.

I had known Lucinda for a long time. She and I had had a run-in at Con Diego (called Con Digeo by its attendees because of all the typos in the program book) several years back and I had tried, unsuccessfully, to avoid her ever since. Our conversations from that day on had consisted of only two words, uttered in passing.

Asshole, she say.

Bitch, I'd respond.

I sighed, squared my shoulders, and braced myself for the verbal onslaught as I knocked on the door.

Doris answered. She looked grim and shaky. She motioned me inside and closed the door.

The suite smelled of fresh bread, chili, and something foul, something I had never smelled before and wasn't sure I wanted to smell again. We stood in an entry that led to the bathroom on the left, a main room just before me, and a bedroom on the right. The security kid so skinny he was skeletal and a shade of green I'd never outside of a blacklight poster, leaned against a faux Louis the Fourteenth table. He had a hand over his mouth and was taking deep breaths, as if to calm his stomach.

"What is it?" I asked.

Doris pointed toward the main room. I lumbered in, cautiously, not sure what to expect. A chocolate pterodactyl hung from the ceiling and flower arrangements that looked vaguely prehistoric stood on every end-table, along with cute little origami triceratops heads. A human-sized tyrannosaurus rex made entirely

out of cheese stood on a circular mirror stand in the center of the room. Crock pots filled with chili bubbled on a table leaning against the wall dividing the main room from the bathroom.

“What —?” I started to ask again, and then I saw her.

She was sprawled on the floor, her left hand resting on the glass double doors leading out to the patio. The doors were closed. I cautiously made my way around the cheese dinosaur and the main table, still in the middle of preparations for the night’s party, and stopped near her apron-clad torso.

There was no doubt it was Lucinda. She wore a linen pantsuit beneath that apron, and in her right hand she held an apple partially julienned into a stegosaurus. It was her head that was the problem.

It had been stomped flat, crushed into unrecognizability. More gray matter than I would have expected splattered the teal carpet, mixed with more blood than I had ever seen in my life. I swallowed twice, hard, not wanting to repeat the pea soup episode and contaminate the crime scene. Then I cautiously made my way back into the foyer.

“You call the cops?” I asked.

“No!” Doris said. “They’d shut us down.”

“Damn straight they’d shut us down,” I said. “We have a murderer on the loose here.”

The kid moaned and headed toward the bathroom.

I grabbed his arm. “Uh-uh,” I said. “Puke in the public restroom. You don’t want to contaminate a crime scene.”

“Too late,” he mumbled, yanked free, and stumbled into the bathroom, kicking the door closed behind him.

“Poor kid,” Doris said. “I’m amazed he has any stomach left.”

“Listen, Doris, we gotta call the cops.” I covered my hand with my sleeve and reached for the black rotary dial on the faux Louis the Fourteenth.

Doris put her hand on mine, forcing the receiver down. “It’s Friday afternoon,” she said. “Think about what that means.”

Eight thousand attendees, all of whom would demand refunds. The hotel, which would sue for breach of contract. The reputation, which would shut down all Los Angeles area conventions for the foreseeable future, not to mention all media cons, not to mention all conventions held in this hotel chain forever.

Millions of dollars, all because Lucinda made someone stomping mad.

“Can’t we at least wait until tomorrow?” Doris asked.

Retching sounds echoed from the bathroom. My stomach rolled in sympathy.

“Tomorrow?” I asked. “Don’t you remember the party signs that are up all over this convention. For tonight? In this room?”

“Can’t we change them to tomorrow night?” she asked. “Then we won’t have to refund, and we won’t be in breach of contract.”

But we would still have the reputation problem, along with another one. “Tampering with a crime scene is illegal, Doris,” I said softly.

“Can’t you solve this?” she asked. “Can’t you solve this before the cops get here?”

“I’ve never done a murder investigation before, Doris,” I said.

“*Please*,” she asked. “If we can give them a suspect, they won’t shut us down, and Ruth and I can handle the PR problem, at least long enough to save the con.”

“You don’t care that a woman has been trampled in her own hotel room?”

Doris crossed her muscular arms. “You really need to ask me that, Spade? I wouldn’t be so rude as to ask you.”

She could have, though. Because I was upset. Lucinda had her points. She made a mean chocolate soufflé, and she knew more about fannish foods than anyone I had ever met. She also had her moments: the charity auction she ran for literacy at Orycon in the early ‘90s brought in \$5,000 more than usual because she browbeat the attendees into spending more money. And she got them to do it by having them buy signed books.

Sometimes I found myself in complete agreement with Lucinda’s arguments.

And that terrified me.

I stared at Doris.

“Will you help us?” she asked.

I sighed. “I won’t tamper with the crime scene, and I will meet with the police when they arrive. You will call them from this room and you will make sure that no one else enters here. You’ll also keep the kid from talking to anyone but me. If I happen to solve this thing before the police arrive, fine. But I won’t go any farther than that. I’m not going to let some murderer run loose because you want to hold a media con honoring one of the lamest movies of all time.”

“The special effects were cool.” The kid had opened the door to the bathroom. He was now a chalk white.

“But the plot sucked,” I said. Then I nodded at Doris. “Call. I’m going to snoop a bit. And don’t leave until I tell you to. Got that?”

She nodded and reached for the phone. I stopped her. “Cover your hands with your sleeves. And don’t touch anything besides that receiver.”

She glared at me, but followed my instructions. I prowled into the bedroom, deciding to talk to the kid after his breath cleared up.

Lucinda, not surprisingly, was a neat freak. She had arrived and unpacked, her clothing hanging on her hangers in the walk-in closet. Each item was separated by tissue paper, and her hats were in boxes on the shelf above. Her shoes were lined up below in neat little rows beneath the matching clothes. She had two wigs on the dressing table, one studded with little plastic dinosaurs — the clear brightly colored kind that bartenders used to put in drinks in the mid-sixties. A silver lamé dress hung from the plant hook in the ceiling. Lucinda had planned to go all out on this party, and it surprised me. She had to be doing a favor for someone. Media cons were beneath her — and while she enjoyed fannish cooking, she hated fannish clothing.

I got back into the foyer as Doris hung up the phone. “I didn’t tell them it was a murder,” she said.

I mentally shook my head. That would be her problem when the cops arrived. It would be better for all of us if I had some idea what had happened.

“Okay, kid,” I said to the security boy, “come into my office and talk to me. And don’t touch anything.”

The kid’s color still hadn’t returned. He followed me into Lucinda’s bedroom and started to close the door.

“Don’t touch,” I said. We went deep into the bowels of the room, and stopped near the bed. I knew that Doris would have trouble hearing us from this spot because I had had trouble hearing her on the phone.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Chad,” he said. I raised a single eyebrow, Spocklike. I had never met a kid who worked con security named Chad. Or at least, a kid who worked con security who would admit to being named Chad.

“Okay,” I said, “I need to know: what made you come to this room in the first place?”

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. That stomach of his was amazingly weak. “I was by the flyer table — that was my post — when these fans came down the stairs and told me they’d heard a huge pounding on the fourth floor. They took me to their room on three and I heard it too, like something really heavy was going to crash through the floor. Then I came up here. The door was open, and I let myself in. It was really quiet. I called out to see if anyone was here, and then I saw the food. I went in to grab a snack and —”

He burped, then covered his mouth, swallowing hard. “Sorry,” he said.

“It’s all right,” I said. “Do you know who these fans were?”

“Not by name,” he said. “But they have the room below this one.”

And were probably preparing for another party since the room below also had to be a suite. I rubbed my chin in proper detective fashion. I had a conundrum. I need to talk to those fans, but I didn’t want to leave Doris alone in the room. Nor did I want anyone else to know what had happened to Lucinda.

Then I realized it didn’t matter. Doris had been in the room without me already. I had investigated, and I knew how things looked. I had seen everything but the bathroom, and that could be remedied.

I took the kid back to the foyer. “Wait here,” I said, and peered into the bathroom. The kid had already contaminated the crime scene — several times — but there didn’t seem to be much to see. The bathtub was still maid-spotless and the counter had Lucinda’s make-up and nothing else. The toilet seat was up, one of the towels was askew, and otherwise everything looked fine. It didn’t even smell as bad as I thought it would.

“Okay,” I said as I emerged. “Let’s find those fans. You wait here, Doris, and don’t touch anything.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, looking faintly annoyed at the suggestion.

The kid and I slipped into the hallway. The con was filling up. Two women wearing belly dancer skirts and midriff tops, conversed about the proper navel jewel. Five teenage boys compared tattoos. Three grown men, in Klingon boots and armor, adjusted each other’s forehead ridges.

The kid and I took the stairs.

The third floor was filled with people in dinosaur costumes. Some were cheap Halloween masks, while others were full-bore papier-mâché or plastic. The costumes looked heavy, they looked hot, and they smelled of glue. I stared at them, mostly at the feet, wondering what kind of pressure a person would need to drive those hard plastic soles through a skull and crush it.

Then we were in front of 3708. The kid knocked on the door. His hand was shaking.

It was opened by a slender woman whose black hair formed perfect Louisa May Alcott ringlets around her face. She wore a lavender satin shirt with purple satin pants, and the outfit somehow looked perfect on her. Her convention badge was clipped to a tiny piece of cardboard inside her shirt's high pocket, so as not to ruin the satin.

"Hi," she said, looking a bit confused.

"Security," the kid said, glancing at me. "Remember? You asked about the big stomping?"

"Oh, yeah." She was staring at me. Her eyes were lavender, like the shirt. I'd never seen eyes like that in person before. Only in photographs of Elizabeth Taylor. "Who're you?"

"I'm from Ops," I said. "Mind if we come in?"

"Why?" She was asking the kid.

"Because when I went upstairs," he said, "I found —"

I kicked him. He shut up.

"He found that he had a few more questions to ask you," I said. "Mind if we come in."

"No," she said. "I guess not."

She got out of our way, and we stepped into the foyer. It exactly matched the suite above, only here the carpet was brown. Two men sat in the suite's living room. They looked vaguely familiar. They stood as they saw us come in.

"Something wrong?" the first one asked.

He was tall and muscular — those fakey kind of muscles that come from too much health club, and too much low-fat food. His shirt was unbuttoned below the navel, revealing a washboard stomach, and his bare feet looked manicured. His companion wore ripped jeans and a *Star Trek* t-shirt, but unless I missed my guess, his hair had been permed.

Interesting look, for fans. It looked a little too Hollywood, a little too put together, for my tastes. Maybe these folks were slumming.

"You guys with the convention?" I asked.

"What's this all about?" T-Shirt asked. He had his hands on his hips. Same fakey muscles, and he didn't look as if he had ever cracked a book. But, I reminded myself, this was a media con. Folks here didn't have to crack books, even though most of them did.

"Of course we're with the convention," the woman said, and tugged gently on her badge as if to prove it.

"What's your interest?" I asked. "Filking?"

“Excuse me,” Manicured asked. His face flamed and he looked insulted.

“Fill-king,” the kid said, “not fucking.”

Interesting comment, I thought, but I didn’t look at him. “Pipe down, Chad,” I said. “What are you guys doing at the con?”

“Anyone can come,” the woman said, apparently realizing that my questions had more importance than the guys were giving them credit for. “Right?”

“Of course,” I said, “but usually people have special reasons for attending. What are yours?”

“We like dinosaurs,” T-Shirt said.

“Fascinating,” I said in my best Spock voice. No one laughed, even though most fans usually did. My best Spock voice was pretty damn good. “So what’s your favorite dinosaur? A plugosaurus or a brontodacdyl?”

“All of ’em,” T-Shirt said.

“Hmmm,” I said. “Hear you had some noise problems.”

“Yeah, man, sounded like weird pounding upstairs,” Manicured said. “Like someone was trying to punch a hole in the floor.”

“Sounds serious,” I said. “Will someone move that chair over here?” I pointed to a square wooden chair that seemed to be the sturdiest thing in the room. T-Shirt moved the chair to the place I pointed to, right next to the balcony doors.

“Spot me, Chad, will you?” I asked as I climbed up.

“Ah, um, ah, you might want me to do that,” he said.

“No need,” I said, even though the chair was groaning under my weight. I reached up and removed the ceiling panel. Gobs of dust and dirt rained on me, and I had to clear a spider web, but after that I had a pretty good glimpse of the space between the ceiling and the floor above.

“Looks normal,” I said, and to my surprise, it did. I put the tile back. “You guys are safe.”

“That’s it?” the woman asked. “That’s all? It sounded wretched up there.”

“It was,” Chad said. I braced myself on his shoulder and squeezed as I got down. It shut him up again.

“That’s it,” I said cheerfully. “I hope you have a good con.”

“Ah, thanks,” T-Shirt said. He was frowning at me.

The kid and I left. The dino costumes flooded the hall. The newer ones looked even more realistic than the earlier ones. Especially the Spielbergian velociraptors. All terrifyingly icky except for the guy wearing blue jeans and a tie-dye brontosaurus head. And the inevitable tot dressed as Barney.

One glance at the elevator told me we weren’t going back to the fourth floor that way. Too crowded. It also meant the cops wouldn’t come up very quickly when they arrived.

“Where to now?” the kid asked.

I didn't answer. I was feeling pretty annoyed with him. Pretty annoyed with the whole thing, really. I wanted to get back to my Ops computer with its lovely numbers and forget I had ever gotten involved with this detecting business.

Even if I was good at it.

We took the stairs and I was puffing by the time we reached the fourth floor. I hadn't had this much exercise in weeks. And I was moving faster than I liked.

Most of the dino costumes were on the third floor. Regular con-goers littered the fourth. None of them looked like the three ringers downstairs.

I shave-and-a-haircut knocked on 4708. Doris answered immediately. "What took you so long?"

I didn't answer. As I came in, I asked, "Did Lucinda know I was coming to Dinocon?"

"How should I know?" Doris asked.

I glared at her.

She sighed, exasperated. "Probably. If she was looking. You would have been hard to miss since your name was in the con-com listing in all the progress reports. Why?"

I had my suspicions. I made my way back into the suite's main room.

"Hey!" the kid said. "What're you doing?"

His voice had gotten increasingly shrill. I ignored him. I made my way to the body, and, just as I remembered, the floor didn't sag under my considerable weight.

I knelt beside the body. The gray matter and blood were drying in a perfect arch.

"Hey!" the kid yelled. "You said no tampering."

"Grab him, Doris," I said through my teeth. He was getting on my nerves. This whole thing was.

I grabbed the right wrist, dislodging the julienned stegosaurus, and felt — plastic. Soft, lifelike, fake plastic.

"Bitch," I mumbled. I half expected the crushed dummy to mumble "asshole" in return. Then, louder, I said, "Doris, did you call 911?"

She didn't answer. I turned. She was frowning at me.

"Doris?"

She flushed. "No," she said. "I called the regular line. I wanted to give you as much time as possible."

Her caution had worked to our advantage. "Call and cancel," I said. "Then break that kid's arm if he doesn't tell you where Lucinda is."

"Lucinda —!"

"Just do it." First time I'd ever understood the sense of a Nike ad.

She twisted the kid's arm up behind his back. Within seconds, he was screaming, "Executive Suite! Executive Suite!"

I got up and walked over to him. "Key," I said.

He handed me a specially marked executive floor key. "Come on, Doris," I said. "Keep a good grip on this kid and commandeer us an elevator."

She did exactly as she was told.

On the way up, I explained the whole thing, and the kid wisely said nothing, confirming all my suspicions. I was trying to contain my anger, because this thing had just become personal.

And to think I would have mourned the bitch if that had truly been her on the floor below.

You see, the plan was simple: the execution was hard. Lucky for Lucinda that her boyfriend had his new job in Hollywood and even luckier for her that most special effects guys are also sf nerds. Ironic that she needed media people to tamper with a media con. But Lucinda had always been a bit dim when it came to irony.

And, apparently, detail, at least non-food related detail.

First there was the fannish clothing. No matter what kind of theme party Lucinda gave, she never, ever dressed in fannish clothes. No wigs decorated with little plastic dinosaurs, no silver lamé dress. She might have consented to work a media con, but she would never have given up her stylishly proper clothing. She planned the perfect media party, all right, down to the clothes, forgetting that she would never, ever wear those clothes because, of course, she didn't plan to.

But those wasn't the only detail that bothered me. The three "fans" on the floor below had been extras in a straight-to-video sf release that I'd been watching at home a few nights before the con. I would have made them as non-skiffy folk anyway. All science fiction fans — media and lit alike — know the difference between a real dinosaur and a made-up one.

And then there was Chad, clearly another actor for hire. Except he overdid the vomit bit, and the bathroom smelled as if the maid had just left. Lucinda probably hadn't counted on the strength of my sniffer.

But she had counted on me. In fact, I had been the center of her plan. Without me, it wouldn't have worked. She knew that I knew better than to tamper with a crime scene, no matter how great the temptation. She knew that I had a healthy respect for the authorities and that I would insist on cops being present.

And she knew that the cops would see this for the hoax it was. She would appear at the right moment, blame the convention for overreacting to her little party, piss off the cops just enough to get the whole con shut down. The hotel chain would have been angry, the attendees would have demanded refunds, and the whole cascade effect that Doris had foreseen when she first saw that body would have occurred. Media cons, not just in LA, but all over the country would have suffered, and possibly died.

Lucinda's little stunt would have caused more damage than the murder. It was sabotage, served cold.

When we reached the executive suite, Doris made the kid open the door. Lucinda saw him, stood up, and cooed. She was dressed for her act in a white sheath that accented her lightly tanned skin and golden hair.

When she saw us, her eyes widened.

“You bitch,” Doris said, blowing my line and letting go of the kid. He started to back away, but I shoved him forward and closed the door behind us.

“Back off, Doris,” I said. “She’s mine. There won’t be any cops, Lucinda. You won’t ruin this convention.”

“I’m going to see that you’re banned from cons forever. I’m going to make sure that your name is taken out of the Fannish Directory. I’m going to —”

“For what? For a little party I planned to throw for some friends?” Lucinda asked. “Don’t you think it rather cute? I do.”

“You —”

Doris lunged for her, and I caught her, staggering a bit under her power. The kid bee-lined for the bathroom, fear making his intentions real this time.

“Go to Ops,” I said to Doris. “Tell them everything is fine. I can take it from here.”

“I’m going to get you,” Doris said, but she listened to me. She knew as well as I did that strange things happened at sf conventions, and that there was no proving malicious intent here.

Knowing about it was something else.

“Misunderstandings are so tragic, Doris,” Lucinda said, blinking her blue eyes guilelessly.

Doris growled and disappeared out the door. I stood in front of Lucinda. “Media cons aren’t your style.”

She smiled. It was sweet as rhubarb pie. “They’re not yours either.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with people having fun. I’m a bit more open-minded than you, Lucinda. I believe people can enjoy reading and watching movies. I believe there’s room in fandom for both.”

“You’re so naive,” she said. “These cons are so anti-literature. They appeal only to the ignorant. People who don’t understand real science, or real science fiction.”

“I think people who think they guard pure science fiction may not understand real science or real science fiction either,” I said pointedly.

“Good god,” she said, “a philosophical discussion when I have a party to finish.”

“It seems strange to me that you’d put on a party here, Lucinda.”

She shrugged. “I thought I’d give these people the opportunity to come to a lit-con and see what they were missing.”

“So kind of you,” I said.

She smoothed her dress. “We all do what we can in the circumstances provided.”

At that moment, I almost told her what tripped her up. I almost told her that it was her lack of scientific knowledge, her lack of understanding of forensic science that had destroyed her. First, the splatter had been too pretty, too uniform. Second, and more importantly, the type of force it took to stomp out someone’s

brains would have caused damage to the plywood floor. Damage someone of my weight would have felt in loose boards or groaning wood.

But I didn't. Why give her the ammunition? She might try again someday.

"Am I excused?" she asked brightly.

"There is no excuse for you, Lucinda," I said in my best fannish manner, and moved out of her way.

The bane of the non-licensed investigator is that we have no real authority. We can't arrest. Worse yet, people with authority often look down their noses at us.

So we are forced to take some matters into our own hands.

Lucinda, misguided as she was, was clever. Who could prove that the panic the kid, Doris, and I felt was anything more than a product of our own imaginations? She would say that she had planned a perfect party, and we had nearly ruined it.

In fact, that night, she did carry off the party with full aplomb. She did change the victim from her clone to that of a lawyer, in keeping with *Jurassic Park* (the movie) tradition, and she did pour ice in the bathtub, but those were the only changes she made. The party was the hit of the convention, and became the talk of sf — both media- and literature-oriented — for years to come. It was, in its own way, the Woodstock of science fiction. Eventually everyone who was anyone claimed they had been there, even if they had been clear across the country at the time.

Everyone who was anyone except me.

You see, I was in Ops, checking the computer records. We had an unexplained power failure just as I was transferring Lucinda's credit card information from her con file into an active file so that we could bill her account. Unfortunately, the accident caused blips in her credit record that cascaded down the system and destroyed her credit rating for the next year. She had to defend and deny and repair, all of which took time away from cons and con parties, and fandom.

And somehow she got it in her pretty little head that this would happen again if she ever attempted to sabotage — even accidentally — a major convention again.

Misunderstandings are so tragic.

But we all do what we can in the circumstances provided.

"Stomping Mad" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch first published in *Return of the Dinosaurs* edited by Mike Resnick and Martin H. Greenberg, Daw Books, 1997.