

The McCarthy Witch Hunt

a novelette by Kim Newman

1953

'Mrs Stevens,' began Roy Cohn, sincerely, 'this is not an interrogation.'

The young woman on the other side of the desk made a face which very nearly said 'you could have fooled me'. Finlay thought her nose might have twitched slightly and felt uncomfortable.

'This is just an informal interview. To help you sort out questions that have been raised.'

'Will I be subpoenaed?'

The lawyer's smile was as fake as Finlay's right eye. 'There's been no question of that so far.'

Cohn was good in a snake-smooth way, Finlay thought, but too high profile. He thrived on publicity. No matter how he purred and charmed, there was no way Mrs Stevens hadn't made him as the prosecutor who put the Rosenbergs on Death Row. Finlay would have preferred someone more shadowy at this stage. Hugh Farnham, or the Kennedy Kid. Even Nixon.

'Who is that man?' Mrs Stevens asked, nodding at Finlay.

'I'm with the Bureau.'

'The FBI?'

'That's right,' he confirmed, hoping frankness would reassure her. Just now, Mrs Stevens was on the knife-edge between 'friendly' and 'unfriendly'. They all knew she'd ultimately testify. But they had to play the game out.

'I'm just a housewife,' she said, redundantly. 'My husband is with McMann and Tate. We live in Westport ...'

'Goodwife Stevens,' Finlay said, fixing her with his good eye, 'do not make the mistake of thinking us naive.'

She sat forward in her chair and looked at them. No one said anything for a moment. Finlay could hear the traffic down in the streets. He had kept on his hat and was sweating into the leather band. If he took it off, there'd be a reddish brand across his forehead.

This morning, before leaving the hotel, he'd found something tucked inside the sweatband, a pale length of substance that might have been a shed snakeskin. It crumpled and burned in the ashtray like cellophane.

Mrs Stevens was pretty in a plasticky magazine cover way. Permanent blonde hair, ordinary-attractive features, neat skirt and blouse, matching hat and handbag. Seven or eight years ago, while Finlay was combing what was left of Berlin, she'd have been a high

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