

An illustration of a young boy with reddish hair, wearing a green jacket and dark pants, sitting on a blue and white plaid folding lawn chair. He is looking towards the right. The scene is set in a yard with a sidewalk, a lawn, and some bushes. In the background, there are houses with windows and a blue door. The overall style is a soft, painterly illustration.

If thirteen-year-old Marty Rafner had his way, he'd spend the summer of 1953 warming the bench for his baseball team, listening to Yankees games on the radio, and avoiding preparations for his bar mitzvah. Instead, he has to deal with FBI agents staking out his house because his parents—professors at the local college—are suspected communist sympathizers. Marty knows what happens to communists, or Reds, as his friends call them: They lose their jobs, get deported...or worse. Two people he's actually met, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, have been convicted of being communist spies, and they're slated to be executed in two months.

Marty just wants everything to go back to normal, but that's impossible thanks to the rumors that his parents are traitors. As his friends and teammates turn on him and federal agents track his every move, Marty isn't sure what to believe. Is his family really part of a Red Menace working against the United States? And even if they're simply patriotic Americans who refuse to be bullied by the government, what will it cost them?

As the countdown to the Rosenbergs' execution date continues, it may be up to Marty to make sure his family survives.



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# RED MENACE

*Lois  
Ruby*

 CAROLRHODA BOOKS  
MINNEAPOLIS

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## CHAPTER 1

# THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 1953

**L**ast week the FBI pulled up across the street and aimed binoculars at my house. At Amy Lynn's next door, too. They're staking us out round the clock, like we're Mafia bootleggers.

Hey, G-men, I've got news for you. Al Capone doesn't live in the neighborhood. This is Palmetto, Kansas, not Chicago, Illinois. No dead stiffs lying around on Oxbow Road.

They won't notice anything suspicious about me, Marty Rafner, the world's most loyal Yankees fan. Right now I'm innocently shooting hoops with my best friend Connor Dugan, who lives down the block, though the FBI's not checking out his family.

Connor has his big butt in the air as he dives into the sage hedge to get the ball. Jabs his finger on one of those thorny things, so he pops the finger into his mouth, sucking blood.

"Shoot!" I holler. Connor flubs a one-hander wide of the basket. "Jeez, you never even came near the pole."

“Basketball’s not my game. I’m a baseball man.”

“Yeah? Well, don’t forget, Mickey Mantle played football and basketball in high school, not just baseball.”

Connor puffs up. “But I pour all my talent into one game. First string, shortstop. Let’s see, where are you? Oh, yeah, way out in center field. You need a telescope to spot the ball.” He shoots.

“Whoa. That one hit the rim. You’re missing closer.”

“Hey, Marty, how bad you think it hurts when they shoot that electricity through you?”

The Rosenbergs. They’re always lurking in the back of our minds. Even if my parents *didn’t* know them personally and *didn’t* make them the hot topic at our dinner table, the daily radio bulletins would keep reminding us about their upcoming execution.

I don’t respond, but Connor just won’t ice it. “Think it feels like your insides are fried? Two eggs, sunny side up?”

It’s like a jolt of current is racing through my own gut. I shoot and miss. “Nah, I think it’s more like you’re zapped with a stun gun.” Dribble, dribble, lay-up, my signature shot, like I practiced a million times. A million times, and I still overshoot the rim.

“You kidding? They’ll be flopping around for about six minutes.”

My shot bounces off the board and streaks past us into the street. Under the G-men’s car. “Go for it, Con.”

“I’m not messing with the FBI!”

Am I gonna sacrifice a decent basketball, or wait a month or a year until they give up and go home?

They make it easy for me by starting up their Studebaker and crawling a few feet up the block, freeing the ball so I don’t have to belly my way under their car. But as soon as I’ve got my prize, the car backs up into its same old rut.

I swear, Connor’s got a one-track mind. “Wonder if they’ll sit next to each other, like a two-seater electric chair. Picture it, sparks flying back and forth, *zowie*.”

My stomach roller-coasts.

“Bet you two bits Julius and Ethel will holler like banshees when that shock whizzes through them. Pshoooo.” Revved up by this picture, Connor sinks one and sends the rim vibrating.

I snag the ball smack out of the net and glance across the street at the Everlys’, where Luke’s not. Luke used to dribble about fifty times before shooting. Where’s he now? On a transport, heading home from Korea with a Purple Heart. Might not be able to stand up, let alone shoot baskets.

Man, don’t I know anybody whose life is toodling along happily? Amy Lynn’s family is getting the same attention from the G-men that mine is. That’s about everybody on our block—the Sonfelters, the Dugans, the Everlys, and us, the Rafners. Oh, and a few other neighbors I only see when I take the trash cans out to the street. Mom calls them the Garbage People.

I pull the ball to my achy chest, hugging it like the earless stuffed chimp I used to stash under my pillow. “Those two boys, both their parents will be dead on the same day. Think about it, Con. How would you feel?”

“Parents like that? They sold us out to the Ruskies. We’re talking A-bomb secrets.”

“Aw, come off it. They never gave the Russians any secrets, on account of they didn’t have any to give.” My parents and all their Hawthorne professor buddies swear that the Rosenbergs are not spying traitors. A lot of people think they are, though. Doesn’t matter one way or the other anymore, does it? Appeals denied, date set, boom. Zap.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s refused to hear the Rosenberg case twice already, and the execution date is circled on Mom’s kitchen calendar. Doomsday, June 18. Only two months away.

Connor lives for that day. “My father says their kind, Julius and Ethel and Amy Lynn’s father, they’ll turn us all into a whole country of pinkos.”

My lip curls up to the left, like Mom’s when she hears things that tick her off, and a lot of things do. Around our house, *pinko* is a lip-curling cuss word. So my lip’s practically wagging like a tail, and I can barely get the words out. “The Rosenbergs were framed, Con, and you know it. The trial was a circus, the judge was crooked, the star witness—Mrs. Rosenberg’s own

brother—man, he lied on the stand to get his wife out of hot water.”

“Well, my father says if they’re commies, that’s good enough for him. The only good red’s a dead red.” Like his father’s such an expert. Mr. Dugan’s the head of buildings and grounds at the College, but he’s got louder opinions than half the faculty.

Connor shoots again. The rim rattles and the ball bounces off.

I snag it. “You’re all heart, Con. Get this: the Rosenbergs are not guilty!” I pound my gavel-fist full force on the basketball. Needs air. So do I, trying not to picture Michael and Robby shooting baskets in some other driveway, knowing their parents will both be dead before their next birthdays.

Connor snorts. “Not guilty, huh? That’s what they all say on Death Row.” He does a staggering number, gasping with his last breath, “I’d rather . . . be dead . . . than red. Aaarggghh.” Keels over in the grass, belly up. Great for bouncing the basketball off his flabby gut.

I don’t want to talk about the Rosenbergs anymore. It’ll be a relief when June 18 finally rolls around and the whole thing’s over, and the Yankees are hotter than lava, and the Mick is batting .330, and life is ordinary, white-bread, Kansas normal again.

“Shoot!” I yell again, knocking the wind out of Connor with a basketball bomb to the solar plexus.

“Hey, you trying to kill me?”

“It’s tempting.”

Connor laughs, but I’m semi-not kidding. I guess my anger inspires him, because he jumps up and sinks two in a row.