



Suspicion (The Battling McGuire Boys)

By Cynthia Eden

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Uncovering the truth about that long-ago night plunges Ava into a world where no one can be trusted. Except maybe the rancher she has loved for years... But with a vengeful killer stalking them and passion drawing them inexorably closer, will Mark's secrets be their downfall...?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Cynthia Eden is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author. She writes dark tales of romantic suspense and paranormal romance. Her books have received starred reviews from Publishers Weekly, and was named a 2013 RITA® finalist for best romantic suspense. Cynthia lives in the Deep South, loves horror movies, and has an addiction to chocolate. More information about Cynthia may be found at www.cynthiaeden.com.

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Ava McGuire didn't have a lot of safe havens. And, outside of her family, there weren't exactly a lot of people she trusted.

In fact, only one person came to mind...

Mark Montgomery.

Ava slammed her car door and turned to the house. It was the middle of the night. *Not* the right time to be paying a visit to Mark's ranch, but she wasn't exactly overwhelmed with options.

I need to see him.

She straightened her shoulders and she marched toward his front door. She didn't let the memories swamp her as she climbed up the steps of the big wraparound porch. If she thought too much about the past, it would hurt. Those memories always did.

So she shoved the thoughts into the recesses of her mind, and she climbed those front steps. She reached for the doorbell but then the door opened.

Mark was there.

Tall, handsome, strong—*Mark*. His blond hair was tousled, and the light shone behind him, glinting off his shoulders. Very broad and bare shoulders because he wasn't wearing a shirt. Just a pair of low-slung jeans.

"Ava?" He reached out to her. As always, he seemed warm. His touch chased away the chill she'd felt since she'd first climbed into her car and begun the drive that would take her from her place in Houston to Mark's ranch in Austin. "What are you doing here?"

I needed to see you. I had to talk with someone...with someone who wouldn't think I was crazy.

Those words wanted to tumble out of her mouth, but she was trying to play things cool and not come across as the insane one. At least, not right away. She knew there were plenty of folks who already thought she was nuts or, much worse, a cold-blooded killer.

The rumors about her had persisted for years.

But...Mark had never seemed to believe those stories. He'd always stood by Ava and her family.

"I need your help," she told him quietly. She looked over his shoulder, hoping that no one else was there. The ranch house was huge, sprawling, but normally his staff stayed in separate quarters. She really didn't want anyone to overhear the confession she was about to make.

He pulled her into the house and shut the door behind her. "Ava, I'll give you anything you need."

Right. Because that was true-blue Mark. The guy who was always there to save the day. Or at least, that was the way she thought of him. Lately, though, her brothers had been acting differently when they spoke of Mark.

Her brothers had been friends with Mark for her whole life. And she, well, she'd been the tagalong. The little girl who bounced after the boys. *And who had always been in love with Mark Montgomery.*

Not that she'd ever told him that. Not him, not anyone.

He kept his hand on her shoulder as they headed into his den. All of the lights were on in the place, and she saw a glass of wine sitting on the table.

Wine. No shirt...

Heat flooded her cheeks. "Do you have a... " *Not a lover, please, not a lover!* "Is someone here with you?"

One brow shot up. "Jealous?"

Wait, what? She shook her head. "I am so sorry. This—this was a mistake." What *had* she been thinking? She'd just been scared and she'd run. But she hadn't run back to her brothers because she couldn't handle going to the McGuire ranch or...having them stare at her with pity in their eyes as they wondered if she'd finally cracked under the pressure of their parents' murder.

Poor, fragile Ava...she just couldn't handle it anymore.

She pulled away from him, spun on her heel and marched for the door.

Mark stepped into her path. His arms crossed on that massive bare chest as he gazed at her. "I'm not letting you go now." The words seemed to hold the edge of a threat. Or a promise?

"Mark?"

"I waited too long," he murmured. She backed up a step.

"No one else is here." His voice was flat. "There is no girl waiting in my bedroom—if that's what you're thinking. There's only...you."

All of the moisture seemed to dry up in her mouth. Her gaze slowly slid over him. The last time she'd seen him had been months ago. They'd been at the funeral of Austin police detective Shayne Townsend. She'd wanted to talk with Mark then, but her brothers had been determined to keep her away from him.

Her brothers were keeping secrets from her.

Only fair, really, because she'd been keeping plenty of secrets from them, too.

Mark was a handsome man, powerful and commanding. He had high, slanting cheeks, a long, hard blade of a nose and lips that were...sexy. Sensual. She'd spent far too much time thinking about Mark's lips over the years.

He was big, easily a few inches over six foot, with those strong, broad shoulders that he'd used back in his high school football days. His skin was a sun-kissed gold, his eyes a dark blue. When he looked at her with those eyes, Ava sometimes felt as if he could see *through* her.

But right then, Mark's eyes held confusion and worry.

"What are you doing here, Ava? I thought you were staying away."

Not from him, but from Austin and from the McGuire ranch because that place held too many painful memories for her. But when no place seemed safe, where were you supposed to go?

He's my haven.

"Ava?"

"I'm not crazy."

"I never said you were." His hands dropped and he took a step toward her. "Never thought it, either."

Others had. How many times had she heard the whispers over the years?

Is that her? Did she do it?

They should have locked her up...

She's either crazy...or she's a killer.

Ava swallowed and lifted her chin. "Someone has been in my house." The little one-bedroom cottage in Houston that she called home.

"*What?*" Now a lethal fury had entered his voice.

"He didn't take anything. Nothing was broken, so I couldn't really report it to the police. I just... I know someone has been inside." It was the small things that had tipped her off to the intruder's presence. Things that most people probably wouldn't have noticed.

A confused furrow appeared between Mark's brows. *He doesn't believe me.*

"Pictures have been moved." Now she spoke quickly, the words tumbling out as she tried to convince Mark that she was telling the truth. "Like someone picked them up, but put them back down in the wrong place."

His square jaw locked. He had a faint cleft in his chin. Something else that was sexy about him.

"That's not all," she hurried to say because she knew the picture thing sounded flimsy. "My clothes were rearranged." She felt the heat stain her cheeks. "He went through my dresser and...touched things. Moved them." Her underwear. Her bras. He'd been in her closet, too. The clothes had been moved—pushed to either side just a few extra inches.

At first she'd thought she was imagining all of these small things. But...then they kept adding up. And she hadn't been able to shake the feeling that someone was watching her.

No, worse.

Stalking her.

Now Mark was just staring at her.

"I'm not imagining this," she whispered as she gazed up at him. "It's happening. When I got home this evening, it had happened again. My back door...it was unlocked. He just left it unlocked when he left." Mark was still staring. He had to believe her! "I *triple*-checked that door before I went out. I know it was locked, I *know*—"

His hands wrapped around her shoulders. "Why didn't you call the police?"

"I did...the first time. They came out, looked around and said there was no sign of any intruder." The police had basically told her to stop wasting their time...only in a nicer way.

"Your brothers," he snapped out the words. "They own a PI business, for goodness' sake! They'd be on this thing in an instant. They'd—"

"Lock me up and throw away the key." Her words were brittle. "You know my brothers and exactly what they're like." Military through and through, and when it came to her...about a million times too protective. "I don't want to go back to the McGuire ranch. You know that. I *never* want to stay there again." Because every time she went there, Ava hurt. "This is just a jerk playing some kind of sick game with me. I want the game to stop. I want—"

Mark was shaking his head and his hold on her tightened. "Breaking into your house isn't a game. It sounds like someone is fixated on you! Stalking you!"

That was what she feared.

"What if he escalates? What if he decides to break into the house while you're there?"

Just why did Mark think she'd driven all the way to Austin? That unlocked door had sent her into a tailspin, and she'd been horrified at the thought of staying in that place for even one more night. She'd already put plans in motion to leave Houston, but tonight's little fright fest had moved up her departure by a few days. "That's where you come in," she told him.

His face was just inches from hers.

"I need a place to stay." He hadn't seen her car yet. So he didn't know... "I was already planning to move to Austin... I was offered a job at the art museum. I was scheduled to start in two weeks, but I already turned in

my notice at my old job, and..." And she was talking way too fast. "Whoever was messing with me in Houston, he won't follow me to Austin. It's a new city." That's what she'd been telling herself. "I'll get an apartment here and vanish."

"Ava."

"Until I find that apartment, I need a place to stay." She licked her lips. His gaze immediately fell to her mouth. Was it her imagination or did his blue stare heat up? "Please, Mark, can you let me stay here just for a few days? Until I find a more permanent place?"

Because she'd always felt safe with him.

But his jaw seemed to lock down even harder. His breath heaved out and he—he backed away from her. "If someone is stalking you..." He took another step back. "You need to call your brothers. They're the experts at this kind of thing. They'll find the guy—"

"If they even believe someone was in my place." She wasn't so sure they'd buy her story. They treated her with kid gloves as it was, always trying to hide the truth about their investigation into their parents' death. They didn't get that she wasn't some scared teen any longer.

He frowned at that. "Of course they'll believe you."

He sounded so confident. The cops hadn't believed her. Her neighbors hadn't believed her. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes." He gave a grim nod. "And you should have come to me *immediately*. I mean, how long has the joker been doing this to you?"

"A month." He believed her. Relief swept through Ava, almost making her feel a little dizzy.

Fury darkened his face. "You wait this long to tell me? You only come to me when you're terrified. You don't—"

"I changed the locks. My brothers had installed a security system—a top of the line system. I tried to stay safe." *On my own.*

"You have to tell them."

"My brothers haven't exactly been living the easy life lately," she muttered. Grant had nearly died a while back when he was working a case. He'd wound up in the hospital. And as for Brodie—he and his girlfriend had both just battled a monster from their past. They'd barely made it out of that nightmare alive. "They've had enough to deal with, okay?"

"You're their sister. They'd drop everything for you."

She glanced away from him. "I just need a place to stay tonight, okay?" Did he want her to beg? Because she was close to it. She couldn't stay in a motel. The walls in places like that were thin. "It's too late to call them now." If he'd just let her stay the night, she could figure out another plan for tomorrow.

"Bull. You came to *me* this late. Their ranch is just down the road."

Her gaze fell to the floor. "I wanted to be with you." But now that seemed foolish. He sure hadn't greeted her with open arms. "I shouldn't have come." She turned away and started heading back toward the door.

"No, you can't leave."

And he was touching her again, spinning her around to face him. Staring at her with fury and—and some other dark, turbulent emotion shining in his eyes. "You come to me," Mark continued, "telling me that some bozo is stalking you...and you expect me to just watch as you walk away in the night?"

She swallowed. "No, I expect you to give me a room...for old time's sake." Tomorrow, when she wasn't dead tired from fear and exhaustion, she'd work on another plan. One that didn't involve her brothers totally flipping out.

He gave a curt nod. "You can stay as long as you want."

Yes! That relief was so strong that she was *definitely* feeling a little light-headed. Or maybe that was just because she hadn't eaten since breakfast. "Thank you." Impulsively she stood on her toes and wrapped her arms around him. His rich masculine scent filled her nose. "You've always been a good friend to me."

Mark's body was rock hard against hers—hard and hot and so incredibly strong. His hands settled along the curve of her hips. "Is that what I am?" His voice was deeper, almost a growl.

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. "Yes." Her own voice came out too husky, so she cleared her throat and tried again. "Yes, but you're also...more."

"Am I?" His gaze had locked on her mouth.

Her heart thundered in her chest. "You're almost family."

"No." An instant denial. His hold urged her even closer to his body. "I'm not family. Don't ever think that I am." His eyes were still on her mouth. And his head was lowering toward hers, closing that last little bit of space. "I'm not your brother, and I'm not some safe friend."

She trembled against him. "Mark?"

His gaze slowly lifted and met hers. "You should be careful with me."

Her drumming heartbeat seemed to shake her chest. She'd never worried about being careful with Mark. Mark was good, solid and dependable. The light in the dark. He was—

"Because I'm not sure how much longer I can be careful with you."

He was going to kiss her. Ava was sure of it. Mark was so close to her, the tension in the air had turned blazing, and she wanted him to press his mouth to hers. She'd wondered if he would ever actually—

He backed away. Again.

She suddenly felt very cold.

"You know the guest room is down the hallway." He pointed to the left.

Yes, she knew where the guest room was.

Just as she knew that Mark's room was on the other side of the sprawling ranch house. Far enough away... *that he won't hear me scream.*

She thought about going out to the car for her bags, but figured she'd just save that for another time. Her car was parked near the entrance to Mark's house, and the bags would be safe there for the time being.

For now, she'd crash...because she needed to slip away from Mark and his too-watchful gaze.

She turned on her heel and headed for the hallway.

"Tomorrow," he called after her, "we call your brothers."

She reached out and touched the door frame. "They don't want me near you." Not now. She didn't know what had happened, but she'd been given that warning by more than one McGuire. Ava looked back at Mark. He hadn't moved.

Had he even heard her? Sighing, she took a step forward.

"What do you want, Ava?" His low, rumbling words stopped her.

And an instinctive response...you...rose to her lips. But she managed to choke that word back.

"Ava?"

"I don't want to be scared anymore," she said, and those words were the truth.

Or at least, as much of the truth as she was willing to share right then.

Ava kept walking, and Mark didn't say anything else.

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