



## Lip Service (Lone Star Sisters, Book 2)

By Susan Mallery

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Former navy SEAL Mitch Cassidy comes home to find nearly everything different. His wounds from battle have changed the way people treat him. His cattle ranch is suddenly organic. But time hasn't touched his desire for Skye—or the sting of her betrayal. Forget lip service. He's asking that luscious mouth of hers to reveal *the truth*. But will Mitch be able to put the past aside to help Skye get out from under her father's thumb...and help himself recover from a broken heart?

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery has entertained millions of readers with her witty and emotional stories about women. Publishers Weekly calls Susan's prose "luscious and provocative," and Booklist says "Novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling." Susan lives in Seattle with her husband and her tiny but intrepid toy poodle. Visit her at [www.SusanMallery.com](http://www.SusanMallery.com).

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"I'd like you to marry my daughter."

Skye Titan was having enough trouble balancing a small tray with two drinks and a plate of appetizers in one hand while reaching for the study door with the other. A sudden inability to breathe only complicated the stability problem.

Thirty seconds ago she would have thought that nothing her father said could surprise her anymore. She would have been wrong.

Talk about humiliating, she thought, wondering if Jed Titan's statement was meant to buy a son-in-law or sell a daughter. With him, she couldn't be sure.

"Izzy?" the other man asked, his voice clearly audible, despite the thick door between them.

"No. Skye."

"Oh."

Skye waited impatiently.

"Oh?" Was that the best he could do? Annoyance grew as time ticked on.

"I guess that would work, too," the other voice said at last.

Skye practically growled in irritation. Words to make her heart beat faster for sure. So charming. How was she going to keep from *throwing herself at T. J. Boone* when she walked into the study?

If she had been any less the well-trained hostess, not to mention a dutiful daughter, she would have pushed open the door, tossed the drinks in both their faces and left the house, never to be heard from again.

"Egotistical jackass bastard," she muttered, not sure if she meant the insult for T.J. or her father. They both deserved it.

She forced herself to breathe slowly, then imagined herself sinking into the big tub in the bathroom off her bedroom. Bubbles up to her chin, a glass of white wine to take off the edge. She was calm and in control. She was going to do the right thing, because that's who she was. The good girl, dammit. The one who served drinks to men like T.J. and her father.

Skye opened the door to the study and stepped inside the room. The two men stood next to the pool table. Jed didn't bother acknowledging her while T.J. looked momentarily uncomfortable. As if he wondered whether she'd heard him condemn her with faint praise.

She smiled as she offered the successful businessman his drink, wishing she'd thought to spit in it first.

"T.J.," she said.

"Skye."

He was good-looking, in a blond, blue-eyed sort of way. Tall and well dressed. He was a Texas boy and was probably charming, but it was hard to notice when the unenthusiastic "I guess that would work, too" was bouncing around in her brain.

She set the appetizers on the table in the corner. "Is there anything else, Daddy?" she asked.

"That's all, Skye."

"Then I'll say good-night."

Her hostess duties completed, her temper still firing, albeit silently, she left the room and walked to the stairs. Once on the third floor, she made her way to the last room on the left. During the day, it was a bright open space done in primary colors. A big bed sat by the window overlooking the main pasture. At night, shadows closed in, but seven-year-old Erin was never afraid of the dark. She wasn't afraid of anything. A quality she must have inherited from her father, Skye thought enviously.

Now Erin lay sleeping, a tiny curled-up bump under the covers. Skye sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at her child.

"I love you, Bunny Face," she whispered.

Erin didn't stir.

Skye rose and walked the few feet to her own bedroom. Her younger-by-a-year sister, Izzy, sprawled on the big bed, watching television. She muted the sound when Skye entered.

"Don't you have a TV in your own room?" Skye asked.

"Sure, but using yours is more fun. Who's the guy?"

"T. J. Boone. You're the one he wants."

Izzy sat up, her dark curly hair a halo around her head. "What are you talking about?"

Skye walked to the bathroom and turned on the tub. While water thundered out, she poured in jasmine-scented bath oil that foamed and made bubbles.

"Jed told T.J. that he'd like him to marry his daughter. T.J. asked about you but Jed informed him that I was the daughter being auctioned off. T.J. paused for a *very* long time before agreeing that I would do." Skye returned to the bedroom, then swore softly. "Did I remember to bring up a big bottle of wine? Of course not."

Izzy bounced to her feet. "What are you talking about? Of course he wants you. You're gorgeous."

That was stretching it, but Skye wasn't going to refuse the compliment.

"It doesn't matter," she said with a sigh. "I'm not letting Jed pick a husband for me. Been there, done that."

"Bought the T-shirt," Izzy added helpfully.

She'd done more than that. She'd married the man in question because it was what her father wanted. Because it was the right thing to do, or so it had seemed at the time.

"I have a backbone," Skye said, feeling dissatisfied with her life and not clear on why. "I'm sure of it. If I didn't have a backbone, I couldn't walk upright. I'm twenty-six years old, a widow and single mother. Shouldn't I be the one running my life?"

"You are," Izzy said, then shrugged. "Sort of."

"How wonderful. I'm a role model for doormats everywhere."

"You're not a doormat."

Skye shook her head. "Sorry. This should be a pity party for one. I didn't mean to include you. Why don't you go downstairs and flaunt yourself in front of T.J.? Show him what he'll never have."

Izzy frowned. "Are you okay? I can stay and keep you company."

"No, thanks. I'm going to take a bath where I'll be floating in a sea of denial." Because her bad mood wasn't just because of T.J.'s obvious rejection. She wasn't interested in him or any man. It was her father assuming once again he could control her life. Because she'd let him... more than once.

"Sk-ye." Izzy drew the word out into two syllables. "Don't make me sing 'The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow' until you beg for mercy, because I will."

Skye laughed. "Okay. I'll be good. Now run along and make trouble. We'll both feel better for it. I'll be fine. I just need to get some sleep. Everything will look better in the morning."

"Promise?"

"I swear."

Izzy hesitated, then left. Skye returned to the bathroom and turned off the water. She pinned up her hair, then undressed and climbed into the tub. But no matter that she closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, she kept

hearing the conversation between T.J. and Jed. And kept getting mad. Mostly at herself. For being the kind of person who did what she was told.

Because she was the good sister. The one who followed the rules. Who did the expected.

"I hate people like that," she said aloud into the empty room. So why had she become one of them?

Izzy waited until T.J. stepped out onto the front porch of the house. She'd grown up lurking in shadows, spying on her older sisters, who seemed to have all the fun. She was used to being stealthy.

When she was sure he hadn't noticed her, she crept up behind him and said, "Hi," in a loud voice. It was hard not to laugh when he jumped.

"Jesus," he yelled as he turned. "You scared me."

"Good. I understand we're soon to be brother and sister. That's very cool. I've always wanted an older brother. You can teach me all kinds of things."

T.J. stood a good ten inches taller than her, but Izzy wasn't the least bit intimidated. She wasn't there to fight fair and would use every advantage to bring the jerk to his knees. Scaring him had just been a happy bonus.

"Brother and sister?"

"You're marrying Skye, aren't you? At least, that's what she said."

T.J. swore, this time more aggressively. "She heard. I didn't mean for her to."

He was standing at the top of the stairs. Izzy thought about giving him a big push, just for the thrill of watching him tumble. "You hesitated when Jed offered you Skye. I can't believe you had the nerve to think about it. She's worth ten of you."

"Wait a minute. My hesitation wasn't about Skye. She's a beautiful woman."

"So were you concerned about the size of your equipment?" Izzy interrupted with a smirk.

"I was making a point with your father." He leaned against the post by the stairs. "And for future reference, I've never had complaints about the size of my equipment."

"Most women are too polite to complain in person. We only tell each other when we're disappointed."

He raised a blond eyebrow. "You have sass."

"I have a lot of things you'll never see."

"Want to bet?"

Izzy liked that he gave as good as he got, but not that he was consorting with Jed, talking about marrying Skye and flirting with her.

"Jed won't take kindly to you playing his daughters against each other. Trust me, he's not a man you want to piss off."

"Maybe he doesn't care which of his daughters I marry."

"You couldn't catch me and even if you could, you couldn't handle me."

"That sounds like a challenge."

She ignored the statement. "Let me be clear. Hurt my sister again, T.J., and looking eye to eye with a snake will seem like a step up for you."

He stared at her feet, then worked his way up. "You think you could take me?"

"Even on a bad day. I fight dirty."

"So do I, little girl."

She filed that piece of information away for future reference. "I'll be reporting our little conversation to my sister. The Titan girls are very loyal to each other. Keep that in mind."

"You're full of advice. What makes you think I need it?"

"You have amateur written all over you."

Mitch Cassidy pulled to a stop at the entrance to the ranch. Although he'd grown up here, he hadn't been back in nearly nine years. He'd expected a few changes—life had a way of moving forward whether he wanted it to or not—but not this.

He stared at the words over the open metal gates. The gates, connected to nothing, were just there for show. "Cassidy Ranch. Home of certified organic beef and free-range poultry."

"What the hell?"

He wasn't sure what offended him the most. The phrase "certified organic" or the word *poultry*.

"Chickens? We have goddamn chickens?"

He hated chickens. They were loud and messy. And this was Texas. His family ran beef. They had for nearly a hundred years. It was the source of the Cassidy fortune. If some ranch wife wanted to raise a few chickens for eggs or deep frying, the stupid birds were kept out of sight and never talked about. They weren't bragged about in a sign.

His left foot ached. He reached down to rub it only to remember a half second later that he didn't have a left foot anymore. The below-the-knee amputation was the reason he wasn't a SEAL these days. It was the reason he'd finally come home.

He swore again, put the truck in Drive and headed for the main house. In a perfect world, he would quietly reappear at the ranch, easing into a normal life, without anyone noticing. However, though life was a lot of

things, it wasn't perfect.

He drove down the nearly mile long private road. White fences lined both sides. There were horses on the right and prize bulls on the left. Prosperity on the hoof.

He rounded a curve, past a grove of trees and saw the house where he'd grown up. It was a sprawling two-story structure with a wraparound porch. Flowers grew waist high, swaying gently in the breeze. It could have been a picture from a postcard. Mitch almost wished it was.

Fidela stood on the porch, straining forward, as if wanting to know the second he arrived. She took off at a run toward the truck, forcing him to stop short of the house.

She might be pushing fifty, but she had the speed of a six-year-old and got to him before he'd awkwardly clambered out of the truck. He landed on gravel and nearly lost his balance as his leg muscles struggled to keep him upright on his new and painful prosthesis.

"You're back!" she said, tears filling her brown eyes. "Finally. I've been praying and praying since you left. God is tired of me asking for your safety. You could have helped, you know. Not done such dangerous work. But no. You like to test my faith."

She cupped his face, then ran her hands across his shoulders and down his arms, as if wanting to make sure he was real.

"You're taller since you left, but so thin. Mitch, such sadness in your eyes. But you're home now, yes? Home with me and Arturo. The ranch will heal you and I will cook all your favorites until you are too fat to ride a horse."

She smiled through her tears, then hugged him with a fierce strength that squeezed the air out of him.

She'd been a part of his life since before he was born.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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