

FAKING HUMAN

A Tale From
Mystic Valley



MOIRA ROGERS

Faking Human

By Moira Rogers

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Chapter One

The Great Salsa Jar Fiasco

"Who's the big blind?"

"Frank. No, Frank's the small blind—"

"No, I'm the dealer. Josh is the big blind."

"Where the hell *is* Josh?"

"Probably in the bathroom again. Dude can't hold his beer."

"Or he's in the kitchen hitting on Scott's woman."

"Fuck off, Dan."

"C'mon, you know he wants some of that Discovery Channel shit."

"Dan—"

"Wait, so who's the small blind?"

Claire listened to the voices in the living room, every word crystal clear in spite of the heartfelt pop ballad pouring out of the radio on the counter. Sometimes she thought she should remind Scott's friends—*again*—about her magically-amplified hearing, but it never seemed to sink in. They invariably spent five minutes horrified over the possibility that she'd heard some of the rude questions they liked to ask Scott about her sexual proclivities, then promptly forgot about it.

Besides, she was used to being talked about. Scott's friends were human, as was Scott himself. In spite of the large number of supernaturals who made their homes in Mystic Ridge, the vast majority of the students at the university were human, or humans with magical abilities. Shapeshifters were comparatively rare, and those who weren't wolves even rarer still.

And female coyotes who date humans... As far as she knew, she was the only one in town. It made Scott somewhat notorious. Sometimes, he seemed to enjoy the attention they garnered. Other times...not so much. *Usually when I've embarrassed him.*

Claire dumped a bag of tortilla chips into the bowl she'd set out and returned to the fridge for the jar of salsa. The jar ended up unopened next to the bowl of chips, and she picked up the tray with one hand. For someone whose mother routinely held dinner parties for dozens of important philanthropists, it was hardly an impressive display. *But they'll like it better than pear halves marinated in brie sauce.*

"Hey, where the hell's the food?" *Frank.*

Scott cleared his throat. "Claire's getting it. She wanted to help out."

"What, is she out catching a rabbit or something?" That was Dan, and from the slight slur in his voice she deduced he'd made it through the first pack of beer he'd brought with him.

Claire fought a brief battle with her instincts. The urge to march into the living room and introduce Dan's face to the wall was so overwhelming she took two steps toward the living room before she realized it.

No. You're a human's girlfriend. Human girlfriends don't throw guys who are seven inches taller than them through walls. Even if they deserve it.

Maybe especially not if they deserve it.

She sighed, stepped around the corner, and almost ran into Josh as he came barreling down the hallway from the bathroom. "Oops. Sorry, Claire." He stood there awkwardly, then reached out for the tray. "Oh hell, let me get that."

"Sure." She passed it to him and turned back to pick up the small case of beer next to the door to the kitchen. "Thanks, Josh."

Of all Scott's friends, Josh was the only one who'd never been blatantly rude to her, but he still didn't seem to know what to make of her, or even how to talk to her. Now, he flushed. "I guess I should have gotten the beer instead."

Because it's heavy? It was a twenty-four pack, granted, but surely a human girl could have picked it up. Or maybe that's not what it's about... Damn it. I need a handbook.

The men gathered around the table were staring at them, so she smiled and nodded to the open doorway that led to the living room. "It's okay, Josh. Thanks."

"C'mon, just bring the damn food." It was Dan again, sounding annoyed now. "And stop hitting on Scott's girlfriend right in front of him."

Josh colored even more and slammed the tray down on the table. "Shut the fuck up, Dan. Asshole."

Claire skirted around Dan—and *notice how I didn't smash his head into the table? I'm learning*—and set the beer down next to Scott. "Need anything else, honey?"

"What?" he asked absently, more focused on organizing his poker chips than on her. "Oh, no. Thanks anyway, babe."

"Sure." She straightened. "Does anyone else—"

"Shit!" Dan struggled with the salsa jar, his face gone red from effort. "What'd you do, weld this lid on?"

"You're such a *girl*," Frank snorted. "Hand it here."

Dan tossed the jar at Frank, who barely managed to catch it before it went through Scott's TV. *That* got Scott's attention; potential abuse of his electronics always infuriated him far more than anything having to do with his girlfriend. "Watch it, asshole. You break my flatscreen, you're buying me a new one."

"Relax, man." Frank twisted the cap and grunted a little. "Christ. That's really on there."

Josh rolled his eyes and held out his hand. "Let me have it, Mary."

Oh, for crying out loud.... Without thinking, Claire plucked the jar from Frank's hand and twisted the cover off. "Sorry, I probably put it back on too tightly."

A hush fell over the table, and even Josh stared at her, shocked and uncomfortable. Finally, Dan snorted in laughter. "Why didn't you introduce us to your boyfriend, Scotty?"

Oh, she had Scott's attention now. He glared at her as Frank and Dan laughed, resentment burning in his eyes. Claire cursed herself silently and offered the salsa to him.

He took it without a word. "Who did we decide was the small blind?" he asked tightly.

Uncomfortable silence filled the room until Frank cleared his throat. "Dan."

Claire hovered next to Scott as the boys settled around the table, part of her wanting to find a way to get Scott to look at her, and part of her—

Part of her wanted to climb across the table and kick Dan's ass.

She caught him looking at her again. It was a rude, blatant stare, almost as if he was searching for some outward sign of what she really was. But it was also

challenging, cocky and arrogant. He was so obviously convinced of his superiority that her skin crawled. Every instinct screamed for her to put him in his place. Show him who was stronger.

Show him who was *dominant*.

Her mother's voice drifted through her head, the lecture she'd gotten the first time she'd given in to that instinct at eleven years old, when she'd tackled the housekeeper's son to the ground and bloodied his nose for destroying her favorite book. *It's so vulgar, Claire. Of course you have urges, but we're not animals. The mark of a civilized person is the ability to ignore one's instincts and behave as society dictates.*

We're not animals. How many times had she heard those words? Every time she'd done anything that hinted that she wasn't a sweet, submissive young shapeshifter capable of passing for human. One who would marry another well-bred coyote and throw dinner parties for his friends while the nanny raised their children.

It hurt to press down that wild thing inside her, but she'd had years of practice. She dropped her eyes and looked away from Dan, a subtle bit of body language that was lost on him but still grated on her nerves. So did the way her voice sounded so nervous and tentative when she spoke. "You need anything else, Scott?"

He sat stiffly, his shoulders rigid. "If we do, we can get it."

Josh gave her a half-hearted smile. "Thanks, Claire."

She couldn't even summon a smile in return. She turned and retreated, out of the living room and down the hallway. The whispers started before she was out of earshot. By the time she reached Scott's bedroom, Dan had chimed in with one or two lewd comments about which of them liked to be on top.

Claire closed the bedroom door and turned on Scott's stereo for good measure before dragging her backpack up on to his bed. She had plenty of reading to do for school, but it was hard to concentrate when she could hear Scott's friends harassing him again.

Over a jar. *A jar.*

Humans. She sighed and curled up on her side, promising herself that she'd remember this time. She'd remember all the stupid little rules she had to follow to fit in with Scott and his human friends. Don't be too strong, don't be too aggressive, don't growl at his friends....

Don't open jars.

Damn humans and their rules.

Chapter Two

The Unfortunate Flirting Incident

"Claire?"

The voice came from just over her shoulder, far too close for someone to have approached without her being aware of them. With a guilty jerk, Claire snapped her laptop shut and turned her chair to face her supervisor. "Hey, James."

James was a graduate student, and the sort of hot that shattered most people's preconceived notions of what a librarian looked like. Claire dealt with giggling freshman girls who showed up to flirt with him at *least* twice a shift.

For all the good it'll do them, she thought wryly as James plopped down in the seat next to her. James was hot, all right. Almost as hot as his boyfriend. Ryan worked in the physics department as an adjunct professor, an honest-to-God rocket scientist who rolled his eyes every time she and James tried to institute a little bit of order into his chaotic life.

Claire loved hanging out with James and Ryan, probably because they didn't care when she did things out of line with how a normal human girl should act. Ryan shrugged off her eccentricities while James embraced them, going so far as to try to convince her to go jogging with him—as a coyote.

The expression on his face now wasn't cheerful or open. In fact, it was wary. "So. Your boyfriend's here."

"Oh yeah?" That was unusual. Scott did *not* like libraries.

"Yeah." James swiveled his chair back and forth in a nervous habit Claire recognized all too easily. "He's over on one of the computers."

That, at least, made more sense. Scott hated libraries, but he loved computers. "Maybe the internet's down in his apartment."

"Yeah, maybe." He took in a breath and then let it out. "You know how Cathy got pissed when Dr. Keller picked you to head up the paranormal section?"

It was such a bizarre change in subject that Claire blinked stupidly at him for a moment. Cathy had been pissed, sure—and Claire could understand how it could be frustrating for a graduate student to be passed over in favor of a twenty-one year old. But what it had to do with Scott—

"Oh." Anger bubbled up in her, hot and fast and riding her instincts straight toward pure fury. *That fucking bitch—*

She didn't realize she was on her feet until James spoke, his voice nervous. "Claire, are you okay?"

She ignored him. She ignored everything, including the student who took one look at her face and blanched as she stormed around the side of the desk. He stumbled out of the way, and she stalked toward the bank of computers, her instincts clamoring for the destruction of her challenger.

She found Cathy leaning over the partition separating Scott's computer terminal from the others, a low-cut summer sweater showcasing her breasts. He stared at them with a slightly nervous look on his face, then licked his lips. Even from this distance, it was easy to hear his words. "I don't think so, Cathy. I mean, I have a girlfriend—"

"Whatever." Cathy's voice was lower than usual, softer. "I know Claire, and I'm not impressed."

You'll be impressed when I'm done with you. Her anger left no room for any other emotion, not even the usual self-consciousness she felt when faced with slender, stylish women like Cathy. The kind of woman who smiled and made condescending remarks about her "baby-birthing hips."

Claire stopped several feet away, barely aware that her hands had curled into fists. Her voice came out sounding like a snarl. "Back off."

Far from being intimidated, Cathy smirked at her. "Hello, Claire. Feeling a little snappish today?"

She took another step forward, ignoring the gathering crowd. She heard James cursing behind her, but she couldn't pull her gaze away from Cathy. Smirking, nasty Cathy. "Back. Off."

The brunette arched one perfect eyebrow and glanced at Scott. "Fine. God knows what you've done to him, anyway."

Claire tried to take another step forward, but strong hands locked around her upper arms. She snarled and whipped her head around, some tiny part of

her recognizing James' scent. Someone she cared for. Someone she shouldn't hurt. It didn't make her voice any friendlier. "Let go of me."

He held his ground with admirable, if foolhardy, courage. "Why don't you and me and Scott go talk in the break room, huh? It's getting a little crowded out here."

Scott stood, an angry, embarrassed flush already rising in his cheeks. "Come on, Claire." He stalked toward the back without waiting.

Claire turned her gaze back to Cathy, refusing to budge even when James tugged gently on her shoulders. "Stay out of my life and away from my boyfriend."

Cathy just snorted and shrugged one shoulder. "I felt sorry for him. It was a moment of weakness."

She'd taken two steps toward Cathy before James realized she'd gotten away from him and jumped to catch her arms again. One or two gasps erupted from the onlookers, along with a single catcall.

"She's not worth it," James whispered, his voice frantic. "Damn it, Claire, don't let her get you fired. It's what she *wants*."

His words penetrated the haze of rage clouding her brain. Cathy still smirked at her, defiance in every line of her body. She had no idea—no fucking *idea*—how easy it would be to hurt her. To put her in her place.

Humans don't have places, she reminded herself firmly. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, ignoring the disappointed murmurs of the crowd as she turned toward James. She could hear his frantic heartbeat, nervous in spite of the calm hands on her shoulders.

"C'mon, Claire." His voice was steady and soothing, and held just enough deference to soothe her. "That's right. Let's go get a soda. I'll buy, huh?"

"Okay."

"Crazy bitch," Cathy muttered from somewhere behind her.

Claire fought a brief, violent battle with her instincts, every muscle tensing until she shook from the effort it took to keep from wheeling around, to keep from tangling her hand in the woman's hair and smashing her head into the desk.

It *hurt*, and not just physically. Inside, the coyote howled angrily, furious that a challenger stood before her and dared mock her. She was stronger, more

powerful, better in every way.

In the end, her lifetime of practice made it possible to walk away. The wild part of her whimpered its confusion as she shoved past two onlookers, and she ignored it. She ignored it like her mother had taught her, pushing down everything that felt right and natural. It felt like walking in someone else's skin, everything tight and uncomfortable and unfamiliar, but she ignored that, too.

She couldn't ignore the look on Scott's face when she pushed open the break room door. He was embarrassed. *Humiliated*. Again.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Claire?" he demanded tightly. "Seriously—"

"Hey." James stepped around her before she could stop him. He was several inches taller than Scott, and built strongly enough to be intimidating. "Cathy is on her ass *all* the damn time."

Scott didn't seem to care. "That doesn't sound like much of a reason to literally *growl* at someone. And in public? Jesus Christ."

James opened his mouth again, but Claire reached out and laid a hand on his arm. "I need to talk to Scott. Please."

"Claire—"

"*Please*, James."

He didn't look pleased, but he nodded shortly and retreated to the door. He paused with his hand on the metal handle, his eyes worried. For a second she thought he'd say something else, but he just shook his head. "I'll cover the front desk for you."

"Thanks."

The door whispered shut behind him, and there was nothing left to do but look at Scott.

He stared back, his arms crossed over his chest. "What? You want me to pretend that scene was *normal*?"

She'd locked down the coyote with such brutal efficiency that his tone didn't raise more than a faint growl of protest. Instead, shame and guilt rose up with easy familiarity. "I'm sorry, Scott. I didn't mean to. It's—it's just her—"

But there were no words to explain it to him, no way to describe how it felt to have a rival challenging her in such blatant ways, day after day. She forced her eyes to the floor, her shoulders slumping as a tiny noise of distress escaped

her. *I'm still not good enough. I'll never be good enough.*

His shoulders slumped a little, as well, and he sighed. "No, it's not— Come here." He held out his arms.

Relief nearly strangled her as she slipped into them and tucked her face against his chest. "I won't do it again," she promised, knowing it was a lie. She hadn't meant to do it *this* time, but her control seemed to be slipping instead of growing steadier. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't be normal enough. *Human* enough.

"I'm sorry," he whispered against her hair. "It's... You looked like you were going to fucking *kill* her, Claire. For something ridiculous."

The scariest part was knowing she *could* have. "I know. I'm trying. I swear I'm trying."

"Me, too," he told her quietly.

Try harder, Claire. Just...try harder.

She could do it. She *had* to. And if some tiny part of her felt like she was dying... Well, maybe that was the price for being human.

Please be worth it.

Chapter Three

The Disastrous Bar Altercation

Claire hated the Blue Moon Bar & Grill. Situated just over the river in Mystic Valley's tourist-trap riverfront district, the Blue Moon catered exclusively to humans who thought they were brave for crossing the river to hang out in a "shifter bar."

Except Claire could count the number of actual shapeshifters in the building on one hand and still have fingers left over. The owner was one, a shifty-looking cougar who prowled the restaurant in an exaggerated stalk she imagined was supposed to look predatory. She'd giggled the first time he'd seen her, earning an annoyed glare that had turned into wary recognition. Now he avoided her whenever Scott dragged her to his bar.

The bartender was a different story. A hard-eyed coyote, he watched her with a single-mindedness that made her vaguely uncomfortable. She'd thought about telling Scott, but something in the coyote's eyes made it clear he'd be more than happy to dispose of any human stupid enough to challenge him. And telling Scott he couldn't protect her... Well, it was the *truth*, but it wouldn't help their already rocky relationship.

It was especially bad tonight. Scott had invited all of his friends along but, since no one other than Josh had shown up, they'd ended up taking stools at the bar. The bartender's energy prickled over her skin every time he walked by, and she could *feel* the weight of his gaze on her.

Scott, of course, was oblivious. Claire sighed when he ordered another beer and leaned in close enough for him to hear her over the loud music from the dingy dance floor. "I'm getting a little tired. Think we could leave soon?"

"We just got here," he protested.

"An hour ago," Josh interjected. He drummed his fingers on the bar. "This place makes me nervous."

Irritation flared on Scott's face. "A few more minutes, Judas."

Claire opened her mouth to tell Josh there was nothing to worry about, but the bartender turned that chillingly intense gaze on her again, raising the hair on the back of her neck. "One more beer," she agreed, inching her stool closer to Scott's. She was practically in his lap already, but the display didn't seem to be discouraging the bartender.

"I'm going to the can," Scott said suddenly, edging off his stool. "I'll be right back."

"Scott—" She reached out a hand, but he was already gone. "Shit."

Josh froze with his beer bottle halfway to his mouth and arched an eyebrow. "What? What's wrong?"

She slid her gaze to the bartender and met his eyes by mistake. Something flashed there, and a wicked smile curved his lips. Claire jerked her attention back to Josh and forced a smile. "I don't like hanging out down here. On the riverfront, I mean."

He shrugged one shoulder and reached for a bowl of shelled peanuts. "I'm about to call it a night anyway. I can get a cab back to my apartment."

The weight of the coyote's gaze felt stifling. "Could you—could you wait? Until Scott gets back?"

"I was going to," he assured her. "I'm not leaving you alone in a place like this. That's crazy."

Scott didn't seem to care. She doubted he'd thought twice about wandering off and leaving her at the bar. Not that she *needed* his protection, but the fact that she didn't was one of the things he seemed to hate so much. *Until it's useful.*

She managed a smile for Josh. "Thanks. It's not dangerous, I just—"

"Another beer?" The bartender stood directly across from her, his hands resting only inches from her arm.

Claire tried not to be obvious as she inched back, taking her mostly empty beer bottle with her. "No, thanks. Still working on this one."

Josh tapped the scarred wood beside her. "We do need to close out this tab, though. Thanks."

The bartender glanced at Josh and then back at Claire, and one eyebrow climbed up. "Really? A couple of human puppies? There's no way they're man enough for you, honey, not even both of them together."

Heat flooded her cheeks and she tightened her fingers around the edge of

the bar until she swore she heard it creak. "Can we just close the tab?"

Josh raised both eyebrows as the bartender smirked at her and turned away. "Nice. I can see why Scott likes this place."

Claire waited until the man had moved to the other end of the bar before speaking. "He's like me," she said softly, tilting her head to indicate the bartender. "A shapeshifter. Coyote."

"I figured that much out." Josh finished his beer. "Where the hell is Scott?"

She glanced over her shoulder and sighed. "I don't know. Taking his time, I guess."

Even as she spoke, Scott came weaving through the sparse crowd. "Man, this place is a dump. I love it."

Claire tried to hide her wince. "Josh closed our tab. Maybe we could come back some other time? I really have to get home and study."

"*Christ*, Claire. Why did you even *come*, then?"

Because you begged me to? She wanted to offer to go home on her own, or to catch a cab with Josh, but leaving Scott down here on his own was a recipe for disaster. "I told you I wouldn't be able to stay for long," she reminded him, maybe a little *too* sharply. "I have a huge test Monday."

Josh cleared his throat awkwardly as Scott climbed back on his stool and snarled, "Can I finish this beer?"

The bartender was still ten feet away, but that didn't stop him from smirking at her in amusement. Claire tightened her fingers around the edge of the bar and struggled not to bare her teeth at the coyote in challenge. "Yeah. Finish the beer."

"Thank you *very* much." He enunciated every word carefully. "Now that I have *permission*..."

Claire's temper, already tense from the bartender's low chuckle, snapped. "You know what? You're an ass. Stay here all night if you want. I'm going to go get a cab and go home."

He gave her a mock salute. "Knock yourself out, woman."

She should have known he wouldn't care. Claire grabbed her purse and pulled out twenty dollars to leave on the bar.

Josh stopped her. "It's paid for." He nudged Scott in the side with his

elbow. "Damn it. She can't leave by herself."

Scott made an exasperated noise and huffed. "Fine. I'll wait outside with you until you get a cab."

"You don't—" She bit her lip to keep the words from coming out and forced a smile, mostly for Josh's benefit. "Thanks. That would be nice." *Though I'm not worried about my safety, you idiots.* Leaving them on the wrong side of the river after dark made her feel vaguely guilty, even if they *were* far from any *real* shapeshifter hangouts.

He stalked after her, swaying on his feet. He knocked into a much taller man with his shoulder and cursed. "Watch where you're going, asshole."

Claire winced when the hulking man turned and snarled down at them. He was human, but taller than Scott and easily *twice* her size. "Scott, come on."

"No," he snapped. "Not until this son of a bitch apologizes for almost knocking me over." He glared up at the man, then shoved him. "Jackass."

Oh, Jesus.

"Watch it, kid." The large, dark-haired man reached out a hand and shoved Scott back, sending him reeling several steps. "I could crush you."

"You could try," he shot back as soon as regained his footing. "And I could whoop your ass."

"Scott, please—" She reached out to grab his arm. "Let's go."

The man chuckled and threw a right hook at Scott. Even an inexpert punch would have bowled him over in his drunken state, but the man hit him solidly in the jaw, and Scott went flying.

Instinct took over as rage flooded her. An asshole he may be, but Scott was *hers*. A snarl ripped free of her throat and the wild part of her that she'd so carefully boxed up ripped free. She laughed. Then she lunged.

The man had to be a foot taller than her, but it didn't matter once she barreled into him. He was surprised enough that he stumbled backward a few steps, then tripped and went down with Claire riding him to the floor.

She got her knees on his arms to hold him down before she pulled back her arm and landed a hard punch straight to the end of his chin. The drunk roared his pain and lifted his arms, and Claire remembered too late that super strength didn't mean a man with a hundred and fifty pounds of muscle couldn't toss her off of him.

He threw her, and she hit the floor with a yelp of pain as customers dove out of her path. She wasn't graceful enough to execute any impressive rolls, but she still got to her feet far more quickly than her drunk attacker. By the time he staggered to his knees, she'd gotten her hands around the back of a chair. She swung it without thinking, crashing it into his body hard enough that wood shattered and he slumped back to the floor.

Instinct still rode her hard, and she took a step forward, intending to make sure he *stayed* down. A strong arm locked around her waist and picked her up off the floor before she could get any closer, and the scent of coyote wrapped around her as the bartender hauled her bodily out of the fight.

With that wild stranger inside of her free, she reacted without thought. Her knee came up and she drove her heel back into his groin with an angry noise. He howled and dropped her, and she hit the floor again before scrambling up into a defensive crouch.

The patrons of the bar were silent, with the exception of the softly cursing bartender and the groaning drunk. Scott lay unconscious on the floor, and Josh knelt next to him. He stared at her in fear.

Claire dragged in a breath and let it out, trying to calm the instincts inside of her. Josh's fear grated against her nerves, and Scott's vulnerability both enraged and disgusted her. He was weak, he was *unworthy*—

And you're acting like an animal. Dozens of shocked and terrified people stared at her, reminding her that this bar catered to humans who only *thought* they wanted to brush elbows with the supernatural. Part of her wanted to rise to her feet, to demand they take a good look at the danger they so callously confronted.

The rest of her wanted to curl in a ball and hide.

The shame won. Shame *always* won. Claire dropped her eyes and rose unsteadily to her feet, adrenaline already shifting to regret. She crossed the room to Scott's side and no one stopped her. No one said a word.

She knelt next to him without meeting Josh's eyes. "Is he okay?" she asked in a hoarse whisper that echoed loudly in the silence of the bar.

"I—I think so." Her hand accidentally brushed his, and Josh recoiled. "He's out, but I don't think he's badly hurt."

Shame tightened around her as the stink of fear overtook even the smell of stale beer and greasy food. "Should we take him to the hospital?"

Even as she spoke, Scott began to stir. Josh pulled him to a sitting position, then helped him stand. "I think he'll be all right. Can you—" He bit his lip. "I'll get him home. Can you get back to your apartment okay?"

Five minutes ago Josh had been worried about her getting to a *cab* on her own. She tried to push down the pain as he avoided her gaze. "Sure. No problem, Josh. Thanks."

"Sure, Claire." He slung Scott's arm around his shoulders and cleared his throat. "Uh...I'll see you later."

The owner of the bar stopped five feet away from her and watched as Scott dragged Josh through the door. Then he turned his nervous gaze on her. "You need to leave."

"I'm sorry." Claire rose to her feet again, and found her purse in the tangle of broken wood left over from the chair. "I can... I can pay—"

"Leave," the man said again, more firmly this time.

Cringing, she looped the strap of her purse over her head and hurried out the door.

The breeze carried the smells of the riverfront to her, and she shivered as she pulled out her cell phone. Josh had already shoved Scott into his car, and she watched them peel out of the parking lot as she dialed information and asked to be connected to the first cab company.

Whether Scott wanted to come back to her or not, she knew their days together were numbered. The harder she tried to pretend, the more things fell apart. She'd give him a chance to accept her as something more than human, but the memory of the fear in Josh's eyes made her wonder if *any* human man could truly accept a shapeshifter woman in his life.

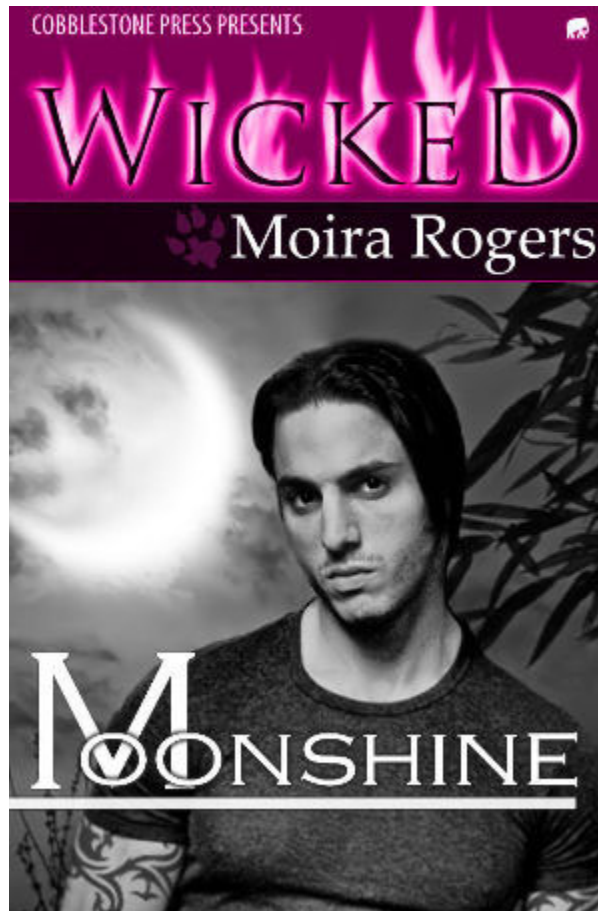
It doesn't matter, she told herself firmly as she hung up the phone and wrapped her arms tightly around her body. *Don't borrow trouble. Give him a chance.*

After all, Scott might surprise her.

Not likely. But he might.

The End

Interested in reading more about Claire Franklin and Mystic Valley?



Claire is tired of pretending to be polite, docile...human. She wants to unleash the animal inside her, and she wants to do it with a man who can really handle her. Then she meets Lars, a dangerous, sexy alpha, in a smoky bar. They share some moonshine, a potent shifter aphrodisiac, and have blisteringly hot sex.

Their one night of intoxicated passion leaves her wanting more, but Lars isn't interested in a woman who can only let loose while under the influence. Claire must then decide whether she's ready--and willing--to truly embrace her wild side.

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Read an Excerpt from Moonshine

Claire knew she stuck out like a sore thumb from the moment she walked into the bar, and realized it had nothing to do with the fact that she looked like shit. Dos Culebras was not a bar women usually entered alone unless they were professionals. The few non-hookers in residence belonged to men frightening enough to convince the rest of the clients to leave them alone.

She was not a professional. Worse than that, she was a shapeshifter who challenged every man in the bar just by walking into it. Hell, she wanted to be a challenge. She needed to meet another shapeshifter tonight. Someone like her, who understood her strength. Who could *handle* her strength. Someone who wouldn't be afraid.

She heard her ex-boyfriend's voice as she took her beer to a small table in the corner. *It's not you, Claire. You need someone...like you.* Oh, he'd been full of false sympathy when he'd broken up with her. He'd pretended it wasn't because she'd proven herself to be stronger than he was—yet again.

Humans are fragile. A morbid thought, but so true. Humans *were* fragile, and she had to stop wanting to be with one. Over twenty years had passed since magic had first crashed into science and bled into everyday life. The terror had finally subsided, and lots of men now found it hip to have a supernatural girlfriend. *At least until she embarrasses them in front of the boys by being stronger than they are.*

Human men. Their egos were as fragile as their bodies.

She was halfway through her beer before she realized she had attracted a stranger's attention. He sat across the bar from her, in a corner booth, with his back against the wall and one booted foot propped on the cracked vinyl in front of him. A cigarette dangled from his mouth, and a long-neck hung loosely from his fingers. Tattoos encircled his arms, tribal designs that stood out against his skin and disappeared beneath the sleeves of his T-shirt. He looked dangerous. *Perfect.*

Even at that distance, his eyes bored into hers. The intensity of his unwavering gaze made her uncomfortable. She had no problem recognizing another shapeshifter. Not a wolf, which she might have expected, but a coyote. *Like me.*

She met his gaze unflinchingly, knowing he wouldn't be able to resist the challenge of her presence.

You'll do, whoever you are.

After a moment he rose, one fluid motion bringing him out of the booth. He stalked towards her, his movements at once graceful and dangerous, and she

couldn't take her eyes away from him. He stopped at the corner of the bar and slid onto a seat. For a minute, Claire thought he wouldn't speak. Then his icy blue eyes softened, and he said in a low voice, "You look like shit."

"Thank you. I feel like shit," she replied quietly. "That's why I have a beer."

He paused for a moment, then set down his bottle. "I know who you are, you know."

It figured. Coyotes weren't rare, but there were only ten female coyotes in town compared to the fifty or so males. She turned her eyes back to the man and ran them over him in an assessing manner that bordered on insulting. "Really? Haven't seen you in any of my classes. You don't look like the college type."

He just grinned, and the simple action transformed his face from broodingly dangerous to dangerously handsome. "Touchy bitch."

"Yeah, maybe." She finished the rest of her bottle and set it on the table. "My boyfriend just dumped my ass because I'm tougher than he is. I'm feeling a little touchy."

He stared at her for a second. "Beer ain't taking the edge off of that, doll. You do shots?"

She slanted him a look, wondering if he was the type of man who could find her something better than alcohol. Maybe the tricky little magical drug making the rounds now. Custom designed for shapeshifters, it provided the adrenaline rush of a shift, along with a healthy dose of desire. Right now, she wanted something to remind herself just how far she was from actually being human.

Of course, she wasn't exactly sure how to *ask* him if he happened to have a bottle of moonshine in his pocket. So instead, she settled for a vague reply. "If I wanted to do the stuff I usually do, I wouldn't be here."

He nodded. "Hey, Wanda. Give us a couple of shots of Johnnie Walker, yeah?"

Claire waited until the woman set a shot glass in front of her. Then she picked it up and tossed it back, coughing a little as the liquid burned its way down her throat.

When she managed to blink away the reflexive tears that sprang to her eyes, she found him watching her. "It's a long way from milk and cookies."

"Yeah." He threw back his own shot without blinking. "I'm Lars."

"Lars." Claire dropped the shot glass back on to the bar. "Hi. I'm Claire."

Author Bio

Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy—and you get Moira Rogers. By day, Bree and Donna are mild-mannered ladies who reside in the Deep South. At night, when their children and husbands are asleep, they combine forces to unleash the product of their fevered imaginations upon the page. To learn more, visit their webpage at <http://www.moirarogers.com>.