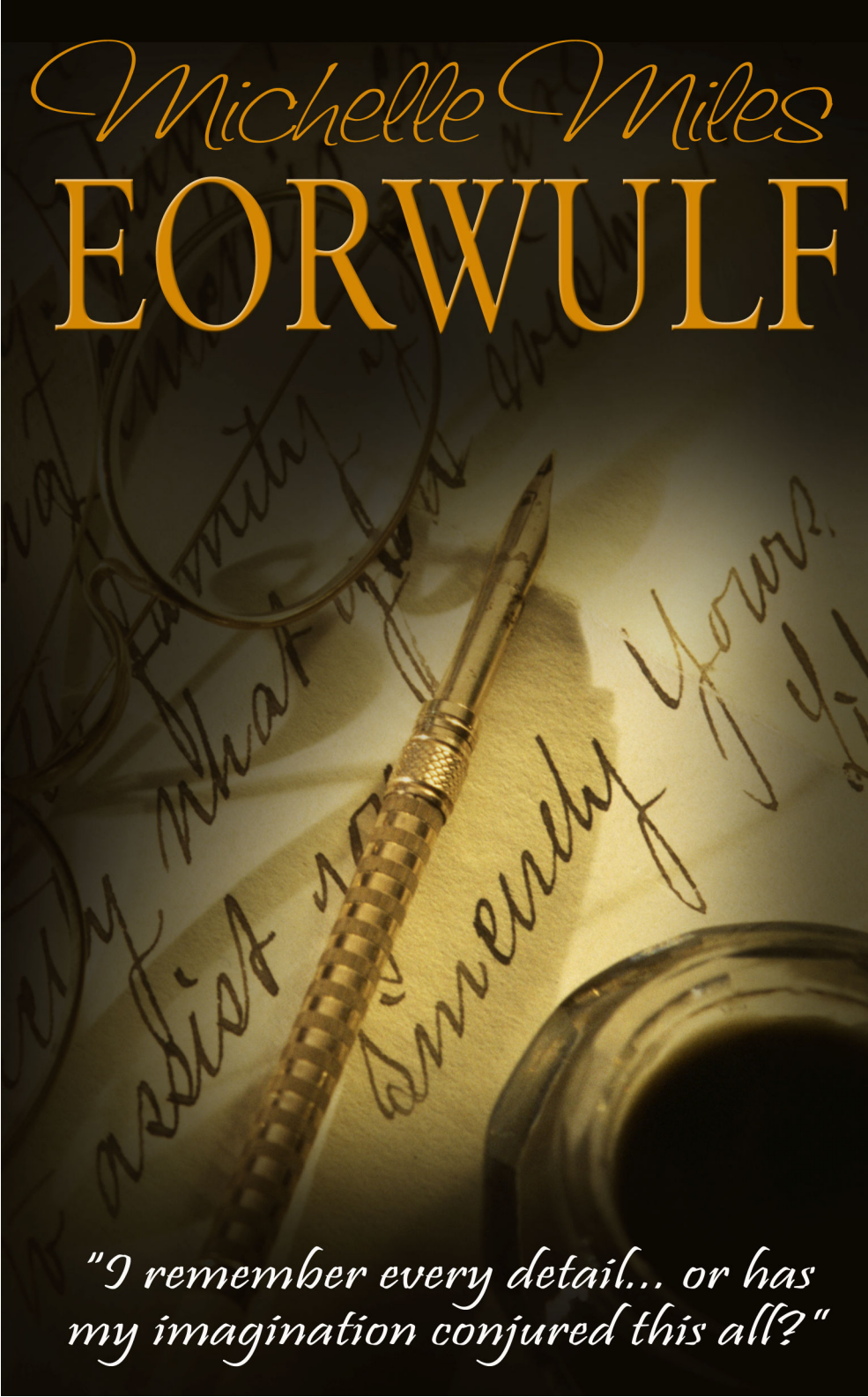


Michelle Miles

EORWULF

A close-up photograph of a fountain pen and an inkwell resting on a piece of paper with cursive handwriting. The pen is a gold-colored fountain pen with a textured grip. The inkwell is a dark, round container. The paper is yellowed and has several lines of cursive handwriting in dark ink. The lighting is warm and focused on the pen and inkwell, creating a soft glow. The background is dark, making the pen and inkwell stand out.

*"I remember every detail... or has
my imagination conjured this all?"*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

EORWULF

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For those who believe

EORWULF

By

Michelle Miles

I seems as though it has been years since I have seen him, though in truth only a few days have passed. Even so, I remember his last kiss and how his lips felt as if it was yesterday. I can still feel his scruffy cheeks under my palms, see his face in my mind—ruggedly handsome with an inherent strength, bronzed by wind and sun. I remember every detail of the color of his eyes, so dark-blue and mysterious, that I could get lost in their striking depths.

Or do I really remember this? Is it my feeble mind playing tricks on me? Has my imagination conjured this man? Part of me says yes. If it was not for the gold button in my bureau drawer, I would not have believed he existed.

Meira put down her quill and flexed her fingers. Her eyes drifted down the page along her careful script, not really seeing the words she had written. She gazed out the double windows into the waning afternoon, watching the grass wave in the wind and the sun blister the sky to dark pink.

Her illness had fully enveloped her and she knew it would soon take its toll, gripping her in a way from which she could never recover. She leaned heavily into the thick pillows, her breathing shallow and labored. Her fingers ached from writing, yet she knew she had to continue. Her writing and thoughts were her solace.

She longed for the touch of him, to feel his strong, powerful hand grasp hers, their fingers intertwining. She looked down at her frail hands, the lace around the cuffs of her nightdress covering most of her pale flesh. She shoved back the sleeve to look at each bone jutting out from her wrist and hand beneath her parchment-fragile skin. She shuddered at her own ghastliness.

Taking up her quill again, she dipped the tip into the inkwell. She wrote it all down—everything she could recall, all the details she could envision to bring him back to her mind, back to life again.

On a blustery day in November, I left the cottage and walked down the hill to the creek. The sky was gray, the wind harsh. Water cascading over rocks was the only sound aside from the wind in my ears. It was early evening, just before the sun relented behind the clouds and was gone. No one was there save for a few ducks along the creek bed. The air was crisp and clean, redolent with damp leaves. Signs of autumn were everywhere; the leaves had turned golden and deep-red and carpeted the dying grass.

I followed the pathway down to the wooden bridge built ages ago. To keep warm, my hands were shoved in the pockets of my long-dead father's coat. My booted feet clomped on the aged planks and there he stood. Eorwulf. His name is like a sweet tune on my tongue.

The tips of his ears were red. His long ebony hair cascaded down his back to his waist in two plaits on either side of his face. He wore tall, shiny black boots to the knee, dark pants, a long black waistcoat with gold buttons, and a cream-colored tunic beneath that tied at the throat. He seemed out of place there, yet as though he was always a part of it. He turned when he heard me.

His face was battle-scared in many ways, yet smooth and timeless, with a square chin. As I neared, I could see the dusting of five o'clock shadow covering his cheeks. He

smiled to be friendly and I returned that smile. Not wanting to disturb his solitude, I continued past him to the other end of the footbridge. I caught his strong masculine scent on the wind, reminding me of leather and horses.

His presence was there, though; so near yet so far. I watched him from a distance as he stared across the ripples, the wind spraying foamy gusts across the water. He did not speak to me that day, even though I longed to say something to him. I had no words to give him; idly chatting about the weather seemed silly. I watched him turn and walk up the ridge. I never thought I would see him again. I was sure he must be spoken for and I would never know him. I was wrong.

Meira's hand cramped, forcing her to put down the quill. She laced her fingers and bent them back, cracking her knuckles. It was a small respite from writing; she knew she had to go on. She had to get all the words down before they were lost. She stretched her arms over her head, easing stiff back muscles.

She settled back between the cool sheets, a cushioned lap desk balanced on her legs. Her grandfather had made it for her and her mother had fashioned the cushion out of old, faded dress fabric. Meira wrote again as the sun dropped toward the horizon, casting long shadows into the room. Her mother crept in, startled to see her still awake, but made no comment as she lit the tapers by the bed. Meira knew she ought to acknowledge her, but instead continued to write of Eorwulf in the pale gold candlelight until the break of day.

The next day, in the late morning, I returned to the creek for my daily walk to feed the ducks. I took a loaf of bread baked early that morning and broke off crusty pieces, tossing them into the frigid water. The ducks quacked approval as they dove for the tiny morsels. I heard shuffling footsteps behind me and there he was, flashing a dazzling white smile.

My heart pounded at the sight of him. I tried to ignore him, turning back to the ducks and tossing more bread. He stepped beside me and I could smell him once again on the wind. Sniffing the air, it was that unmistakable fragrance of horses and leather and something else I could not place. Something spicy and otherworldly and...heavenly.

He was dressed the same. Even in winter, his skin was still tanned, almost glowing with a faint aura I had never seen on anyone before. His olive complexion would never burn, unlike mine. I was cursed with Irish skin, pale as moonlight and never to turn golden like his.

"Good morrow to ye," he said, breaking the silence.

I weakened in the knees at the sound of his voice, so deep and masculine with a hint of an accent I could not place. I said good morning, and then offered him a crust of bread. We stood there on the timeworn planks of the wooden bridge and fed the ducks. No more words passed between us until he turned to depart.

"Thank ye for sharing your bread." He favored me with a smile before walking away. Then something made him pause and look back. "And the company." His handsome face broke into a wide grin, showing off deep dimples as he gave me a wave of his hand, which was red from the cold.

I watched him leave me again for the second time in as many days, watched him walk back up the pathway and disappear over the ridge. He had left, but he had thanked me for my silent company. I had loved him from then on and...

Meira stopped writing, her quill tip hovering over the parchment. Her throat tightened into a lump and tears blurred the careful handwriting. How could she love him?

She dropped the quill, put her face in her hands and wept, at last yielding to the emotion that had been welling inside her for so long. Warm tears rolled down her cheeks, dripping onto the paper. She tried to wipe them away, only to smear her carefully written words. She reached for a handkerchief, dabbing her eyes. Her hands shook and she knew it was from lack of sleep and food.

She leaned heavily into the pillows, fighting the coughing that scratched her throat and tightened her chest. She could not stifle it for long and succumbed to the illness, spitting blood into a nearby bowl. Catching her breath at last, she picked up the quill to continue. She was only at peace while she wrote of Eorwulf.

I thought of him that night as I lay curled in my bed. I watched the wind blow the naked branches of the oak tree just outside my window. Moonbeams descended into the room in a blue-white veil. I wished for him to be with me, to hold me near him and tell me all was well. Though I knew in my heart things were not fine, how I longed for that one moment that would never come!

After church, I went back to the creek. I could only hope he would be there as I crested the ridge. My heart lurched when I saw him standing in the same place as the day before. He held a silver flask and two cups. A fresh loaf of bread wrapped in a cloth was in a basket at his feet. I pulled my cap down tighter on my ears; the wind was colder that day than any other.

He saw me then and juggled the flask and cups to wave. I smiled, coming to him. The anxious ducks flapped their wings near his feet, waiting for the promise of bread to drop.

"I brought the bread this time." His breath escaped in a fog as he pointed to the loaf. "And tea. I trust ye drink tea?"

I nodded and he poured the steaming liquid into one of the cups, then handed me the hot brew.

"Earl Grey," he said. "Do ye take cream?"

I replied that I did and sipped it, but the tea was so hot, it scalded my tongue. He knew right away I had burned my mouth and concern flickered over his face. I quickly handed back the cup, only to spill it over the rim. It splattered on the bridge. I thought he might be angry, but he laughed instead as he placed the cup at his feet.

"Perhaps I should have cooled it for ye." He chuckled, his smile reaching to his twinkling eyes. "My name is Eorwulf."

"Eorwulf?" I repeated, letting his strange name roll off my tongue. "I'm Meira."

"I know who ye are, Meira." He took my hand in his and kissed it.

A wave of shock went through me as I stared at him, trying to comprehend what he meant. He knows who I am? I thought. He knows my name?

"I don't understand," I said.

"Of course ye don't," he said, still holding my hand and smiling. "'Tis all right, though. Ye will in time."

"If you know who I am—"

"Ye live in the mansion on Hawthorne Ridge," he said. "Your room overlooks the meadow."

My head throbbed with this new information and I was suddenly very aware of how warm his hand had made mine. Although his breath escaped in white plumes, he seemed otherwise unaffected by the cold. He didn't shiver as I did under my oversized coat. I wanted to ask more questions, to learn how he knew this about me, but he continued as if there was nothing strange between us.

"Shall we feed the ducks?"

That was all we exchanged that day. We lapsed into silence and later, sipped hot tea in the solitude of the quiet landscape. I hadn't the courage to ask him how he knew what he knew, nor did he explain. We departed with no promises between us and I did not know if I would see him again...though I suspected I would.

Meira's hand ached and her wrist throbbed. Dawn came, early morning rays streaming through the picture window of her bedroom. She leaned back against the headboard, watching dust particles dance in the sunshine. Weakness shifted through her and it was an effort to hold her head up, to write.

Her bedroom door opened and her mother and the doctor entered, her mother carrying a tray with a bowl of porridge and a cup of steaming tea.

"Here you are, dear."

She reached for Meira's journal, but Meira snatched it back, cradling the loose papers to her chest and hugging the pages as if all were dear treasures. She shook her head vehemently, refusing to relinquish the sacred sheets.

"I just wanted to move it for your breakfast," her mother said, her face knit in concern.

Meira shook her head again, waving her and the tray away. Hugging the journal, she noticed her ink-stained forefinger and thumb.

Her mother placed the tray on a corner of her bed. "You should eat, dearest," she prodded gently.

But Meira refused as the doctor perched on the edge of the bed. He reached for her wrist, held his icy fingertips to her skin and felt her racing pulse. He plugged a stethoscope in his ears, but Meira shoved him away.

"I want to listen to your lungs, Meira," the doctor said, his voice gentle.

Meira clutched her journal closer to her chest, bowing her head and shaking it in a vehement *no*. She could hear her mother's soft sigh and the shifting of the bedding as the doctor rose. Through her lashes, she watched them leave, but her mother paused at the doorway, her hand on the knob.

"Get some rest, dearest. You have circles under your eyes." She closed the door softly behind her.

Just outside the door, she could hear their muffled words.

"She is not improving," the doctor said. "The outlook does not look good. You should prepare yourself."

"How much time?" her mother asked, her voice quivering. Meira could tell she tried hard to keep it steady.

"Perhaps days, no more."

She heard her mother's choked sob and then there was silence.

Meira listened to the deathly quiet, clutching the journal, wondering if she would hear silence like this after she met her end. She knew she had only days left on this earth; she needed no doctor to tell her that. She fought her fatigue, wanting her words and the

vivid tale of Eorwulf more than sleep. She needed to feel something other than despair, so she wrote of what could have been their first kiss. She wasn't sure if it was real or imagined.

We met daily by the creek. Sometimes we would feed the ducks. Other times, we would sit side by side on the creek bed under the large willow tree. That was how we dwindled away the winter.

I could tell him anything except the worst thing. But he already knew. He knew the truth about me—that I was dying. He could feel it, though we never spoke of it. It was a silent truth between us, something we knew was inevitable. There were times, it seemed, I could hear his thoughts as clearly as if they were my own. I can't explain to this day how that is, but I know it to be true. I knew the thought of my illness saddened him. I was weakening more and more as the days passed.

On a blustery cold day in late winter, he kissed me. Snow had fallen, blanketing the ground. Even the shallow places of the creek had frozen. The ducks were gone. He held my hand while we stood in silence on the bridge, his intertwined fingers keeping mine warm. When I was with him, I had no need for a coat or gloves. He radiated warmth and as long as I stood close, I knew I would not be cold.

He released my hand to put his arm around my shoulders. I felt his nose brush my cheek, and then his warm lips grazed my neck and earlobe. Instinctively, my mouth found his, fusing like soldering heat joining metals. We were made to kiss each other and I could feel myself slipping further and further under his spell.

He broke the kiss almost as quickly as he took it, leaning back and watching me with his depthless eyes.

"Forgive me," he said, bowing his head.

"For what?" I asked.

"I should not have kissed you."

I leaned my head on his shoulder, inhaling his scent, that wonderful, heady, masculine fragrance that followed him everywhere.

"I didn't mind." I laced our fingers once again. "I wanted you to."

"It is forbidden by the Elders," he said, his voice nearly a whisper.

I wanted to ask who the Elders were, but he shushed me with a finger to my lips. I let it go because in that moment with Eorwulf, I was blissfully happy, feeling fully alive for the first time.

At noon, her mother returned. Meira had not touched her breakfast. Her mother tried to persuade her to eat her chicken soup and drink her hot tea, but Meira again refused. She wanted nothing to do with eating or sleeping. She only wanted to write and continue telling the story of Eorwulf. As she penned the words, her emotions soared high, taking her along the journey of her thoughts. She was a prisoner of her own emotions.

In the short time we shared together, we walked along the creek, capturing stolen moments. It became more difficult for me to leave the house with my failing health. But our meetings kept me alive, made me stronger. Even though he had said it was forbidden, we kissed each other under the willow tree as though it would be the last time. I longed for him after we parted. Spring neared and at last we were free of the frigid temperatures and the frozen ground.

He wore a long-sleeved black tunic, untied at the collar, revealing bronzed skin sprinkled with dark hair. I wore a dress of midnight-blue with my grandmother's lace

wrap, as there was still a chill in the air. I saw him from afar that day and I joined him on the bridge. He took my hand in his, kissed my palm, making my poor heart flutter.

“Why do ye come here?” he asked suddenly and I thought it was strange.

Certainly by now, he would know the answer to that question. We had shared so much, felt so much together.

“I just wanted to know,” he said then, as if reading my thoughts.

“I come to clear my head. The doctor thinks the fresh air helps.” I turned away, unable to meet his dark gaze, and stared at the rippled water. “I come to release myself of my bondage. This is my only reprieve from a stifling room. My afternoon excursion is the only reason I’m allowed to leave the house. I thought you realized...I’m sick.”

“I did,” he said softly. “Though ye have never spoken of it to me before now.” He continued to hold my hand, gazing at me with heart-rending tenderness.

“Why do you come here?” I asked.

“I come for you,” he whispered, squeezing my hand. “Because ye need me.”

He kissed my hand again, holding my cool fingertips against the warmth of his lips. He released me to touch a loose tendril of auburn hair about my face and then run his hand through my thick locks.

“Who are you?” I whispered, finally voicing the question I had long wanted to ask.

“Tell me, Meira, would ye believe me if I told ye I could take away your illness?”

He whispered against my skin, his breath a cascade of warmth. I was stunned to silence, unable to comprehend the words he had spoken.

“No,” I said at last.

“I can.”

“How?”

“I can take your illness from ye and take ye to a place where ye will no longer feel the pain of it,” he said. “I have spoken to the Elders and they’ve agreed to let me bring ye with me.”

“I...I don’t understand. Who are the Elders? Who are you for that matter?” My heart pattered quickly now, a fast cadence in my chest.

“Search your heart, Meira. Ye know who I am.”

Perhaps I did know then who and what he was. But my mind refused to believe it. I had always known he was different. There was something alluring about him, something regal and pure. Now more than ever, he seemed to glow with that otherworldly luminosity.

“I do know,” I said, my voice shaky.

I could never explain to anyone who he was, especially my mother, for he came from the Heavens to take me away. And I was going to let him. It would be my only salvation from my hell.

“Then come with me now,” he urged.

I shuddered at the thought. Go with him? The only places I knew were my room and this creek. I felt anchored here. How could I leave with him? My heart thudded in my chest and ears, drowning out the chirps of new birds, the whisper of the wind. I gripped his hand, knowing what I wished to say and what I should say.

“Where?” I asked, though I was sure I knew the answer.

“To my home, where ye will be safe,” he replied.

“Will I ever be able to return?”

“I’m afraid not. Once ye cross into my world, ye can never come back.”

I would leave behind everything and everyone that meant anything to me. Could Eorwulf understand that? He had to realize the thought ripped my insides to shreds, knowing I would leave this place forever; knowing I would leave my family and my home on Hawthorne Ridge.

“Will you come?” he asked, hope in his eyes.

I looked down at the faded wood planks of the footbridge, noted the splintering slats and mentally counted each one of them. I bit my lip, hard, until I felt stinging pain and tasted the metallic tang of blood.

“I cannot.”

He bowed his head and gave a silent nod. We turned then and looked at the creek, watching the water flow freely over the rocks. We were silent for a time and then he reached into his pocket.

“Take this then, Meira,” he said, reaching for my hand. He placed something cold and hard in my palm.

Looking down, I saw it was a gold button from the coat he always wore in the wintertime. The button had a symbol embossed on it, with a strange gnarled tree branch and a blooming flower with large, crescent-shaped petals. I had never seen anything like it before.

“If you change your mind, and ye have need for me, just rub the pad of your thumb over the Perrus flower.”

“What will happen if I do?”

“I will come to ye.” He smiled then, the corners of his lips turning up as he closed my fingers around the small, shiny button.

He enfolded me in his arms and held me close as his hand ran the length of my hair. I rested my head on his chest, listening to his deep breathing and the faint running water of the creek, the soft singing of birds overhead. He seemed content then and so was I.

It was dusk now, as evidenced by the darkening window in her room—her only window to the world. Her untouched food had gone cold, even though her mother tried many times to persuade her to eat and put aside her journal. But Meira would not surrender her quill and ink. She had more to write yet.

With her candles bathing the room once again in a pale amber glow, she continued to write of Eorwulf. She was weary, though, and losing her battle to live. Death would come soon and she had yet to write her final farewell. So with a deep breath, she began with a shaking hand. Her once careful script suffered now, growing ragged as she fought frequent coughing bouts.

The memory of our time together is vivid in my dying mind. I can still see his face, hear his voice the day he told me he would take me away to his world. That was the last time I left this house. My illness took a firm grasp and I could no longer leave for my afternoon walks. I have wondered, though, if he came to the creek and looked for me, wondered if he knew I could not come. How long would he wait for me?

I have lost my powers of speech now. I can only converse in writing, so I began to write this journal to leave behind. I leave behind these words to you, Mother. You know

by now the coughing is frequent and is often accompanied by blood. I cannot stop it. I feel as though I am drowning.

Mother, do not worry for me. I go to a better place. I have made my decision and though I am afraid of what is to become of me, I have hope that I can live in a world where I will not cough and ache. 'Tis goodbye—

Her hand stopped abruptly, the inkwell spilling across the page, as she coughed and sputtered. She was unable to control it this time. The quill went limp in her hand as she gasped, trying to catch her breath. With ink on her hands, she reached for her bedside table, fumbled for the drawer between coughing bouts, and pulled it open. The golden button waited for her. She grasped it in her frail hand, clutching it in her palm.

Her thumb brushed across the Perrus flower with her last breath. Her sightless eyes peered into the shadows and a faint smile played upon her dry, cracked lips. She died with her last thoughts of Eorwulf, her memories tucked safely between the carefully written pages.

That was how her mother found her moments later. The button dropped from Meira's limp fingers and danced across the floor, bouncing up and down before disappearing into the dark chasm under the bureau.

The End

Meet the Author

Michelle Miles writes in several genres but finds she enjoys creating other worlds best of all. Her contemporary novella, **TALK DIRTY TO ME**, is currently available with Samhain Publishing and she hard at work on the follow-up, **NICE GIRLS DO**. She is a PRO member of Romance Writers of America, as well as a board member of her local chapter, Yellow Rose Romance Writers, and is a native Texan residing in suburban Fort Worth.

You can visit her website at www.michellemiles.net and her blog, Ye Olde Inkwell, at www.michellemiles.net/blog for all the latest info and to sign up for her monthly newsletter, The Monthly Grind. When she's not writing, Michelle is an avid hockey fan.

* * *

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