



THE WALLED GARDEN
Michele Lang

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By Michele Lang

About the Author:

Michele Lang writes supernatural tales: the stories of witches, lawyers, goddesses, bankers, demons, and other magical creatures hidden in plain sight.

Michele is the author of the historical fantasy **LADY LAZARUS**, coming out September 2010. **LADY LAZARUS** tells the story of Magda Lazarus, a witch with the power to summon souls and a sister who can foretell the future. Set on the eve of World War II in a magical Budapest, Magda must do battle with SS Werewolves, wizards, and demons, including the one that has possessed a willing Adolf Hitler...

Praise for **LADY LAZARUS**:

“An absolutely unique protagonist in an engaging tale set against the backdrop of the greatest clash of good and evil in human history. What’s not to love about **LADY LAZARUS**?”

-**JIM BUTCHER**, #1 New York Times-bestselling author of THE DRESDEN FILES series

“With lyrical prose, a fascinating heroine, and a darkly powerful, emotional narrative, **LADY LAZARUS** is simply magic. Intriguing, beautiful, and impossible to put down.”

-**MELJEAN BROOK**, New York Times-bestselling author of THE GUARDIAN series

To find out more about Michele, please visit her on the web at www.michelelang.com

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THE WALLED GARDEN

*Spring 1988
Columbia College
New York City*

He had left me for dead.

I think this is what bothered people the most. That, and the fact he had attacked me in broad daylight as I had wandered through Riverside Park in September, daydreaming.

The doctors had established that he had only tried to choke me to death and only ripped my clothes, not gotten them off. When I returned to school my freshman year, with a bruised trachea and a battered soul, the other girls couldn't kid themselves that I was somehow at fault. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

What a downer, I know. But in the end I was just another statistic in a gritty, crime-ridden city. Plenty of my ex-friends tried to rationalize me away, leave me for dead, too. I don't blame them, at least not anymore.

But at the time, I survived by staying angry, not by leaving the past to the past. I was used to being the weird kid: Mireya, the Puerto Rican girl from Brooklyn on a prep school scholarship in New England, now on scholarship at a fancy Ivy League school in New York. My mom was a seamstress, never finished high school. I already knew how to make my own way.

I kept to myself, and kept silent, long after the physical harm to my throat had healed for the most part. I slept in my clothes, and I kept the light on for a solid year. My best friend Colleen made me eat, and until I could go back to swallowing pizza and

homemade chili, she cooked me split pea soup herself. Two years passed, years in which I excelled in my studies but lost myself.

I was okay in the daytime, in the dullness of my routine. But at night, all alone...

If it weren't for a man named Jonathan Mellon, my would-be murderer would have won. But Mellon refused to leave me for dead. When it really counted, he stood his ground. And he did it to set me free.

I first encountered Jonathan Mellon at the scene of a different crime, two years after I almost paid for daydreaming in the park with my life. The Columbia campus centers on a quad of buildings, libraries, lecture halls, and dorms. But most of the students lived in housing off-campus, sprinkled around the iffy neighborhood of Morningside Heights.

I lived in River Hall, around the corner from the place in Riverside Park where I had almost met my end. The morning I found Mellon at the entrance to River Hall, his antique Mercedes was parked in front -- what was left of it, anyway. Some evil bastard had taken a baseball bat to the doors, smashed in the lights and all of the windows, and slashed all four tires.

I had just returned from my first class of the day, and the street was relatively deserted. Curiosity got the better of me, and I walked around the car to survey the damage. A polite note in the rear window proclaimed: "No Radio, Don't Bother."

Spray painted along the destroyed side of the champagne-colored car in response: “JUST CHECKING.”

I caught the anguish of the young guy, who was about my age, and I winced for him and his murdered car. “That’s pretty cold,” I muttered, not expecting him to reply or even notice me – by now I had perfected the art of invisibility.

“It certainly is,” the man replied, his focus staying steady on the car, the expression on his face pained. He had a faint accent that I couldn’t place. “This is my bitchy little sister’s car, too. Oh, bother.”

His genteel misery troubled me somehow. Guys like him -- tall, preppy, golden blond – were not supposed to have problems. They were supposed to live off campus in their own daddy-purchased apartments, go to the Village to party with The Cars and the Talking Heads, and show up for class just often enough to pass.

“Maybe you should call the cops,” I said, my voice husky with disuse. This was the longest conversation I’d voluntarily had with a man in months. “You should report it. I know it’s a pain, but at least they’ll put your complaint on file.”

He turned to face me for the first time. His eyes burned with cold, blue fire, and I could see he was angry as well as in mourning. But his lips remained fixed in a small, careful smile. “This is the third car I’ve had smashed up in this neighborhood. The police just shrugged and did the paperwork last time. A man’s got to choose his battles.”

We looked at each other for a long moment, and I suddenly had the strangest feeling that I had met this man before.

The stranger broke the silence with a smile and a nod. “I know you,” he said. “You’re in my miserable Art History survey course, aren’t you.”

I felt the jolt all the way down to my shoes. Did he know me for the notorious reasons most people did? I'd heard the whispers trailing after me in the cafeteria, on the quad. Maybe this preppy blueblood moved so far outside my customary bolshie circles that he just didn't know about me. The thought gave me hope.

I swallowed hard, turned my attention back to the remains of his car. The intrepid radio hunters had smashed up every car on the block the same way. "Art History," I finally, lamely said. "It's miserable? I like the teacher."

"Oh, her," he said, and laughed uncomfortably. "She's ready to toss me out altogether."

"Really?" Amanda Zee was one of my favorite teachers, just out of graduate school, and passionate about teaching as well as publishing her scholarship. "She doesn't seem like such a hard-ass."

"She's not. I deserve to fail."

I swung back to face him, and for moment all of the upper west side of New York held its breath. My heart decided not to stop but instead to gallop, and the ragged edges of a familiar panic began to prickle of my arms like phantom brambles, poking into my skin, pulling me down.

There was something uncanny about him, about the deserted street and the smashed up cars. He was a rip in my gray, mundane reality, a flash of gold on the cement sidewalk.

I forced myself to smile, though the effort probably looked pretty ghastly. "Sorry about your car," I whispered, and I slipped away into River Hall, my student ID at the

ready. The security guard, an ageless mummified Egyptian named Ali, sat silent behind his desk as I streaked by.

But I swear this time I saw Ali smile as I fled from the golden stranger still standing in the street.

He reappeared the next day, like the sun over the horizon. I saw him from far away from my perch at the top of the Low Library steps. A slip of paper he held between his long, aristocratic fingers fluttered in the breeze.

He climbed the steps, his long legs conquering them with no apparent effort. “This is you, isn’t it?” he said without preamble, as if he were used to addressing the commoners of the world and commanding them at his will.

I shrugged and went back to studying the textbook open on my lap, hiding the jolt of fear as best as I could. A listless breeze crawled up the low library stairs and swirled around my ankles – it was a hot spring that year. “Yeah, I was me, last time I checked.”

“No. I mean this.” And he waved the paper at me.

I flinched – had he found the newspaper articles about me, what had happened to me? I raised my head, ready to blow him off with a quick, efficient snarl – and saw just in time that’s not what the guy had in mind, not at all. He didn’t have a newspaper clipping, but my own hand-lettered sign. One that I hadn’t even thought of for a year or more.

“You type papers,” he said, his voice rising with excitement. “I need help. I’m failing out of school because my typing skills don’t exist. Can you type fast?”

My heart started racing again, at the man's close proximity, but also at the prospect of cash. The paper-typing idea was born of desperation in my sophomore year, and before now it had never borne fruit. If anything, I needed money even more than the year before.

"What's your name?" I said. I didn't mean to act rude, but my voice came out husky and rough, like I'd been crying.

"Jonathan Mellon, of the Philadelphia Mellons." He extended a well-tended, manicured hand, and after a moment I took it and shook it. He was all business, and I took refuge in that.

I leaned back on the steps and smiled. "You already know me from class and by my sign. Mireya Rodriguez, of the Brooklyn Rodriguezes." For the first time in I didn't know how long, I started to laugh at this awkward, lovely white boy, slender and earnest as a greyhound. "Our numbers are legion, Mr. Mellon."

"Well, ours aren't." His smile widened, and after a moment's hesitation, he sat down next to me, a careful distance away. "I hope you can type fast."

And so began our nefarious partnership.

I didn't mean to re-engineer his papers, not at first. I got out my trusty IBM Selectric, Mami's high school graduation present to me, checked the ribbon to make sure it was nice and fresh. The spring morning thrummed with life, and I propped up my only window with a wooden coat hanger to let in the semi-fresh air from the enclosed courtyard. A single huge ginkgo tree grew there, and a family of cardinals had made it their improbable refuge. That courtyard was loud – an opera singer lived in the building

across from me, and an oboe player liked to practice until midnight during the week. But I loved that courtyard. For two years now, it had kept me connected to the living world.

On that morning in April, I took a first look at the Art History paper due the next day. Mellon's handwriting was terrible. Awful. But his writing was even worse. Plenty of ideas, sure, but they choked each other like too many baby birds crushed together in a too-small nest.

"You got five separate papers here, *mi corazon*," I whispered under my breath as I re-read his work. "Hm...leave this for next time. Switch these paragraphs, fix the spelling over here..."

I started typing, slowly at first, but then my fingers took flight with his words. The paper was his, I swear it. All I did was a little judicious tidying.

Mellon was running a D average in Art History, but he got a B- on that paper, with an encouraging note from Miss Zee scribbled on the bottom. And he insisted on paying me what he called the "expedited" rate – three dollars a page, instead of my usual one. And he insisted on paying me for the title page. Plus a "good luck" bonus, whatever that was.

Once, I would have been too proud to take the extra money. I would have thrown back my shoulders, told him I didn't accept bribes, and walked away. But that Mireya was gone forever. And also, I liked eating and the payment from this one paper fed me for almost a week.

But more than that, I enjoyed traveling the labyrinths of his mind, wandering the tangled byways of his thrown-together thoughts until I found the worthy truth hidden at

the center. All I did was cut away some of the strangling undergrowth when he set those thoughts to a particular subject on paper. That was all.

At least that was what I told myself.

The nightmares started up again a week after that. I had thought the creep who'd dragged me into the bushes in Riverside Park two years before was some kind of bogeyman, some phantom of night, nobody who intersected with my daily life.

But I was wrong. About a week after Mellon hired me to type everything he did for school, I found a wadded-up note shoved under my door. The note was from my attacker, and he knew all about me. It contained too many details, things I had left to die in the mud at the bottom of the embankment.

It was folded neatly, the handwriting so neat and prim, pathologically perfect like a machine had formed the letters on the page.

I can guess what you must be thinking. The coincidence is too great – Mellon must have been the attacker. But, no. Even aside from the perfect handwriting, I knew it wasn't Mellon. Mellon smelled clean and sharp, citrus and mint. The bastard who had tried to kill me smelled of blood and meat.

And now my attacker knew where I lived.

The next week I pretty much stayed to myself, as I had when I had first returned from the hospital over two years before. My current RA knew all about the new note, but

he was worse than useless – he'd looked a little too prurient when he first found out who I was, and now his face lit up with a creepy delight when I showed him the paper and demanded he call the similarly useless campus police.

So I told the creepy RA to warn Ali, and I stayed to myself. The only person who checked in on me was Colleen, my steadfast friend from the old neighborhood, and she tried to tease me out of my cave. “You’re turning into Pariah Carey,” she said, laughing maniacally at her horrible pun.

“Well, you’re lamer than Duran Duran,” I replied, trying my best to sound like my old, pun-impaired self. I knew I wasn’t fooling Colleen or anybody else.

“You need to get outside,” Colleen said, trying hard to keep up the façade of chummy amusement, like she could chuckle me out of my bunker. But she picked at her cuticles, the way she always did when she worried about me. “You are going to starve to death in here.”

Just then the phone rang, shrieked from under the bed, and I leapt to my feet, a sob strangled in my throat. I re-arranged the paisley scarf I kept wrapped around my neck, and Colleen’s mask slipped to reveal the horrible reality: my oldest friend pitied me. Me. Pity.

I shot her a hurt look as I reached under the bed for the phone. Part of me hid under there, knowing it was going to be my attacker’s voice on the phone.

I cleared my throat and answered the phone. “Hello?” I said, my voice rough and hoarse. I held my breath and waited.

It wasn't. It was Mellon. "I need your help, Mireya," he said, his bland, confident voice a little tremulous. "I got hit with a surprise 24 hour paper. Ten pages. I'm dead."

"Don't say that, don't joke like that." I ran a shaky hand through my hair, and Colleen's pity shimmered into curiosity. Good, let her wonder.

"No, I'm not joking." Mellon's voice sounded tinny on my ancient, beat up bakelite rotary. "If I fail this class, my father is going to disown me."

My smile was genuine, and it reached past Colleen's worry to the realization that I could help somebody else. I had the goods, and that knowledge felt really fantastic. "You won't fail. I won't let you, Mellon. Come on over."

Colleen slipped away before Mellon arrived, and she was smart enough not to say anything about him. But she leaned against my rickety door, looked me up and down as she got ready to go.

"Watch yourself," was all she said, but her eyes were full of a fear too big to express in words.

I saved Mellon's academic life that night, and half dozen more times after that. His grades climbed steadily, but not fast enough to cause suspicion. I only edited, never rewrote, so the overchoked ideas still knocked down his grades to an extent. But for the first time in his academic career, Mellon was gunning for the Dean's List.

After he got his first A, we celebrated by going to the West End, a local watering hole with great music and cheap beer – not that I needed to worry because of course Mellon insisted on paying. I had written many a paper of my own at the long,

unvarnished bar, with a single bottle of Dos Equis to rent the barstool and the background roar to remind me I still existed.

We decided to cap off our beers with dinner. I wolfed down a roast beef sandwich, giving up any ladylike pretenses after the first salty, delicious bite. Finally I wasn't hungry, finally.

I started on the fries and watched Mellon eat his BLT, much more slowly. He took a tiny sip of beer, set his glass a little too carefully on the crinkly paper napkin.

"Hey, Mellon, you okay?" I asked, my voice tentative. I didn't like poking at him through his thick layer of reserve. I liked the space between us.

He hesitated, and then his brilliant smile wiped out the shadows lurking in his eyes. "I'm fine, better than. Because you, Mireya, have got the magic touch." He raised his glass to me. "Thank you for that."

I hadn't thought of myself as anywhere in the same universe as good luck for an exceedingly long, dreary time. I nodded at his noble, if wrong, sentiment, and took a sip of beer myself. "I'm not good luck. You wrote those papers yourself. All I do is type them."

His smile broadened, and he leaned back, enjoying our silent complicity. Elvis Costello wailed a sweet, sad song over the crappy sound system, and I finished off the last of the sandwich. Farewell, sandwich...

Mellon must have caught my longing for one more bite. He waved for the waitress. "Hello, please favor us with a platter of nachos."

His odd turn of phrase made me snort with laughter. I loved the way laughing felt.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “And I amuse you how?”

I sensed his hurt feelings under his politesse, and I hastened to reassure him. “No, Mellon, don’t worry. I just thought of you ordering bar food in Brooklyn like that. The waitresses I know out there would just stare at you like a freaking alien.”

We smiled at each other, again complicit in something neither one of us wanted to identify or name. We both knew we would destroy it by speaking of it.

“It is a beautiful night,” Mellon said. “Let’s go for a walk on campus...I assure you, it’s so well-lit it looks like day.” He leaned back, and I swear he held his breath, as if he knew how risky a walk in the darkness was to me.

At that moment, I knew he knew about what had happened to me in the park. And for once it didn’t change anything between us. We both knew what had happened, but for the first time I didn’t care.

How I longed to walk again in the moonlight.

The Quad was lit up like a Christmas tree; golden lights strung through the trees glistened like tinsel. A slow, cool breeze wandered along the brick walkways and between the venerable buildings.

We stood together at the wrought iron gate at Broadway and 116th Street, the entrance to the Columbia Quad. All was Ivy League perfection. But a strange rustle brought us up short. I scanned the flat, manicured walkway until I found the source of the noise. “Jesus,” I muttered, but I stood my ground.

A horde of rats scuttled from under the boxwoods across the way, crossing toward the student center next to Carman Hall.

“How many?” I croaked. My eyelids felt rusty; I blinked hard to focus my vision and to make sure I was really seeing what my brain insisted was there.

“Oh, about twenty-five or so,” Mellon said, his voice chipper but a little faint.

He moved closer to me, and I swallowed hard, appreciating his presence. “I’ve never seen so many all at once,” I whispered. “And they’re huge.”

“Yep. But they seem pretty mellow for rats.”

“You kidding me? You ever see that movie Willard?”

“What?”

My mind flashed on a dozen viewings of the horror flick from the 70s, played on our grainy black and white TV at home on endless Sunday afternoons.

My mouth had gone cotton-dry by that point. “Never mind.”

I reached out and grabbed his hand. His fingers felt smooth and strong and he never flinched, just squeezed my hand in response. The rat horde stopped, and their little rat eyes focused on us, casually assessing whether they could take us.

They scuttled along the pathway toward us, and we were all in complete agreement – they could totally take us, chew us up and leave our skeletons behind on 116th street.

I held my breath, tensed to run. And then the leader, an enormous gray rat with protruding teeth, sneezed and licked his nose. A spell was broken and the swarm turned away to the sewer grating near the student center and they poured themselves between the iron bars like furry rat-water.

“Don’t think I’ll be dining at the student center any time soon,” I said. Mellon laughed so hard I thought he was going to pass out.

“You’re good luck, alright,” he finally said. “But you’re also crazy, Mireya.”

“And you just figured this out? Tsk, tsk, Mr. Mellon of the Philadelphia Mellons,” I murmured. “Only a crazy person...”

My voice trailed off, and I didn’t finish my thought – only a crazy person would still be at this school after what happened to me. I was crazy enough to insist on staying. But I had lost myself somewhere, and I wasn’t about to give up the fight of getting me back. That meant sticking it out here, now, in this place.

Mellon got quiet. “If you’re crazy, then I don’t want to be sane.”

I kept clutching his hand, and he kept holding mine. And my focus slowly shifted from the swarm of rats to the fact that I was holding the hand of a gorgeous blond boy in springtime, under the light of a New York City moon.

We stood there for awhile, Mellon’s hair all silvery in the shadowy night. “We better get out of here before we end up as Rat Chow.” My voice sounded raspy but coherent.

“Of course. Right as always.” Mellon led the way forward.

The stars danced over our heads in a swirling fox trot. “Where are we going, Mellon?” It occurred to me I was drunk or high, but no – my mind was clear and sharp as the night.

When I looked at him, his eyes sparked silver, like his hair. “I want to show you something. Don’t be frightened.”

Of course a bolt of pure adrenaline shot through me after that, but I swallowed hard and held onto Mellon’s hand. “But should I be? Scared, I mean.”

He smiled then, a lonely and untamed smile, an expression I never imagined could look so at home on Jonathan Mellon's patrician face. "Yes. You should be scared. But you're crazy enough to come with me anyway. And, Mireya, no matter what happens, I want you to know that's a good thing."

I took a step closer to him, despite the fact his words freaked me out. "Why? If I only..."

"If you only nothing." He pulled me along, under the shifting cotton of the clouds racing by on the wind over our heads. "Just come on."

Our steps quickened as we broke into a run across the quad. No one else crossed our path, though a dense cloud of little birds wheeled wildly over our heads.

He pulled me up the stairs of Low Library, past the kneeling Rodin statue, the Thinker, to the entrance of the St. Paul Chapel. Faint music rose from the depths of the crypt in the basement. The crypt housed a famous student-run club, the Postcrypt, that hosted musicians on Saturday nights.

I followed Mellon down the slippery, slightly damp stone stairs. As we got closer to the wooden door barring our way into the club, I was surprised to see him pass by the little room, nodding at the kilted guy half asleep on a barstool by the doorway.

"Where are you going?"

He lifted his fingers to his lips and shushed me in response, and pointed to a stairway I'd never noticed before, heading still deeper underneath the chapel.

"Down here," he said.

These stairs were made of different stone than the gray granite of St. Paul's Chapel – something red and crumbly like brick, but with streaks of pearlescent white flaking into opalene brilliance under Mellon's elegant feet.

I slipped a little – there was no handrail – and Mellon grabbed me by the elbow to steady me. We exchanged a glance in the low, flickering light, and as he leaned to me my heart started to pound so hard it was almost painful.

“Mireya?”

“What?” I whispered, half-tranced by the shadows on the stairs.

“Don't forget to breathe. You're turning blue.”

And he smiled, a kind, warm smile to show me he didn't mean to belittle or tease. I smiled back, and for a moment, in a delicious flash of sensation, it was like I'd gone backwards to a Mireya who had never suffered, never been attacked.

And then that light, girlish Mireya vanished once again.

“Steady,” Mellon whispered. “The stairs get steeper.”

And so they did – the stairs became blocks of cold brass, slippery and worn through in the middle, strangely scarred and dented by something even colder and harder. The air got colder too, and damp.

But not moldy. Aft first I took that apple blossom scent for cider, but when I saw the first flower petals on the stairs, I gasped.

That flower smell came from flowers. *Flowers.*

“How far down have we gone?” I asked.

Mellon shrugged, and I realized with a start that he had a lantern in his hand. A lantern, okay, not a flashlight or even a candle.

“I had this stashed at the top of the staircase,” he said, anticipating my outburst. “Thought it would be handy.”

For the first time, Mellon made me hesitate. I’d trusted him enough to see him alone for weeks, now. His reserve and courtesy had reassured me, even as I had avoided all the people except Colleen in my usual circles.

And here we were, far enough away from the world that nobody could hear me scream for help. And Mellon was acting so strangely I hardly recognized him.

My heartbeat raced in my ears, and I felt my pulse pounding in my throat. I wiped my damp palms on the front of my pants, and waited for him to stop.

He did, and raised the lantern high to take a good look at me. “You are afraid.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I’m sorry, Mellon. Yes, I am.”

He nodded in reply, slowly. “Nobody can get at you here. You’re here with me.”

His eyes flashed with electricity, and I forced myself to breathe slowly until my heart could follow my mind and calm down. I had, up until this point, found Mellon unthreatening, a safe male presence in a world of predators. But now, in the weird dappled light of his lantern, Mellon looked fierce and powerful. And protective of me.

I was no old time damsel in distress. But I was happy to place myself under Mellon’s protection in this strange, subterranean place.

“We’re almost there, Miss Mireya Rodriguez of the Brooklyn Rodriguezes.”

He reached for my hand, bent his head over, and reverently kissed my knuckles, his eyes all the while searching out my own.

And that strange flicker of freedom from the past enticed me again. Somewhere down below a different Mireya waited for me. I didn't know her yet, but suddenly I wanted to meet her, very much.

Mellon held my hand, the one that he had kissed, and we picked our way down the last dozen or so stairs. The flowers dotting the surface of the stairs became a veritable snowdrift of white, and the last step was completely carpeted in their strange, fragrant petals.

It was unbelievable. I took a deep breath, rubbed my eyes as if I could rub the illusion of it all away like tears.

We stood together in a brick walled garden, trellised with climbing roses and wisteria and the strange apple-scented white blossoms blowing over the stairs. It was broad daylight. A low, rhythmic chirp sounded from somewhere inside the boxwoods planted all along the perimeter of the garden's walls.

"Nightingale frogs," Mellon said, his voice low.

I had never heard of Nightingale frogs. Have you? Has anyone heard a song like that, anyone who lives on the surface, ignorant of the world branching away from under their feet?

"It's beautiful, so beautiful," was all I dared to say. "Jonathan, thank you so much."

"My father's people are the Mellons of Philadelphia," Mellon said. "My mother's people, well..."

His voice trailed away, and I knew better than to ask. Instead, I tilted my head back and looked far overhead, saw diaphanous clouds racing across the blue sky, a tiny, perfect moon hanging upside down.

It felt like coming home.

I bumped into Colleen a week later at the Hungarian Pastry Shop, where I waited with my tea for Jonathan to appear. She almost passed me by, her chocolate croissant in hand, but then she did a double take and almost dropped her breakfast on the ground.

“Mireya?” Her voice was no more than an incredulous squeak.

I laughed, a deep belly laugh that felt almost as good as sex. “That’s me. At least the last time I checked.”

“Oh, girl, you look – beautiful.”

“Different, you were going to say.” Colleen didn’t pity me now, oh no. I think I frightened her a little bit, now.

“Where have you been? You don’t answer your phone, I knocked on your door only about eleventy billion times...” Her voice trembled, even though a smile stayed imperfectly pasted on her face.

I emerged from my bemused haze long enough to really see her. “Oh no, you were worried.” I reached up and hugged her around the neck, gave her a peck on the cheek. “You are a good friend to me, sweetie. And an old soul.”

She pulled back and her eyes narrowed. “You sound like you’re saying goodbye. Or like you are zoned out of your everloving mind. That Mellon guy isn’t some kind of dealer – is he?”

“No way. Just my boss, and he’ll be here in a minute if you want to meet him and make sure he’s okay.”

She took an absent-minded bite of croissant and backed away, looking thoroughly spooked. “I have class in ten minutes. Sorry.” She ate the rest of the croissant in two or three bites, swallowed her meal, and evidently made up her mind to speak. “I’m not sure what’s going on with you. All I can say is be careful. Remember your limitations.”

Her little speech made me laugh again, sadly this time. “Maybe I should be worrying about you. You always told me to trash my illusions and reach for the stars...”

“Maybe I’m just saying the same thing a different way.” And with a final wave of her fingers, Colleen left for class.

Mellon appeared not five minutes after Colleen’s parting words of wisdom. “Okay, Mellon,” I said, glad to leave her worries behind and ready for business. “What have you got for me?”

His smile, as usual, hid a world of secrets. “A philosophy paper.”

I glanced down at the handwritten paper he held out for me. The paper’s title: The Walled Garden.

The words brought me up short and I looked up from the crabbed, scabbly handwriting overflowing the crinkly lined paper. “I thought...”

“Don’t worry. It’s a hypothetical garden.”

I smiled back. “I’ll take that to mean that our secret is safe. So in that case, I have something for you. Something amazing!”

The dancing cool light in his eyes went dark, and he sank down in the chair next to mine. “You went back there, didn’t you. Without me.”

“I couldn’t resist.”

“You went alone.” Something new shone in his face, and I read it immediately and with great pleasure – it was admiration, mixed with a flicker of fear.

Mellon, afraid. My pleasure shaded into amazement. I cleared my throat and straightened the pink lace scarf arranged around my neck. “Yes, alone. I’ve been in worse places alone, believe me.”

He nodded. “You brought something back.”

“Yes! Good student, you know your teacher well. But you’ll never guess what. A map. A. Map!”

He drew his chair closer to mine, leaned in and whispered. “A map? Of what? And wherever did you find it?”

“I didn’t find it, I made it. And it’s a map of the world beyond the garden wall.”

He drew back with a cry of pain, leaned in and grabbed my shoulders. He gave me a little shake, caught himself doing it, and then almost crushed me in a fierce, all-enveloping hug.

Now there was a reaction I’d never have expected to inspire out of Jonathan Mellon. And here’s the strangest thing: I welcomed that hug. Lost myself in it, in fact. And lost and safe in his arms, I considered what a freaking miracle that sense of safety represented.

“You jumped over the wall!” he murmured against the top of my head. I could feel him swallowing hard. “I can’t believe I didn’t lose you.”

“Of course not. I have the world’s best sense of direction. And if I know how to do anything, it’s to come back no matter what.”

I gently disentangled myself from Mellon’s embrace, took out the folded up square of paper I kept in the back pocket of my jeans. Unlike him, I took pains to keep my work neat, and the graph paper had a sketched pathway and careful notes covering both sides.

I leaned in and waved the paper. “Look, the walled garden is in the center.”

I took in the sight of his quick, neat features as he pored over my drawings. While he was distracted, I stole a close up view of my strange and beautiful new friend’s face. And in that moment, tracing the line of his lips and his jaw with my gaze, I realized I could love this man.

It was crazy, classic Mireya crazy. But it also made a certain immutable sense. Because I had never known a man like Mellon, one who quietly moved mountains and revealed worlds without saying a word. One who realized that words are jewels, that if you can work magic, there’s no need to brag about it.

He poked me gently in the shoulder. “You’re daydreaming again. Go ahead.”

I smiled up at him, and he wrapped an arm protectively around my shoulder and rubbed at his jaw with his other hand. I watched him take the map and study it, and a slow realization came to a rolling boil in my mind:

He didn't know about any of this. All he knew personally was the garden itself – he had never gone over the top. And that knowledge put the fear into me for the first time.

Why hadn't Mellon gone exploring down below the way I had?

He poked me in the shoulder again. “So what did you find?”

Mellon, impatient. I'd discovered a world of wonders in my friend, as well as in the subterranean world he'd opened to me. “Well, once you climb the trellis and go over, across the brass stairs, there's a cinder path, lined with cactus and these strange purple vines with flowers.”

He nodded for me to go on, an odd expression on his face. I took a sip of my now-tepid tea, and leaned against his warm, strong arm. “About fifty feet down -- the pathway slopes down – the way forks. I decided to pick right every time, and the path branched about five times.”

I indicated each fork in the path with my pinkie, touching his finger as we traced my recorded footfalls together on the page.

“And then...” I hesitated. What I was about to say was amazing, unbelievable, and breathtaking – but I could never unsay it. I savored the silence before words.

Mellon nodded for me to go on. He was ready.

“I came to a door.”

He leaned forward even more. “To another garden.”

“Yes.”

He wrinkled his forehead, nibbled at his lower lip. “And you jumped the wall and climbed the stairs.”

“Yes, Mellon! It was so amazing.”

“And what did you discover at the top of the stair?” His voice sounded dry and precise, like a lawyer doing a routine courtroom cross-examination in a boring town somewhere far, far away from where we lived.

“It was a speakeasy. I came up through the wine cellar, and all these guys in zoot suits sat in a row along the bar. It had a huge polished bar, even bigger than the West End. And there were – show girls there, too. Wearing flapper dresses and strappy shoes.”

“Astonishing. And what else?”

“The barkeeper knew me, Mellon! He nodded and smiled. Offered me a ‘whiskey neat, on the house, girlie’!”

Mellon’s face went alabaster, like somebody had turned him into a decorative figurine. “You didn’t take it. Tell me you didn’t drink it!”

I leaned up against the whole side of his lean, warm body and looked up into his face, so close I could have kissed him. But I resisted, I didn’t. I didn’t want to steal our first kiss, not in the middle of his panic. “If I did drink it, Mellon, would I have made it back?”

He hugged me again, and I felt a tremor in his fingers, very slight, where his fingertips pressed against my bare arms. “Promise me you won’t do that again. Jump the wall, all alone.”

“But it was amazing, Mellon. I’m a history major...you can just imagine what that was like!”

“No, promise me. As a boy, I swore to my grandfather never to venture past the garden walls. I never imagined you would just go ahead yourself, without telling me first. Mireya, you astonish me.”

I drew back, caressed his cheek until his eyes went from wild to merely troubled. “Mellon, I was free. I met myself down in that pathway, you know? I have to go back. I have to. But I want you to come with me.”

“It’s beautiful, but it’s dangerous.”

“It’s worth it. Come with me!”

When he didn’t respond, I gave into the temptation and ran my fingers through his glorious, thick blond hair. “Come with me. We’ll take the left hand path together. Don’t worry...your grandfather will never know.”

The left hand path was wonderful in a completely different way, one that Mellon seemed to find less threatening than the dangerous speakeasy with the all-too-knowing barkeep. We found a walled garden after only two branchings of the path, and we emerged to rolling fields high on a bluff overlooking what would someday become Passaic, NJ. I recognized the view – it was the same as the one in my tiny bathroom window.

A single Indian woman with a baby on her breast sat cross-legged, and she nodded as we walked by. It was autumn, full daylight, and the leaves sprinkling down into Mellon’s hair were orange, white, and blood red with purple streaks. I carefully filled in my map before we returned to the walled garden under the Columbia University chapel.

Over the next few weeks, my hand-drawn map got more complicated looking than the NYC subway map. I redrew it onto a much larger piece of paper, started naming the pathways so I could keep them straight in my mind, but even so, the twining paths and interlocked gardens crowded each other over the smudged page.

What adventures we had underneath the streets of New York City, Mellon and I. I could write a whole book about it, and someday maybe I will. From the days of Peter Stuyvesant to the Revolutionary War, to World War II to hazy futures beyond our own lives, Jonathan and I explored a city unfolding in time as well as space. We always came back, sometimes with difficulty but more often with a familiar, homecoming ease. But I always left something of myself behind.

In all these times and places I found a single constant, a central point more changeless than our own walled garden: Jonathan Mellon himself. Steadfast, mysterious, bearer of secret fears he was strong enough to carry alone. And no matter where and when we went, we agreed our favorite place and time was our own.

The day Mellon brought back his first A+ paper, we didn't travel anywhere or anywhen, but stayed the night in my room. I double locked the door and put my desk chair up under the doorknob in the extremely unlikely event that Colleen would stop by – even she had given up on me, and now none of my old friends remained in my life. We ate turkey sandwiches by starlight with the window open, and the oboe player regaled us with something slow, sad and sweet, like Debussy blissed out of his mind on opium.

When I let down the window shade and took the clips out of my hair, the music seeped into my veins. The room was full of shadows; Mellon's face shone like the moon.

Mellon unlocked my body and my heart like a garden gate, and his loving caresses were the key.

Afterwards, we lay together on the bed, so close that the twin bed was plenty big enough for the two of us. I sighed and rested my cheek on his narrow, muscular chest, and I reveled in the calm cadence of his heartbeat.

“Why did you talk to me that day out by your beat-up Mercedes, Mellon? It was no accident we met, was it?”

I could feel that Mellon was holding his breath. He exhaled with a slow and ragged sigh, held me even closer. “You have a scent of magic, Mireya. I found you irresistible. Did from the first moment I laid eyes on you.”

He rolled me on top of him, arranged my bare limbs to twine all around him like a climbing trellis of roses. “And I intend to never resist you again.”

The night passed slowly and with a blooming sweetness. It was the purest, most uncomplicated bliss I have ever known.

Which only made the note nailed to my door all the more horrible when we discovered it the following morning.

The door itself was scored with scratches and deep grooves, and it looked scorched, like someone had tried to burn their way through it as we slept.

The paper pinned under the nail smelled rank, like piss and beer and smoke. It was ground in dirt. It smelled like Riverside Park in late September.

My body went cold as I reached up and ripped it off the door. I forced myself not to flinch as I turned the packet of paper over in my hands and opened it.

A small bundle fell into my open palm, and I heard Mellon mutter a foreign curse under his breath. It was a lock of my hair, matted and burned.

The note itself was written in that uncanny neat handwriting I had seen before, and it said only:

YOU ARE MINE

I handed the note to Jonathan and went back into my room without a single word to say. My fingers ached at their tips, and at every point where they had touched the paper.

“The words are a lie,” Jonathan said, his voice clean and clear and strong. “You belong to me. And to yourself.”

I sank to my knees and sat by the window facing the courtyard. A flock of starlings chattered noisily in the branches of the ginkgo tree.

“No, that note tells the truth, sweetheart.” The strength flowed out of me and into the floor under my feet. I sank to the ground, curled up on the floor, and I covered my face with my hands. Focused on breathing slowly. In, out. Focused on the fact that I still breathed.

Jonathan knelt next to me, still wrapped in my sheet, and his hand traced a soft pattern on my back. “It was true once, perhaps. But not anymore.”

“But the – bundle.” My words were heavy as rocks in my mouth. I wiped at my eyes and lifted my head so I could look at him, the closed door looming over us like a gigantic tombstone. He was sleek and golden as a young stag in the springtime.

“It is a curse bag, my love. Do you know what that is?”

I swallowed hard. It hurt. “No. But it means I’m not free. All that time underground...none of it means anything. He’s still got a claim on me.”

“I must have called attention to you. It found you because of me.” He sat back, let the sheet fall back from his shoulders. In the soft light of early morning, the pain in his eyes pierced me, sharper than the rusty nail driven through the paper on my door.

Suddenly, he shook his head, as though he were making up his mind about something important. “No. You will be free, my love. I’ll explain as we go. But we have to hurry.”

I knew what he meant. Whoever – whatever – had left me this note, he had gone back to hide at the bottom of the stairs under the chapel. I knew it, as surely as I now knew that I loved Jonathan Mellon with all my heart and soul.

We raced across the Quad. I held his hand as we ran. Kids passed us all around, lost in their own bubbles of reality, heading to or from their final exams – it was the first day of finals week.

We stopped at the foot of the stairs leading up to the main entrance to the Chapel. “Who attacked me that day, Jonathan?”

Jonathan took an old-fashioned iron key out of a strange little leather fob he had strapped to his belt. He leapt up the stone staircase and fiddled with the enormous locked wooden doors until they silently swung open.

He looked down at me, reached to me with an open hand. “You know the saying, I am certain. ‘Ignorance is bliss.’” And with a strange smile, he bowed and escorted me over the threshold and into the hot darkness of the chapel.

We headed at top speed for the back of the chapel, to the stairs leading to the Postcrypt, and I decided to get the truth out of him, before it was too late. “Ignorance is not bliss, though. It’s deadly.” I half-hurled myself down the stairs after his swift, retreating figure.

He paused at the top of our stairs, his eyes like dark sapphires. “Sometimes things aren’t what they seem. And the illusion is more pleasing, can lead you to your strength better than the naked truth.”

“What do you mean?”

He disappeared down the stairs. I followed, clutching at the wall to keep my balance. “What are you trying to tell me? Don’t speak in platitudes. Who are you really? What are you?”

His voice echoed from somewhere down below. “I’ve known you for awhile. As I said, yours is an attractive magic...I really couldn’t help but love you.”

“What are you, Mellon?”

The silence was painful. By now I’d come to the huge brass stairs, and I had to slow down so I wouldn’t fall. Without Jonathan to hold on to, I had to slide down, and knowing we came to hunt, I had the presence of mind to bring a flashlight instead of a

romantic but relatively weak candle or lantern. For the first time, I could see the deep scratches and slashes clawed into the metal.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, half to myself.

I reached the bottom of the stairs, and Jonathan waited for me, eyes wide.

“Daytime up above is night down here. And at night...the creatures of night claim their share of the world.”

A low growl rose from beyond the garden’s walls.

“Part of what they seek to claim is you. But I won’t have it.”

He came to me, seared my lips with a final kiss. “What am I, Mireya?” He held me as the growls got closer. I passed him the flashlight, but the darkness engulfed us, thicker than velvet.

He shook his head and laughed. “It doesn’t matter any more, what I am. My father is a Pennsylvania coal magnate who fell in love with a woman from the dark places: my mother. This is my mother’s domain, her place of power, and for all I know this is her creature.

“But all that matters is you, Mireya. I first saw you at the bottom of a ditch in Riverside Park, and you were fighting for your life. I didn’t let him get you then, and I won’t let him have you now.”

“Listen to me, Mireya,” Jonathan continued, as the growls rose to a horrible shriek. “I’m going to take care of the monster that attacked you. Very few pure mortals have a magic like yours. It’s a rare and beautiful light, my love – but it attracts the darkness, too. Go back up the stairs, quickly.”

“But, Jonathan, sweetheart...”

“Don’t argue. Go. When it is safe, I will come for you. Be ready, my love.”

The shriek grew into a guttural scream. “Go!”

I had never run away from a fight, not in my entire life. But I knew better than to argue with him – after all, I had met that evil beast before, and had barely survived my first encounter. Now, too late, I understood that Mellon alone had stopped it from snuffing me out. The only way to thank him was to try to survive this second time.

I ran back up the stairs as best as I could, half-blinded by tears and by the loss of the flashlight, and it wasn’t until I stopped for air in the middle of the Quad that I realized it –

I still had the map, wadded up in my back pocket.

I finished the rest of the school year in a haze, doing what I knew I had to do in a world that had become a faint dream. I picked up my nemesis, the telephone, and called Colleen for help; my old friend forgave me for my neglect of our friendship without saying a word. She kept my body and soul together somehow, much as she had the first time I had been attacked. But I think she knew I hadn’t really made it back this time, and that I wasn’t going to stick around for long.

The last day of classes, I picked up Jonathan’s term papers from Professor Zee; I craved every scrap of evidence that Jonathan had been real. She gave me a funny look as I collected his final paper, plus some of the earlier ones he’d written that he hadn’t bothered to retrieve.

“Tell him ‘bravo’ for me,” she said uncertainly, her eyes intense behind her thick, clunky glasses. “It’s a shame I never got the chance to say goodbye.”

I swallowed hard and slipped away without a reply, and my teacher, who knew too much about me, thought she understood. Once I was back in the refuge of my locked up dorm room I dared to take a look at them.

When I saw the title page of the first paper he had handed in, long before we had first spoken to each other, my throat all but closed up with tears. I remembered the assignment well, and it had cemented my admiration for Professor Zee: “Write a paper describing an imaginary masterpiece of art, its imaginary historical context/influences, and its central defining characteristics. 3-5 pages.”

Jonathan’s imaginary masterpiece was called “The Labyrinth of Time.”

Oh, that paper was terrible, and riddled with typos to boot. But I read every word, over and over again, and the tears fell over the heavy bond paper like spring rain.

“My painting would be called ‘The Labyrinth of Time.’ Or perhaps my masterpiece is a medieval tapestry. A beautiful girl, with long, curly black hair and a mysterious smile, wanders in a boxwood maze in springtime, daydreaming. She doesn’t know she wanders in the garden of the Faery Queen – and that the grand pathway of the garden twines through time as well as space.

“The monster waits for her within: you see the red contagion at the bottom corner of the tapestry, near the fringes. It preys on youth, and dreams, and beauty. The fae know how to fight this creature of the underworld, but this girl, child of sunshine and the day, has no defense.

“Far away, the Prince of Fae watches over her, from the top of the tapestry. He knows the monster hunts her. The Prince knows he has no permission to enter the maze himself, and that he enters at his peril. So he guards her as she wanders, unknowing. And he waits for the monster to appear.

“The Prince knows if he goes into the maze by himself, the Faery Queen will claim him, and he can never find the way out again, not without the light of the girl to shine the way out again. Only the maiden can save him: maiden, prince, each salvation to the other. Once the monster is destroyed, the spell is broken, and the maiden can lead the prince to light.”

Jonathan Mellon made our story into an imaginary work of art. He didn't want to speak of it directly, not even to me. For all I know, he had been sworn to secrecy. But the imaginary tapestry he had woven with words told the story clear: his mother was a Queen of Faery, sovereign over the twining gardens of the underworld, and she had emerged from the tangle of her time-crossed domain to entice Jonathan's father into creating with her a changeling child, a glorious blond boy sworn to his mother's Court.

He must have escaped through time as well as space to rejoin his father's people, to pretend at being an ordinary rich kid at a fancy school. But the monster lurked below; perhaps its job was to claim Jonathan for the motherdebt he owed the Queen.

After reading the paper a dozen times or more, tracing the many distractions peeling away like curling permutations of an ever-forking path, I became convinced that I could yet save my beloved. I no longer despaired, only waited for a sign.

I did what Jonathan had said, and got ready while I waited, as school ended for the year. I packed up my two boxes of earthly possessions and mailed them to

my darling *abuela* in New Hampshire. My move thus completed, I bequeathed my drooping spider plant to Ali, the ancient security guard, and he smiled and nodded in silent thanks.

My last night, I sat alone on my bare bed, where I had once made love to a creature of starlight and shadows, and I looked out the window, smelled the wild apple-scented fragrance of the night, and knew I was alone, wild, and free. Jonathan's gift to me.

The door trembled under the gentlest of knocks. It was the sign I had waited for; I was ready.

I turned, and rose. Scooped up my map, walked slowly to the door. And without hesitation, I answered it.

The door opened to a walled garden.

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Afterward by the Author

I went to college in New York City in the 1980s. Pizza was a dollar a slice, punk rock reigned supreme in the East Village, and vandals smashed car windows every night to steal radios. I don't miss the crime or the rampant graffiti (some of it was gorgeous, but much of it blotted out the city's natural beauty) -- but I do miss the gritty edge of the city at that time. This story brings it back for me.

This story first appeared in the collection THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF TIME TRAVEL ROMANCE. This is the unabridged version of “The Walled Garden,” longer than the version that appeared in the collection.

If you’ve ever dreamed of finding a world wilder and more primal than the one you walk in every day, this story is for you.

About the Author:

Michele Lang writes supernatural tales: the stories of witches, lawyers, goddesses, bankers, demons, and other magical creatures hidden in plain sight.

Her speculative romance **NETHERWOOD** released from Dorchester/Shomi in 2008, and she is the author of the historical fantasy **LADY LAZARUS**, releasing September 2010 from Tor Books.

LADY LAZARUS tells the story of Magda Lazarus, a witch with the power to summon souls and a sister who can foretell the future. Set on the eve of World War II in a magical Budapest, Magda must do battle with SS Werewolves, wizards, and demons, including the one that has possessed a willing Adolf Hitler...

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