



# ***Serafina***

By Linda Madl

ISBN: 978-0-9867514-9-3

PUBLISHED BY:

Books We Love Publishing Partners  
192 Lakeside Greens Drive  
Chestermere, Alberta, T1X 1C2  
Canada

Copyright © 2010 by Linda Madl

Cover art by Sheri McGathy Copyright © 2010

This ebook is licenced for your personal enjoyment only. this ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com) and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the work of this author.

“My dear fellow, are you telling me you won’t sell this masterpiece?” exclaimed my client entranced by the portrait hung in my gallery alcove reserved for special works. A gust of prairie wind rattled the showroom’s windowpanes, but he took no notice of the noise as he scrutinized the canvas with a collector’s keen eye.

I again regretted my decision to allow the work to remain on display after it had been hung by mistake.

“You say it’s called *Serafina*?” he asked, clearly probing for information that I was loath to give.

“After the young woman portrayed on the canvas,” I replied.

His wonderment was perfectly understandable. The painting was of an exquisite face, wonderfully layered with details—a certain richness to the shadows and loving precision of the strands of dark hair, the soft purity of the skin, the arch of her brows, and a luminous expression of love that would have made Da Vinci weep with envy and put a jealous pout Mona Lisa’s face.

“The artist is a young man,” my client murmured almost to himself as he hunched forward to examine the signature. “He’s in love with her.”

“True.” The hour was late, and I did not want my client viewing the work in the dark. I signaled for my assistant to light the gas lamps.

“I don’t recognize the name.” My client glanced at me for confirmation.

“You purchased a landscape by him two years ago,” I replied. “However, you’re right. He was a young man when he painted the portrait,” I added so as not to sound too terse. I allowed myself one quick glance at the work. As always it evoked chills in me as well as awe and appreciation—devotion.

Some days ago my assistant had hung the painting by mistake. When I’d insisted he return it to storage, he’d argued it merited display for at least a while. I saw from the admiration in his eyes that he’d fallen under *Serafina*’s spell as well, and I relented. In those brief weeks while on exhibit, my client had seen the canvas and become quite taken with it . . . taken enough to return to my gallery to view it again on his return trip East.

He was a New York banker who’d been stopping at my out-of-the-way but respected gallery for years on his train trips West. I’d come to know him as a sensitive man of sophisticated taste who possessed a discerning eye. He carried a deep purse and was willing to spend generous sums if he truly liked a work.

“You say I have a landscape by this same artist?” he inquired.

I described the purchase he’d made two years earlier.

He remembered. “Indeed. It’s a very good landscape, but nowhere near the quality of this portrait. You’re certain it’s the same artist? You’re certain he won’t sell it?”

“He has a new landscape he’s willing to part with,” I offered to distract my client from his futile ambition to own *Serafina*.

“No, I really must have this portrait.” He gave his silvery head a shake with a true connoisseur’s conviction. “You understand, price is no object? This ranks with the European masters. It deserves to hang with the best.”

I understood. “The artist refuses to part with it.”

That artist, a boyhood friend of mine, lived in a drafty farmhouse in the Sand Hills where he still worked, turning out one competent landscape after another. The works sold well enough among the locals and tourists to keep him in pigment and canvases, groceries and lamp oil. That was all he cared about these days. I added, “This painting has special meaning for him. He won’t give it up. He’s only allowed me to show it on loan so others may enjoy it.”

I did not add that if he agreed to give up *Serafina*, I would not.

“But why?” my client persisted with a huff of frustration. “Because he’s still in love with her, I suppose. An unrequited affair?”

“Yes, in a way,” I said, amused by his romantic assumption.

The portrait captured the radiant beauty of a young dark-haired woman with blue eyes who gazed back at you with serenity and a beguiling half smile. So beautiful was the subject and so well rendered the likeness, the oil painting glowed with life. It was indeed a masterwork worthy of gazing upon for hours, day after day, year after year—provided you did not know the truth of its making.

“I can see you know more about this work than you’re saying.” My client eyed me with great curiosity. “Perhaps you, too, knew *Serafina*?”

I nodded. He’d been such a loyal client over the years and such an aficionado of our local art that I’d come to regard him as a friend. I enjoyed his visits to my little gallery. He deserved to know why he could never own this work. “You have another hour before your train departs. Come into my office and have a brandy with me.”

He agreed.

While he settled in one of my leather chairs as he’d done more than once over the years, my assistant lit the lamps and stirred the coal stove fire to life. I offered my client one of my special cigars and poured the brandy. After my assistant had left the room, we dispensed with lighting the cigars. Then I settled into the chair opposite as twilight gathered on the treeless hills

beyond the window.

“Some forty years ago,” I began, “when our fair city here in the high plains was but a mere frontier settlement of a few houses, a couple of churches, a general store, a small bank, and a school built along a street behind the train depot, there came to town a cattle man and his family. He built a fine house on the hill on the edge of town and a ranch house out on the grasslands and set up ranching. He prospered. His wife gave him a son and a daughter.

“Over the years only one thing marred his good fortune. His son, the boy whom he hoped would take over the ranch in his stead, went away to school in the East and returned home determined to become a great artist.”

My client chuckled at the irony of this.

“This was a bitter disappointment to the old rancher,” I continued. “At first he tried to talk his son out of such a wrong-headed ambition. When that didn’t work, he urged the young man to ranch as well as paint. But the young artist had no interest in the cattle business. He and his father argued continually.

“There also came to town in those days, a poor immigrant Italian family, seeking their fortune: a father, mother, son, a daughter and a couple of younger children. It was an old story in those days. They were put off the train because they had no money to go farther.

“The father and son found work in the livery stable while the mother labored as a cook in the hotel kitchen with the younger children as helpers, and the pretty daughter found a position as a parlor maid at the rancher’s fine house on the hill.”

“Ah,” intoned my client, recognizing the introduction of the story’s heroine.

“Her name was Serafina,” I continued. “She was a lovely girl with respectful manners and a willingness to do hard work. She also had a delightful laugh, a sunny temperament, and a generous nature. All who knew her liked her.

“As you might expect, the artistic son fell in love with the lovely Serafina for her heart and soul were as beautiful as her face. Her ready smile and the scent of roses that always seemed to float about her were obvious to the rancher’s son. He was besotted. She was sweet, generous, loving, and dutiful. She admired his work. What more could an artist want?”

Smiling with understanding, my client nodded in emphatic agreement.

“Knowing that his family would be unhappy with his choice of a wife, and even more concerned about how they might visit that displeasure on Serafina, he kept his feelings secret for a long while.

“Serafina, of course, took note of the handsome, talented young man. She fell in love

with him, but she was a modest girl and avoided flirting.”

“She knew her place,” my client interrupted.

“After a fashion,” I said, careful not to mislead him. “When the young artist could no longer keep how he felt to himself, he confessed his love to Serafina, and she confessed her love to him. For a while they were able to keep their relationship a secret. And they were happy.

“Meanwhile, the young artist’s relationship with his father grew acrimonious. His father would tolerate his son’s painting at the house no longer. So my friend took rooms at the hotel. Daily he worked in his hotel studio. When Serafina had completed her housekeeping duties at the rancher’s house, she would meet the artist at the hotel there. Over the weeks and months their love deepened.

“She praised his work and encouraged him, but she refused to allow him to paint her. He must use his talents to complete greater works, she told him. He must strive to complete his masterpiece. Her confidence amused and humbled him, but he did not argue with her. In time he would wear her down, he was certain. She would become his masterpiece one day, he told her, and they laughed.”

“Well, I see he indeed wore her down,” my client said with another chuckle. Cigar smoke curled up around his head. “What woman can refuse an artist permission to paint her?”

“But Serafina did,” I said, annoyed with having my story interrupted again. “He painted his mother and his sister, which did nothing to win the approval of his father. He painted cavalry officers and their wives, Indian chiefs and their ponies, and cowboys and their guns. I have no idea where those paintings are today. As I recall, they were good likenesses, but not particularly inspired. He was still learning his craft, you see. He never painted Serafina.”

Taking the cigar from his mouth and raising his eyebrows in amused skepticism, my client asked, “Then just how did the portrait in your alcove come to be?”

“Patience,” I continued. “Finally the day came when his relationship with Serafina was discovered. The old rancher knew about the studio in the hotel, but not about his son’s affair. He had come to the dining room to see some business partners. On his way out, he saw Serafina meet his son on the side porch and go inside with their arms around each other.”

“The old man was furious, no doubt?” my client muttered around his cigar.

“Indeed! He felt deceived about his son’s true intentions. His son could have his choice of East coast society debutants or at least a Midwestern heiress—why settle for a lowly immigrant’s daughter. He was convinced the boy was ruining his life. The rancher confronted his son, berated him for his foolishness and deceit, and disinherited him on the spot.

My client shook his head in dismay and rolled his cigar between his index finger and thumb. “Happens in the best of families.”

I ignored the comment. “This did not trouble the young artist greatly, at first. He retreated to his studio. Then he learned that Serafina had been fired from her post as maid and refused a reference, the cruelest thing an employer could do in those days.

“Even worse than that. Ours is a small town, and the rich old rancher’s influence stretched far. The young artist went in search of Serafina only to learn that her mother had lost her job in the hotel kitchen, and her father and brother had lost their positions at the livery stable.

“When the young artist went to her family’s rented house, Serafina’s father would not allow him to see her. In his view, the artist was the source of their troubles. He refused permission for the artist to see Serafina ever again. She wept and pleaded with her father, but he was adamant. She was a good daughter and would never disobey him.”

Surprised, my client took the cigar from his mouth. “But surely . . .” I shook my head at him. “The artist offered her father money, but out of pride the man refused. My artist friend went away troubled and confused about what to do.

“It was a cold winter that year and desperate times for many. As the weeks went by, Serafina’s mother fell ill and could not travel. So her father left town to seek work elsewhere. Her older brother remained, picking up odd jobs to earn food. Serafina and the younger children took to collecting coal along the train tracks for heating and cooking when she wasn’t caring for her mother. The artist’s friends reported seeing her along the tracks after dark when the rail yard watchman was less likely to catch her gathering coal in her apron—a dangerous activity in a place where trains rumbled through several times a night.

“I need to add here that I was one of the young artist’s friends, in those days. He and I had much in common, including our fathers’ ambitious for our future. As boys, we’d been schoolmates. I’d long admired his creativity and his courage. He’d had the backbone to do what he wanted. While he worked at his art, I slaved away as an accountant just as my father wanted.

“We stayed in touch during our college years. When we’d returned to town, we remained friends. I envied him his love affair with the beautiful Serafina and his courage in standing up to his father. I visited his studio as often as I could.

“The artist searched for Serafina in the rail yard at night. I know because I went with him sometimes. He could not bear to think of her out in the cold and the dark risking her life to collect fuel when he could take care of her. He even sent the family a supply of coal, but her brother, old-world proud as his father, turned it away.

“When the artist went looking for her, she eluded him night after night. He began to brood that there was some ominous meaning in the fact that they were being kept apart and that he’d never painted her portrait.”

I paused. Overcome by feelings I thought I’d resolved long ago. I sipped my brandy to collect myself.

“Well, was there—something ominous?” my client asked, amusement in his smile. “Sir, if this is some tale to make me want the portrait more, you needn’t waste your breath. I’m sure we can come to agreement on price.”

I shook my head, letting the brandy burn down my throat before I went on. “Finally the night came when there was a terrible accident in the rail yard.”

“Ah, yes, here it comes, the real pathos.” My client nodded his head in an irritating, all-knowing fashion.

I forgave him and disregarded the mocking comment. “I happened upon the accident when I was walking home late from the bank where I’d been working on end of the month accounts. It was a bitterly cold night. There was much shouting and a cluster of lanterns in the rail yard. I went to investigate. The police had been summoned, and the coroner was there already. The priest was nowhere to be found. A train had hit beautiful Serafina. All that could be done was done. But it was too late.”

“That beautiful girl?” The cynical smile fell from my client’s face as he sat forward in his chair. “What of the painting then?”

I held up my hand to stay his questions. “Her mangled body was sent to the undertaker’s parlor when I headed to my friend’s studio to tell him the tragic news. I volunteered because I felt the news should come from a friend. I arrived at his door shaken to the core. I had no idea what to say to him.

“I knocked when I arrived, and he opened the door immediately. At the sight of me, he commenced to babble about a new portrait he was preparing a canvas for. Strong as his father’s influence was, it seemed the man could not prevent people from coming to my friend for their portraits. I walked into the cozy warm studio, allowing him to talk while my numb mind grappled for a way to tell him what had happened.

“He led the way toward his easel where a freshly prepared canvas rested, the words flowing from him all the while. He was eager to keep the portraiture business going so he could earn money and be independent of his father—and provide for Serafina.

“At the mention of her name, I forced my mouth open. I knew I had to deliver the words



that would bring his clouded happiness to an end.

A rapping on the door silenced me.

“My friend brushed past me and opened it almost as if he was expecting someone.

“A bone-chilling draft swept into the studio, cold enough to take my breath away. The coal fire in the stove glowed uselessly, and the paint rags on the side table stirred in the breeze. I peered down the hallway past my friend to see a hooded figure in the darkness at the door. Abruptly the air was filled with the scent of fresh roses, a scent I’d always associated with Serafina.

“My heart stopped in horror. Everything stopped, even my friend’s chatter and the howl of the winter wind in the hotel eaves. Strangely, the flame in the lamp near the easel burned steady despite the cold currents.

“With deliberation the figure pulled back the hood to reveal herself. Serafina . . . as lovely as ever.”

I glanced at my client to see that his mouth had fallen open, his cigar had gone out, and the last sip of his brandy was untouched.

I went on. “‘Look who is here,’ my friend crowed, his face alight with happiness, though he made no move to touch her, to kiss her cheek as I would have expected after their estrangement. Though his joy was boundless, it was as if some instinct deep inside him knew something was drastically amiss.

“‘Serafina has come at last,’ he said, grinning like a fool at me. ‘Take off your cloak, my sweet, and join us.’

“And she did, join us that is, without saying a word or shedding her cloak. Speechless myself and doubting my friend’s sanity and my own, I backed away as she glided passed me into the studio. The room, toasty when I arrived, became so cold his breath and mine made clouds in the air. The fire in the coal stove burned brightly but gave off no heat. I shivered in the chill and looked around to see her slight figure take a seat by the darkened window, the place where my friend always posed his subjects.

“As my eyes became better accustomed to the dim light I saw that she was whole, unscarred, and radiant as ever—perhaps even more so. She smiled at my friend with an expression full of love and indulgence, tempered with sorrow.

“She seemed to glow, not from her loving expression, but from within her perfect form. In the silence she nodded slightly. Thus she gave her permission. My friend asked no more questions of her, made no more foolish declarations, never touched her, but went about his

work.”

“But . . . ?” my client’s mouth hung open. All the amusement had drained from his face. Pale and sober, he leaned forward in his chair.

With the wave of my hand I warned him again to remain silent.

“I nodded to her in greeting when her gaze fell on me. She took no notice. Though she appeared as solid and real as I seem to you, I knew she did not exist. I’d seen her lifeless, bloodied body carried away by the undertaker.

“She never spoke that night, during all those hours she posed while he painted. I said nothing either, for what was there to say? I was terrified. My long johns beneath my wool suit grew damp with perspiration despite the cold. I longed to escape; yet I was transfixed. I knew what she was—or wasn’t—and I dare not leave my friend alone with the apparition.

“I feared that if I opened my mouth to tell him the truth I would break the spell, the charm, whatever the magic, dark or otherwise, that permitted her to be there in all her loveliness so he could paint this portrait of his beloved—the portrait he’d longed to paint for so long. I felt as if one wrong move might turn this mysterious marvel into a nameless horror.”

“A ghost?” my client said at last in a whisper as if he feared being overheard. “That portrait is of a ghost?”

With a nod I continued. “He worked with steady hands. If my friend consciously suspected anything out of the ordinary, he never said so. Instead he painted with feverish speed, speaking to her from time to time, encouraging her to lift her chin or tilt her head so. His instructions were delivered with a tender tone. She obeyed every direction, her smile never wavering.

“He paused in his brushwork only to blend more pigments. He seemed unaware that she sat before him in half shadow, shining in the dark, and that he worked only by the light of one lamp. Ordinarily he worked in full daylight and put down his brushes as soon as the light waned. But this night he took no note of the light or shadow. He worked as if he could see her face in the full brightness of day.”

I paused again, remembering the strange night. This time my client had no comment to offer.

“At last, the livery stable rooster crowed. My friend stood back from the easel and declared his work finished. Serafina never moved. I went to his side to view the portrait. The painting was as perfect as you see it today.

“There was no denying its magnificence. It took my breath away as it still does

sometimes. My friend had completed his masterpiece in one night.”

“But the portrait is of a ghost!” my client stammered in disbelief. “Surely you are pulling my leg.”

“Be as skeptical as you like,” I said. “But I swear when he invited Serafina to come have a look, she simply faded away before our eyes. Her image evaporated as the morning sun brightened the windows. The cold vanished from the room, and the warmth returned. All I could smell was oil paints and the kerosene vapors of the guttering lamp. The artist turned to me, his eyes wide with incomprehension. Then I told him the dreadful news.

“I would not lie to him as I would not lie to you. When I finished, he tossed back his head and wailed, the piercing keen of all-consuming grief. I believe he’d known something was wrong the whole time he worked. He just didn’t want to question his good fortune.

“He collapsed in my arms. From shock, I suppose, and exhaustion. He slept for two days, and for weeks after that he seemed dazed, hardly recognizing his mother or sister. The doctor was summoned, but nothing could be done. His father showed the rare good judgment to stay away.

“By the time he came to himself, Serafina had been buried in the town’s little Catholic cemetery, and her family had packed their few belongings and left. He eventually withdrew to a deserted homestead in the hills north of town.

“And the painting?” my client asked, sitting back in his chair.

“He left it with me,” I said. “I’m grateful for that to this day. Serafina’s portrait changed my life, too, you see. I quit my job at my father’s bank the next day and started making arrangements to open an art gallery. That was what I’d always wanted to do. I had to take in accounting work for years before this gallery became profitable. But I made it work. When I met the love of my life, the sweetest laundress who ever rode a train west, I married her without waiting for anyone’s approval. I can say I have no regrets.”

“That’s quite a story,” my client said, shaking his head as if to dispel the strangeness of my tale. “Then Serafina’s portrait is your talisman.”

“Yes, you could say that,” I said. “However, it is only in my keeping because the artist cannot bear to look upon it.”

We sat in considered silence for a few moments, staring at the stove.

He drained the last of his brandy and turned to me. The liquor seemed to have restored his color. “Your friend could have painted her from memory, you know.” His skeptical tone had returned.

“But he didn’t,” I said. “She was there. I saw her.”

“These wishful tales of ghostly appearances at the time of death are legion, you know that.” He gave a patronizing shake of his head, as if the commonness of such an eerie phenomenon made it less credible.

I realized, without disappointment or offense, he did not believe me. Acceptance of a ghost portrait was perhaps too much to expect, even of such a sophisticated, sensitive art lover. His renewed skepticism insulated him from the fearsomeness of my tale and told me I had accomplished my goal.

He thanked me for the story, and we shook hands. I saw him out the gallery front door and on his way to the train depot. He did not ask to see *Serafina* again, and I did not offer to show it to him.

I locked the front door for the night. The shades had been pulled in the front gallery. Eager to get home to my wife and the hot meal and warm company I knew was waiting for me. I retrieved my coat and extinguished my office lights before returning to the alcove.

There in the darkness glowed the painting of Serafina in all her ghostly loveliness, giving off a soft, unearthly light that illuminated my way across the room. The air carried the faintest whiff of roses on it . . . or perhaps the fragrance was in my head.

I found the cloth I sought on a shelf near the door and covered the painting as I did every night. It was too unnerving for those unacquainted with Serafina’s history to encounter the glowing canvas in the dark. Even some of my staff refused to be in the same room with it after sundown.

I smiled at her before I covered her face. Tomorrow morning I would order my assistant to return her to storage. Masterpiece though her portrait was, her loveliness was not meant to be on display for the ages like Mona Lisa. Serafina’s face was not meant to be bargained for in a gallery, however rich and astute the client. Its light was for those she loved.

She had returned that night long ago for the sake of love, to give her beloved the one thing she knew he desired. In the hours before her spirit departed this world for the next—her perfect image was the inspiration for his masterpiece.

In doing so, she had given me my life. I will be forever grateful.

###

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Linda Madl's work includes ten novels, contributions to ten anthologies, book reviews, and nonfiction articles. Her first historical romance, *SWEET RANSOM*, came out in 1989 from Pocket Books. She hasn't stopped writing since.

The settings of Madl's books are as far ranging as her own travels. She has visited England, Scotland, the Rocky Mountains, the Ozarks, and the banks of the Kansas River, all stages for her stories.

Her current releases, *THE JOURNEY HOME* and *TRESPASSING TIME*, fulfill a life-long desire to write what she loves to read besides romances, stories about ghosts and the paranormal. Madl's nonfiction work includes feature stories and book reviews for newspapers and magazines, newsletters for technical firms, engineering project profiles, and military award writing.

As a professional she has been active in the St. Louis Writers Guild (past president), Romance Writers of America, KS Writers, Inc. (past president and charter member), and Novelists, Inc. (board member). She is a Fellow of the Kansas Center for the Book.

She has presented programs and workshops at numerous meetings including the 2000 RWA Region 2 Conference in Omaha and the 1999 RWA national conference in Chicago. She also teaches writing and journaling workshops at the UFM Learning Center in her hometown. Daughter of Norma Sprigg, Madl is a graduate of Paola High School and Baker University.

Currently, she resides with her husband, dog, and parakeet in the Kansas Flint Hills. She fills her non-writing hours with family, friends, travel, and community activities.

Find more information and a list of her book titles at [www.lindamadl.com](http://www.lindamadl.com).