

# Sophia the Pet Shop Boy

A Transgender Coming of Age Story

Book 1

Lisa Shea

Copyright © 2017 by Lisa Shea / Minerva Webworks LLC  
All rights reserved.

Cover design by Lisa Shea

Book design by Lisa Shea

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

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

~ v1 ~

Visit my website at [LisaShea.com](http://LisaShea.com)

# Chapter One

“You jerk! You sold me a dead turtle!”

Simon took in a long, deep breath. He was a sophomore in high school now. Fully sixteen years old. He could handle a cranky red-headed mother of two. The “two” seemed about eight years old. The boys were clinging to their mother’s pant legs, their unruly mops of red hair fluffed like nests over eyes shining with tears.

Simon slowly walked around the front counter of the pet store to stand alongside the mother. At her feet was a ten gallon tank. It held one lopsided rock, one small high-edged bowl of muddy water, and one juvenile painted turtle. The turtle’s shell was black, while its legs were a beautiful striped pattern of red, yellow and orange on black. It was about the diameter of a flattened baseball.

It was not moving.

Simon sighed.

He dropped down to a knee and carefully reached in with both hands.

Twin number one wrinkled his face in disgust. “Ewww.” He tucked further behind his mother.

Simon paid him no mind. He gently wrapped his fingers around the turtle's base and lifted him up. He brought the turtle's small black-yellow eyes to face his own.

He murmured, "Hey there, little guy."

The turtle blinked. Once.

Simon nodded in satisfaction. He drew to his feet and placed the turtle in the center of the counter. He lifted the lid on the mealworm container located to his right and scooped out a few.

Twin number two turned a sickly shade of green.

Simon laid the worms down in front of the turtle.

The turtle's elegant head stretched forward, the stripes of crimson and tangerine rippling with the motion. His mouth expertly closed on one of the worms.

Both of the twins stared in disbelief.

Mom put her hands on her hips. "Well, why didn't the stupid thing eat anything we fed it?"

Simon glanced down into the small tank again.

Squished in the corner were a few crusts of bread. They looked brown and soggy.

He made his decision. "I think you're right, ma'am. This turtle just wasn't healthy. I'll take it back and give you a full refund. Plus I'll give you ten goldfish, free of charge, to put into that tank

you have. As an apology for causing you and your boys any unhappiness.”

She nodded in satisfaction. “That’s right. You’ll give us free pets. You should, you know, after what you did.”

Simon bit his tongue as he rang up the transaction. It wasn’t anything *he* had done, after all. He had no doubt that the culprit in all of this was Zephron, the boy who had worked in the shop before him. From what Simon had heard, Zephron had had a severe case of *senioritis*. There’d finally been some sort of an incident with an expensive tropical fish and a hungry anemone, and the boss had had enough of Zephron’s distracted nature. Out had gone Zephron, and an ad had gone in the local paper.

Simon had been hired for his first ever real job.

The goldfish were bagged, the twins were fighting over names for them, and at last the entourage was pushing open the front door, the bell cheerily celebrating their departure. Simon gave them a full minute to get into their car and drive down the quiet street before turning back to his rescue.

“You poor little thing,” he called down to the turtle. “What in the world were they feeding you? And don’t they know that painted turtles need a place to swim?”

The mealworms had all been gobbled up, and the turtle definitely seemed more alert than when

he was first brought in. Simon gave him a little scrunch on the head and then took him up again. He walked down the left-hand aisle to the painted turtle tank. There was just one turtle in the forty-gallon tank. The reptile was currently basking on a twisting log beneath its heat lamp. The large swimming area was crystal clear, with tall, green plants waving in the gentle water flow.

Simon lowered the new turtle into the water and released him.

The turtle stretched his limbs, lifted his head, and then he was leisurely swimming along the glass edge, a look of bliss on his colorful face. Simon could have sworn the turtle smiled at him as he turned in a slow circle.

He murmured, "There you go, little guy. Back where you belong."

A girl's voice called from the front of the store, "They don't talk, you know."

He turned.

Cindy's blonde hair was pulled back into a long ponytail. She wore a red lace dress which fell in soft folds to just above her knee. The neckline curved demurely below her neck.

It was the most beautiful dress he'd ever seen.

Cindy's cheeks flushed red and her hand went to fiddle with the gold heart-shaped locket which dangled at her chest. "Hey, cut that out. I have a boyfriend, you know. He's a *senior*."

She said the word *senior* as if she had somehow managed to capture, as her very own

boyfriend, the most eligible man on the entire planet.

Simon put his hands up and took a step back, nervous fear coursing through him. Zephron was not only a senior but, by all accounts, an intensely jealous and hot-tempered one. Rumor had it that he'd caught his previous girlfriend chatting with another guy after class. The girlfriend had been summarily dumped.

The guy had gotten his nose broken.

Simon had no desire to follow down *that* path.

He stammered, "Cindy, I'm afraid Zephron doesn't work here any more. I don't know where he is."

Cindy stared at him as if he'd grown a second head. "Of course he doesn't work here. He's working on planning out his *college* schedule." Her eyes glowed with pride. "He'll be going to Quinsigamond Community College in just a few months, you know. He doesn't have time for any of this high school stuff any more. Any of these kid jobs."

A small noise sounded in the tank.

Simon looked down.

The new painted turtle had emerged from its swim and was now climbing to bask alongside his tank-mate beneath the warm light. He looked up at Simon with a satisfied gleam.

Simon could have sworn the turtle winked at him.

He drew again on his inner center. The boss had left him in charge. The store wasn't very large – just three aisles of tanks, foods, and supplies, but it was his domain. The news that Zephron had no interest in returning to it only made him more content.

He looked again to Cindy. “If you're not here to find Zephron, then how can I help you?”

She crossed her arms in front of her. “I'm here for the job.”

Simon blinked. “Zephron's job? I have it now. Paul hired me two weeks ago.”

She reached into her purse and waved her phone. “Oh, yeah, smartie? Then why did he text me and tell me the job was mine? He said to come by this afternoon to get all the paperwork signed.”

Simon's face went pale. Had he done something wrong? Had old Paul already decided to let him go? And to a freshman who couldn't even be sixteen yet? Why?

A gruff voice called from the back office, “Cindy, is that you? Come on in. I'll get you set up.”

Cindy's gaze shone in triumph and she flounced past Simon, her red skater's dress swirling as if she were ready to earn a flurry of ten-point-ohs.

The door closed behind her as she entered the office.

Simon stared at the door for a long moment. At last he lowered himself to his knees by the

tank. Well, whatever they were discussing in there, he couldn't do anything about it right now. He thought back over all the interactions he'd had during the past two weeks at the store. He'd had to handle a fair number of returns for pets and supplies that Zephron had mis-sold. He'd also embarked on a cleaning and organization spree, getting years' worth of dust off the fish-tank shelves and cleaning the glass until it was nearly invisible.

The little turtle was snuggled up contently against its tank mate, their eyes closed as they rested in the lamp's warmth. Simon could almost feel the waves of serenity emanating from their small bodies.

He brushed his hands on his jeans and stood, giving a tug to his gray t-shirt. He ran a hand through his dirty-brown hair.

The office door opened.

Cindy came out first. Her face glowed with smug satisfaction and she tucked a set of papers into her purse.

Behind her came Mr. Paul Smith, the store's owner. He was ancient – at least fifty years old. His thin brown hair was peppered with white, as was his unruly beard. He wore a purple polo top and black slacks over a lumpy body. He nodded to Simon as they approached. “Simon, I'd like to introduce you to Cindy. She'll be working here.”

Simon didn't know what to say. This was his first job ever and he'd only been at it for two

weeks. He automatically put out his hand, and Cindy placed hers in his.

Was she really pausing, waiting for a courtly kiss to her fingers?

He gave her hand a quick shake and released it as if it were contagious.

His throat closed up.

Paul nodded in satisfaction. "Cindy here will be your assistant."

Cindy piped up, "Second in command."

Paul chuckled. "Sure, sure."

Simon wasn't quite sure what he was hearing.

"You mean ... you mean she's working *with* me?"

Cindy peered at him through squinted eyes.

"That is what second in command means. We work on things together. Unless you have to go run an errand or something, in which case I'm in charge."

The corner of Paul's mouth quirked up.

"You'd be the one running errands, Cindy. I want Simon here managing the register."

She sweetly responded, "I don't have my license yet. I'm only fourteen. So you'll have to send Simon if you need things mailed or to get more office supplies."

Simon was still having trouble taking this all in. "Mr. Smith, you're going to have two of us in the store?"

Paul waved a hand. "I've told you to call me Paul. And yes, yes. Her mother said it'd be good

for her. Get some experience and all of that. Build up her resume.”

The pieces were finally starting to connect together more logically. Cindy’s mother was a member of the Grafton Town Council. And the Grafton Historical Commission. And the Grafton Library Committee. And probably every other town organization that existed. If Cindy’s mother wanted Cindy to get an assistant job somewhere, it would happen.

Paul pointed a finger at Simon. “You show her how it’s done, Simon. You get her up to speed. You’ve done a wonderful job so far, organizing this place and getting all the tanks set up properly. Take her under your wing. Teach her everything you know –”

His watch gave a shrill beep. He waved in their air to both of his employees and turned to stride back into his office. The door closed shut behind him.

Cindy turned to Simon with her hands on her hips. Her eyes gleamed with expectation. “So, which animal are you going to train me on first?”

## Chapter Two

Simon warily peered through the shop's front windows as he approached the front door. There was Paul, his gray hair sprawling in all directions like a tiger-barb-loving version of Einstein. But Cindy was nowhere to be seen.

Simon's shoulders eased, and he smiled as he pushed open the door. "Good afternoon, Paul."

Paul beamed, stretching his arms. "There you are, boy! Right on time, too. I can't tell you what a relief it is to have you with me. Compared with the things Zephron put me through? He added to my work rather than freeing me up so I could handle other things."

His watch shrilled.

He glanced down at it. "Speaking of which – I'll be in my office. I'm sure Cindy will be here soon. How's it going with her?"

Simon wanted to say *exhausting* or *frustrating*, but instead he held his smile on his

face and responded, “Fine, Paul. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Paul nodded and in another moment he’d vanished into his lair, the door closing solidly behind him.

Peace.

Simon breathed it in, reminding himself for the hundredth time just how amazingly lucky he was to have this job. Until now, he’d just gone home after school every day, hiding in his room to avoid the taunts of his older brother, Karl. Simon didn’t really have any friends in school. He wasn’t interested in the sports that many of the other boys loved. His brother was team captain in football and baseball, and played basketball as well. As far as Karl was concerned, Simon was an absolute failure in life.

Sometimes, when Simon was around Karl for too long, Simon actually began to feel that way as well.

Simon went over to the painted turtle tank and looked in on his two charges. He could have sworn the one he’d saved from a fate worse than death had grown overnight. The shell seemed shinier. The colors seemed brighter. The little turtle swam over to him and put a paw against the glass.

Simon put his own finger there to touch it. “I think I’ll call you Oogway.”

The doorbell tinkled, and he sighed. Then he drew in a deep, steady breath. If a condition of him working in this paradise was dealing with Cindy for a few hours each day, he'd find a way to get through it. He stood and turned –

It wasn't Cindy standing in the doorway.

The boy was about his age, with short-cropped black hair and a diamond-stud earring. His designer jeans probably cost more than Simon would make in a month. The gray Air Jordan 17s on his feet were another \$350 or so. Not that Simon would ever waste his money on things like that, but he had to endure his brother talking about them non-stop at dinner every night.

The boy stepped into the room, looking around with an appreciative smile. "Hey, this shop ain't half bad!"

Brooklyn. New York. It was like listening to one of those movies, to hear the newcomer speak.

Simon stepped forward in curiosity. "Hi, I'm Simon. Did you just move to the area?"

The boy laughed out loud. "How'd you guess? Yeah, my parents divorced and my Ma thought I should get to experience the way she grew up. Grass. Trees. That kind of junk. But it's like moving to the boonies. The whole town shuts down at six p.m.!"

A flush came to the boy's cheeks. "Not that I'm dissing you guys or anything."

Simon waved a hand. “It’s all right. I’m sure it’s quite a shock, after living in New York City.”

The boy’s eyes went wide. “You have no idea. How can you find your way around here? All the roads are windy and twisty. Back home everything was in simple grids. And here you don’t have any subways! No taxis! Everything’s so far away from each other! How do you stop by a bagel shop or grab a slice?”

Simon nodded. “I guess that’s true. You’re pretty much reliant on your parents until you get your driver’s license, and then it costs money to drive around to get things, if you have access to a car.”

The boy looked around. “At least I found a pet shop. I’ve got a corn snake. I want to make sure she stays healthy.”

Simon’s eyes lit up. “Corn snakes are beautiful! Do you have any photos of her?”

The boy eagerly went for his pocket. “Do I! Here, I’ll show you. By the way, my name is —”

The door tinkled as it was pushed open again. A tall woman with short-cropped black hair strode into the room. It seemed clear she was the boy’s mother. Besides the facial resemblance, she wore the most beautiful forest-green dress Simon had ever seen. The embroidery detail at the neckline was stunning. Her golden emerald-studded necklace and earrings completed the ensemble.

She looked around and smiled. “Oh, there you are, Matilda!”

Simon blinked in surprise. Had he missed another person coming into the store? He prided himself on always knowing what was going on in the shop. He looked around –

The boy before him was turning beet red.

The mother put her hand to her mouth. “I’m so sorry. Marcus. I meant Marcus.”



## Chapter Three

The shop seemed as if it'd frozen in time. The tanks still burbled quietly, the air system still gave its soft whoosh, but the boy before Simon didn't seem to be breathing.

The mother flushed. "I'll just go wait in the car, honey." She turned and slipped out the door.

The tinkle seemed unnaturally loud.

The boy – or was it a girl – had a pleading look on his/her face. "Please, this is really important to me. If you could just forget what my mother said –"

Simon blurted out, "I'm confused. Are you a boy or a girl?"

The tone rang with certainty. "I'm Marcus, and I'm a boy."

Simon's brow scrunched. "So why would your mother –"

Marcus plunked down on a chair by the counter. He looked as if he were ready to cry.

Simon's heart dropped. He hadn't meant to upset Marcus. He went over to Marcus's side. "I'm really sorry. I must have just misheard your mom. Please, don't get upset. Show me the photos of that corn snake of yours."

Marcus wiped at his eyes but his gaze remained down.

Simon sought for something – anything – he could say. "I was just distracted. I'm sure your mom said –"

Marcus's voice was low. "She said I was a girl."

Now Simon was completely confused. Maybe Marcus was trying to explain that his mother was mentally ill. "It doesn't matter what your mother says," he gently offered. "All that matters is you. What *you* say."

Marcus looked up with glistening eyes. "Really?"

"Of course," confirmed Simon. "You say you're a boy. So you're a boy."

Marcus flung his arms around Simon in a grateful hug. "You're the best, Simon. Really, the best in the entire world."

Joy spread through Simon. His own family wasn't much for showing gratitude, especially toward him. He was the family failure. That Simon cared so much about such a simple thing warmed him immensely.

Marcus glanced around and then leaned forward toward Simon. “Do you want to hear? I mean, I’ve never really talked about this to anyone. My own age, I mean.”

Simon nodded. “Of course. I’m happy to listen.”

His heart warmed further. If Marcus trusted him to talk about his mother’s challenges, Simon would be the best friend he could be.

Marcus’s cheeks pinkened. It was as if, now that he had permission, there was still fear within him. Fear that the words, once released, could never be drawn back.

Simon said, “It’s all right. I’ll never tell anyone. I promise.”

Marcus bit his lip. “It’s just that ... well ... the doctors made a stupid mistake. When I was born, I was premature. Tiny, you know? There were complications. They, well...”

His blush grew. “They cut something off that wasn’t supposed to be cut off. So to *make it right* they thought it’d be easier if I grew up as a girl. That I’d be less ashamed of my body that way.”

Simon stared at him in shock. Simon had thought Marcus was going to reveal a private detail about his mother. Instead, Marcus had revealed news about *himself*.

*They cut something off ...*

Simon had a feeling he knew exactly what the *something* was that was cut off – and it had never occurred to him, never ever – that doctors could make a mistake like that. Doctors were perfect. They were all-knowing.

Simon’s voice was tight. “They ... they turned you into a girl?”

Marcus shook his head. “They tried to. But I still knew I was a boy. Inside me, you know. Even though my parents followed the orders and put me in frilly pink dresses. Pierced my ears. I hated it. I hated everything about it, and the older I got, the more ... awful I felt. The more it was like this skin I was in was broken and wrong. Like I was some sort of a monster.”

Simon stared at the person before him. “And the doctors thought you’d be *less ashamed* like this?”

Marcus’s eyes took on a glow, as if he’d finally found a soulmate. “Yes! Exactly! Less ashamed? Instead, I grew up every day thinking something was completely wrong with me. That everyone kept calling me a girl, and treating me like a girl, when I knew deep inside myself that I was a boy, a boy, a boy.”

Simon could barely breathe. He struggled to organize his thoughts. “I imagine most of us kids have challenges growing up. But when did you

know that something was *really* wrong? With the way people were treating you?”

Marcus waved a hand in the air. “It wasn’t stupid stuff like wanting to climb trees or ride a bike. Every person can do those things. Every person can like science and astronomy.”

He blushed “And it wasn’t even just that I was dreaming about someday marrying Suzanne Lafitte. But I never dreamed about us being two wives together. I was always a man in my dreams. Always.”

Simon was spellbound. “Then what happened?”

Marcus glanced back at the doorway. “When I was approaching my sixteenth birthday, my mom and dad asked me what I wanted. They were already divorcing by that point, but they were trying to do things together. For my sake.”

He waved a hand at his sneakers. “They’ve got money. So they wanted to take me on a trip to Aspen. Or a cruise. Or something like that.”

His voice grew tight. “I had to say it. It had been building within me all those years, and I just couldn’t take it any more. I said the only thing I wanted was to be a boy.”

Simon stared. “What did they say?”

Marcus stuck his hands in his pockets. “It’s when they finally told me. They finally admitted what the doctors had done. What those medicines

I'd been taking all these years had been about. They'd been trying to convince my body to be a girl, when I had always known I was meant to be a boy."

His fingers twined. "It was like a lightbulb went off in my head."

He gave a wan smile. "It was just a flood of relief. I wasn't crazy. I was right. It was the world around me that was wrong."

Simon looked at the person in front of him with fresh eyes. "And they ... your parents, I mean, they let you? Be a boy?"

Marcus chuckled. "They couldn't really stop me, could they? I was going to turn eighteen in two years, and then my choices would be my own. If they screwed me up for those next two years, it would just make it that harder for me to undo."

Simon still thought of himself as a teenager. It was hard for him to take in that in just a brief two years he'd be considered an adult.

Marcus was building up energy now. "So, sure, they had me talk with a therapist, and with my doctors, but everyone said the same thing. If I was sure I was meant to be a boy, it was wrong to keep forcing me to live as a girl, just because of what random doctor decided sixteen years ago."

Simon's hands were clenched so tightly that his fingers were turning white. "And how often

does that happen to babies? What happened to you, I mean?”

Marcus’s eyebrow drew up in intrigue. “You’re actually interested? It depends on what criteria you use, but some estimates are that almost two percent of babies are born with less-than-typical traits. Some are mild differences and some are more noticeable.”

Marcus shrugged. “But doctors are pushed by parents to say Boy or Girl. So they make a decision in about ten seconds – one which will impact that person for the rest of his or her life.”

Simon arms trembled. “That’s wrong. That’s just wrong.”

Marcus’s eyes widened. “Wait, you really seem to care about this.”

Simon’s head nodded vigorously. “It makes sense. It finally all makes sense. Because –”

The front door tinkled.

He turned.

Cindy was standing there in a stunning blue top over a black skirt, her blonde hair falling loose around her shoulders. And Simon fully realized something that he’d always known, but hadn’t known how to describe.

It’s not just that he admired the beautiful clothes. He didn’t just want to wear a woman’s clothing.

It wasn't that he was attracted to her beauty. He didn't want to date her.

It was that he wanted to *be* her. He wanted to be a girl. A vibrant, expressive, no-limits-in-the-world girl. It's what he'd always wanted, from as far back as he could remember.

He just never thought it was possible.

Cindy stared at him, and her hand went to the heart locket at her neck. "You keep looking at me like that, Simon, and I'm gonna tell Zephron!"

Her head swiveled to the newcomer with interest. "And who's this boy?"

Marcus's face went pale, and he glanced at Simon. It was as if his entire life hung in the balance.

Simon smiled and patted Marcus on the back. "Cindy, I'd like you to meet my new friend. He's moved in all the way from New York City. And his name is Marcus."

## Chapter Four

Simon's heart beat more quickly as he approached the store. There Marcus was, waiting as promised by the front door. Marcus's short hair ruffled in the wind, and today he was wearing a navy-blue t-shirt over black jeans. Anybody who looked at him would think him a typical teenage boy.

But because of one doctor in one hospital, sixteen years ago, Marcus had been forced to live a lie. To live as a girl.

Simon's voice was tight. "Thank you for coming to the store again. I appreciate it a lot."

Marcus smiled as they pushed their way into the shop. "No problem. I don't know anybody in town yet, and my corn snake has to eat, after all. You guys may be rural out here in Grafton, but I'd bet you have fewer rats here than I had in Brooklyn!"

Simon laughed out loud. He felt free. Freer than he'd felt his entire life. As if the doors of possibilities had finally been opened to him.

Paul waved from the counter. "Good to see you, Simon. And who's this young lad with you?"

Simon swept a hand. "This is Marcus. He's just moved in from New York. I think he's gonna become a good customer of ours."

Paul beamed. "Great, great. I knew hiring you would bring great things. All right boys, enjoy. I've got things to do." He vanished back into his office.

Marcus turned to Simon. "So show me this Oogway fellow."

Simon led him over to the tank where the two painted turtles were serenely swimming.

Marcus hunkered down to take a look. "Wow, isn't he a beauty. And you say the red-heads were feeding him *bread crusts*?"

Simon nodded. "Awful, right? I'm just thankful they brought him back in again. Hopefully whoever buys him next will take better care of him."

Just saying those words made his heart sink. The thought of seeing Oogway go out the door again sent shards into his heart. But Simon knew he could never take Oogway home. His mother had strictly forbidden any pets, ever since Kurt had gotten that lizard and then let hundreds of

crickets escape loose in the house. It had taken their mother a month to get rid of them all.

Marcus's eyes gleamed in anticipation. "How about we create a display in the front window? Right now it just has those boring flyers and stuff. Nothing really interesting."

His eyes gleamed with delight. "We can create a massive turtle home which takes up half the window. Logs, water, rocks, you name it. Everybody who walks past will stop to look at it. And you could enjoy it from within the store, too, of course. It'd become a symbol for your shop."

His mouth quirked. "Heck, you could set up a webcam on it and people could watch Oogway from their homes. It could get you tons of publicity. And Oogway could live here forever."

Hope lifted in Simon's heart – and then faded. "I don't think Paul has that kind of money, to build that display. Our shop is hanging in there, but we try to keep our prices inexpensive. We have to, when people can just go to Amazon or other online stores and get bargain basement prices. We have to show them why it's worth it to drive over to get things in person here."

Marcus's eyes were absorbed by the swimming turtles. "I have a big tank in my room," he mused. "Brought it with me from home. My old home, I mean. It doesn't really fit in the new house, but I couldn't get myself to give it up." He

smiled. “Now I wouldn’t be giving it up. I’d be able to come visit it any time I wanted to. If you’d let me help take care of the turtles?”

Simon beamed. “Absolutely! Oogway and his friend would be delighted!”

Marcus laughed. “Wait, you mean the other turtle doesn’t have a name?”

Simon looked down at the two reptiles. “I never thought of naming the animals here. I’ve been more focused on just scraping away mold and cleaning the water, these past few weeks. You should have seen the state of the place when I got here!”

“I can just imagine,” murmured Marcus. “All right then, Painted Turtle Number Two needs a name.”

He stared for a long moment at the turtle. At last he said, “How about Raphael? He was always my favorite.”

Simon had favored Michelangelo, the poet, out of the four Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, but he didn’t mind one whit. That Marcus was going to help him set up a front window display was thrilling. “I just need to check with my boss.”

He went over to the office door and knocked.

A second ... two ... and the door creaked open a crack. “Did you need something?”

Simon waved a hand back in Marcus’s direction. “Marcus has a large tank he brought

with him from New York. He offered to help us set up a nice window display. You know, to bring in more customers.”

Paul nodded distractedly. “Sure, sure. Sounds great. You boys do whatever you want. I’m sure it’ll be grand!”

The door closed.

Marcus arched an eyebrow, but Simon was over the moon. “This will be great!”

Cindy’s voice came in harmony with the chiming of the front door bell. “What will be great?”

Today she was wearing a sunshine yellow sundress with white daisies on it. Her hair was done up in a white-daisy-decorated headband. Both matched perfectly.

Her eyes narrowed, and her hand went again to the ever-present necklace. “I swear, Simon, either you stop looking at me like that or I will pick up my phone –”

His throat closed up. “I’m not interested in you!” he blurted out. “Not at all!”

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Oh yeah? So why do you keep staring at me?”

“I love your outfits,” he bumbled. The words were just pouring out of him like an overflowing tank. “That red skater’s dress. The blue outfit. And this one! It’s just so ... so ... right!”

Her brow creased in bafflement. “Wait. So you want to wear girl’s clothing?”

“No. Yes. Well, I mean —”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, which is it? Yes or no?”

He jammed his hands hard into his pockets. The words burst wildly out of him, before he could rein them in. “I want to *be* a girl.”

It was too late to unsay them. They hung in the air.

Confusion swirled in her gaze. “I don’t get it. You can’t be a girl. You’re a boy.”

It took all of Simon’s self-control to not look over at Marcus. To keep his focus on Cindy. His voice was a whisper. “I can be whoever I want to be.”

“Well, of course you can,” she calmly agreed. “But don’t you *feel* like you’re a boy?”

Simon found he couldn’t speak.

She stared at him for a long moment. At last her eyes widened in understanding. She then looked at Marcus with concern. “Hey, I know you’re new and everything, but you won’t say anything about this at school, will you?”

Marcus’s face was even. “Of course I won’t. Simon gets to decide how he wants to handle this.”

There was a silence.

Marcus turned and smiled to Simon. “Now that that’s settled, my house is right down the street. How about you and me go and get my tank. I think the three of us should have fun setting up the fantastic new window display.”

Simon couldn’t believe the clock on the wall was still calmly ticking. The hum and burble in the fish tanks continued as if nothing at all had just happened. As if it were simply a normal afternoon on a normal October day. One like any other.

Marcus’s eyes shone with warmth.

Cindy’s face lit with delighted anticipation, and her gaze flicked to the front window.

The world kept going. Just as it always had.

Astonished contentment coursed through Simon’s soul. He had never felt this way before in his entire life. And he owed it all to Marcus and Cindy. If only there were some way to repay them both -

A thought brightened him. He turned to Cindy with a smile. “Cindy, you’ve been working hard as my second-in-command. I think you’re finally ready. How would you like to watch over the shop while we are gone? You’ll be in charge. What do you think?”

The joyful look on her face was all he could have hoped for.



## Chapter Five

Pride swelled in Simon's chest as he walked up toward the shop. Before, the front of the shop had been a jumbled mess of flyers and supply boxes. With Marcus's and Cindy's help, the entire glass area had been transformed.

A wooden shelf system supported the long tank, neatly hiding the supplies from view. And what a tank it was! It had to be a hundred gallons at least. Oogway and Raphael were swimming contently amongst the plants in the water area. Several logs and branches draped out above them, with three heat lamps strategically placed. Curled up contentedly in one stretch was a small snake, tangerine with stunning crimson splotches.

Marcus was standing at the window, staring at the snake with a warm smile on his face. "I really think Bobbi-Bobbi is happy here! Just look at how relaxed she is."

“The whole environment really is beautiful,” agreed Simon. “Thank you so much for all your help with it.”

“My pleasure,” beamed Marcus.

They walked into the store together.

Paul was glowing with happiness. “We’ve had twice as many sales this morning as usual,” he crowed. “That tank is a hit! Thank you both so much for setting that up!”

A girl’s voice called from the doorway, laced with chimes. “Hey, I helped! I got all the plants laid out just right.”

Paul nodded. “Yes, yes. And the Grafton News is going to stop by next Monday. They want to do an article on our new display.”

His watch beeped, and he grinned. “All right, kids, keep doing what you’re doing. It’s going great!”

He vanished into his back office.

Simon, Cindy, and Marcus moved over to look at the inward side of the tank. It was just as pretty from this view. The turtles made lazy circles in the water, weaving amongst the tendrils of plants. The snake gave a gentle stretch, her eyes closed as she soaked in the warmth of the lamp.

Marcus’s voice was hushed. “She just looks so happy.”

Cindy smiled. “It’s because she’s where she was meant to be. She has everything she could dream of.”

Her hand strayed to her locket, and she glanced over at Simon. Her voice lowered. “Simon, I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said yesterday. You ... you really feel that you were meant to be a girl?”

Simon pressed his lips together and drew in a deep breath. At last he nodded. He found he couldn’t speak.

Cindy clasped her hands together. “My mom always says that putting a name to something is the first step. It sets your intention. It gives you something to focus on. So ... what is your name?”

Simon’s brow crinkled in confusion. “It’s Simon.”

She shook her head, her blonde ponytail bouncing with the motion. “No, silly. I mean for the real you. For the one you feel here.” She put her hand to her heart, pushing aside the locket as she did.

Simon paused, his thoughts swirling. For so long this had been a hidden part of him. One he had not even thought was possible. It was almost too much to take in, the realization that he could have what he had always dreamed of. What he thought was far out of reach.

At last he whispered, “Sophia. My name is Sophia.”

Cindy put out her hand to him. “I am very pleased to meet you, Sophia.”

Simon stared at her hand for a long moment. Then, carefully, he took her hand in his. “It is nice to meet you, Cindy.”

Something warm and golden blossomed within him. A sense of contentment. Of self. Of the world being *right*.

Marcus patted him on the shoulder. “All right, Sophia, what do you think we should do today?”

*Sophia.*

Suddenly the possibilities seemed endless.

Sophia looked down at Oogway, Raphael, and Bobbie-Bobbie. Inspiration flowed through her like a dazzling sunbeam of light bursting through a shadowed forest.

“I know just the thing!”

Thank you for reading this book – I'm working on its sequel!

If you enjoyed this short story, please leave feedback on Amazon, Goodreads, and other systems. Together we can make a difference!

I support local battered women's shelters.

Be sure to sign up for my free newsletter! You'll get alerts of free books, discounts, fun factoids, and new releases. I run my own newsletter server on my own system. Nobody else will ever see your email address. I promise!

<http://www.lisashea.com/lisabase/subscribe.html>

Please visit the following pages for news about free books, discounted releases, and new launches. Feel free to post questions there – I strive to answer within a day!

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LisaSheaAuthor>

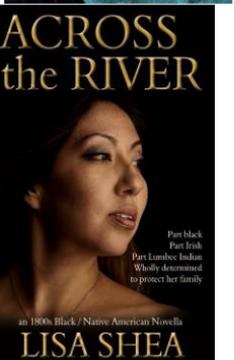
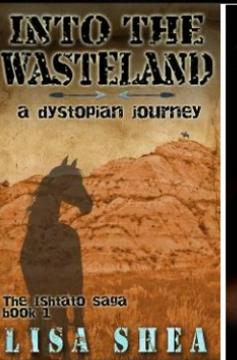
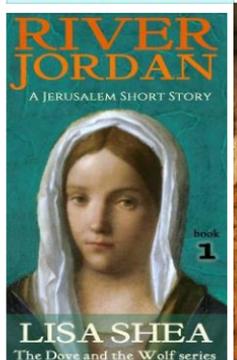
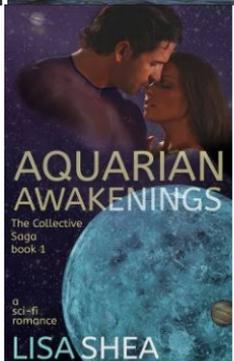
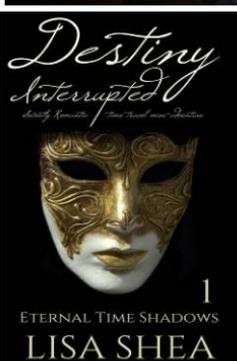
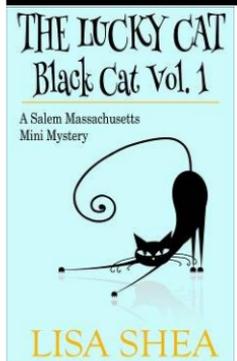
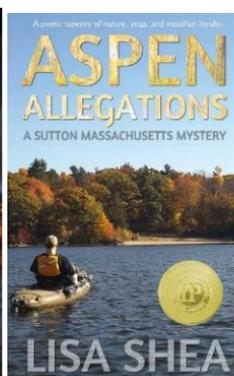
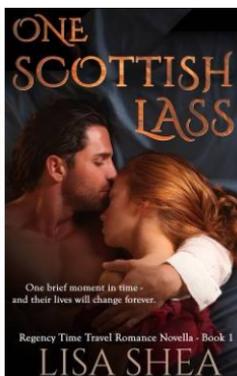
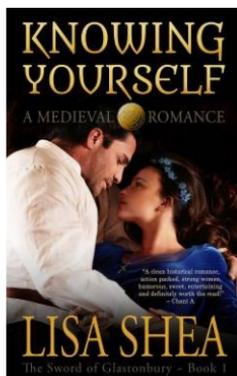
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/LisaSheaAuthor>

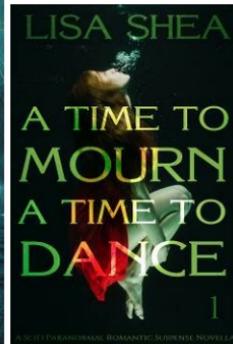
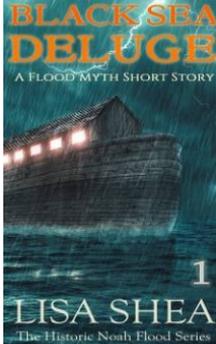
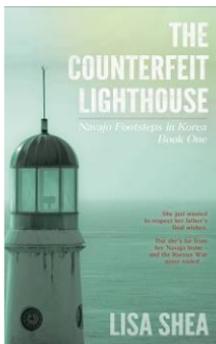
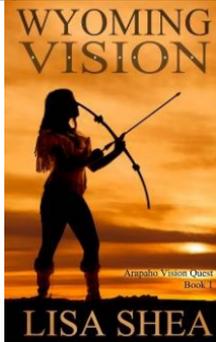
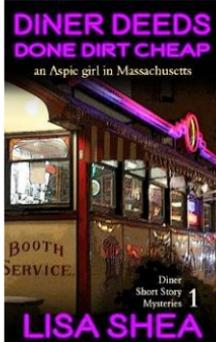
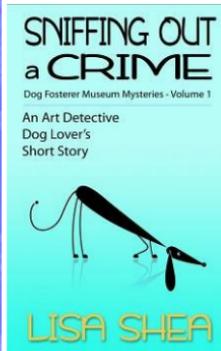
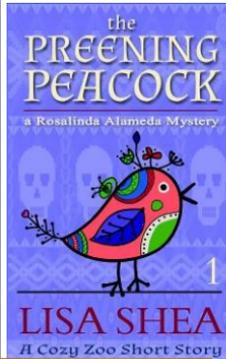
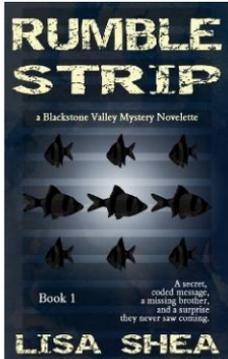
Blog: <http://www.lisashea.com/lisabase/blog/>

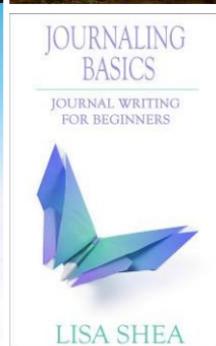
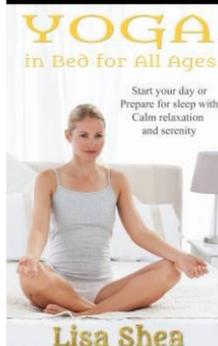
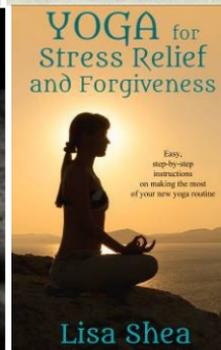
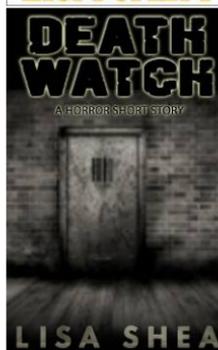
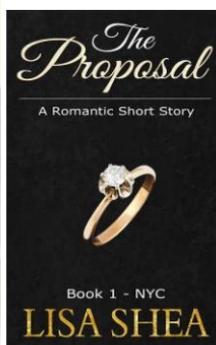
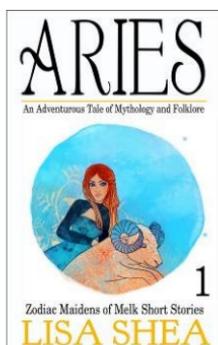
Share the news – we all want to enjoy interesting stories!

# Free Ebooks

Every one of the following ebooks is written by Lisa Shea and is wholly *free*. Download them all today – and share the news!









I may have added more free books since releasing this list here. For the most up to date version, be sure to visit:

<http://www.lisashea.com/freebooks/>

Thank you for supporting the cause!

*Be the change you wish to see in the world.*