



A HOUSE OF NIGHT NOVEL

REVEALED

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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHORS

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CHAPTER ONE

Neferet

The reflection from the past that had suddenly manifested in Zoey Redbird's mystical mirror had been a terrible reminder of the death of Neferet's innocence. It had been so unexpected for Neferet to see herself again as a broken, beaten girl that the memory had shattered her, leaving her vulnerable to the mutinous attack from the creature that had been her vessel. Aurox had overcome her, gored her, and hurled her from the penthouse balcony. When she had hit the pavement below, Neferet, former High Priestess of Nyx, had, indeed, died. As her mortal heart had ceased beating, the spirit within her, the immortal energy that had made her Queen Tsi Sgili, had taken over, dissolving her broken shell of a body and living . . . *living*.

The mass of Darkness and spirit nested together, going to ground, waiting, waiting, surviving, while the Tsi Sgili's consciousness struggled to continue to exist.

The violated girl in the mirror had resurrected a memory that Neferet believed had long ago been dead . . . buried . . . forgotten. That past had risen with a force that she had been utterly unprepared to battle.

Alive again, the past had killed Neferet.

Neferet remembered. She had once been a daughter. She had

once been Emily Wheeler. She had once been a vulnerable, desperate child, and the human male who should have been her most vigilant protector had molested, abused, and violated her.

The instant Emily's reflection had flashed within the magickal mirror, all the decades of power and strength that Neferet had fashioned into a barrier she had used to repress that violation, that murdered innocence, evaporated.

Gone was the mighty vampyre High Priestess. Only Emily remained, staring at the ruin of her young life. It was Emily who Aurox gored and hurled onto the lonely pavement at the base of the Mayo Hotel. It was Emily who took Neferet with her in death.

But it was the spirit of Queen Tsi Sgili that survived.

True, her body had been broken, her mind shattered, but the energy that was Neferet's immortality lived, though her consciousness hovered on the edge of dissolution. The comforting threads of Darkness welcomed and strengthened her, allowing her to first borrow the likeness of insects, then of shadows, then of mist. The spirit of the Tsi Sgili drank the night and vomited the day—sinking into the sewer system of downtown Tulsa and moving slowly, but inexorably in one direction—what remained of Neferet had a never resting compulsion to seek the familiar—to find that which would make her whole again.

The Tsi Sgili was aware when she crossed the boundary between the city and the place she knew best. The place that, even disembodied, her spirit recognized because it had drawn her to it for so many years. She entered the House of Night in the form of fog, thick and gray. She drifted from shadow to shadow, absorbing the familiar.

When she reached the temple at the heart of the school, the specter recoiled, though smoke and shadow, energy and darkness, cannot feel pain, just as they cannot feel pleasure. The ma-

levolent energy of the Tsi Sgili recoiled in reflex, much like the severed leg of a frog twitches in response to a hot skillet.

It was that inadvertent twitch that changed her course, causing her to drift close enough to the place of power that she *did* feel. The Tsi Sgili could not recognize pain or pleasure, but what remained of Neferet knew power. She would always know power.

In sticky drops of oily wetness, she sank into the hole in the earth. She absorbed the energy buried around her, and through it she drew to her the ghostly residue of what was happening above her.

The Tsi Sgili might have remained like that—formless, faceless, simply existing—had death not chosen that moment to approach.

Like wind that blows clouds to shroud the sun, death's approach was invisible, but the Tsi Sgili felt the brush of it before the fledgling began to cough.

Death was even more familiar to the specter than was the school or the place of power. Death drew her up from the pit in the ground. In a rush of excitement the Tsi Sgili's spirit manifested in the first form that had come to her near the beginnings of her power—that of the ever-questing, ever-curious, ever-resilient eight-legged insect.

The black spiders, moving as one, materialized to seek out and to feed from death.

Ironically, it was the fledglings' circle that opened the energy conduit which enabled Neferet to gain enough consciousness so that she was able to focus and borrow the ancient power of death and, ultimately, to find herself once more.

I am she who was Emily Wheeler, and then Neferet, and then Tsi Sgili—queen, goddess, immortal being!

Until that moment, finding the familiar had been her focus.

As death descended upon the fledgling, the Tsi Sgili's spirit fed from it, gathering energy so that finally her memories coalesced from fragments of past and present to one true *knowing*.

The shock of that knowing caused raw energy to surge through her spirit, fragmenting the threads of Darkness and fueling the refashioning of her body. She had been almost fully formed when the elements had expelled her. Exploding from the circle, Neferet fled.

She made it only as far as the iron gate that served as barrier between the human street and the vampyre school grounds. There, her body solidified, and she had burned through all of her siphoned power until she'd been left gasping, weak as a newborn, barely clinging to consciousness. Neferet crumpled against the wall that was boundary to the House of Night.

She must feed!

Hunger was all she knew until she heard his raised voice, spiteful and sarcastic, quipping, "Yes, dear. Of course you're right. You're always right. I don't want to stay for the ridiculous raffle either—I'm absolutely not interested in the five hundred dollars worth of tickets I bought on a chance to win that 1966 T-Bird the vampyres are giving away. No, no problem! And, as you said *so many times*, we should have called a driver and taken a limo. So, so sorry you're inconvenienced by waiting for *me* to walk all the way to where we parked, get our car, and drive it back to pick you up while you sit on a bench and rest yourself. Oh, and I'm so, so glad you were able to allow those two City Council assholes to stare at your boobs while you whispered to them and spread your crazy gossip about Neferet. Ha! Ha! Ha!" His sarcastic laughter drifted to her through the night. "If you actually paid attention to anyone but yourself you would know that Neferet can take care of herself. Penthouse vandals no one so much as got a peek at? Not hardly. That mess looked like the result of a female

temper tantrum. I feel sorry for whoever caused Neferet's temper to explode, but I don't feel sorry for Neferet."

Neferet forced herself to sit up, listening with all her being. The human had said her name. It must be a sign that he was a gift from the gods.

The Lexus not ten feet from where she crouched lit up as he touched the key fob and muttered, "Damned woman. All she does is gossip and manipulate, manipulate and gossip. I should have listened to my father and never married her. All I've gotten from my twenty-five years with her is high blood pressure, GERD, and an ungrateful daughter. I could've been the first single mayor Tulsa's had in fifty years and had my pick of the young daughters of old oil money if I hadn't already been chained to her . . ."

His grumbling trailed off into unintelligible background noise when her supersensitive hearing honed in to his heartbeat.

She sighed gratefully. He did, indeed, sound like dinner. She would not thank the gods of fate who had sent him to her. She would accept their aid as no more than what she deserved—an acknowledgment that they were pleased to have her return to their immortal ranks.

He was opening the door to the sedan when she stood. Neferet put all of her longing and hunger into the one word that was his name: "Charles!"

He paused, straightened, and peered her way, trying to see through the darkness. "Hello? Is someone there?"

Neferet did not need light to see. Her vision moved through the Darkness easily, comfortably. She saw his carefully combed hair, the well-tailored lines of his expensive suit, the sweat on his upper lip, and the pulse in his neck that beat steadily with his life's blood.

She stepped forward and shook back her long auburn hair, exposing the lushness of her naked body. Then, as if it were an

afterthought, she raised her hands in an unsuccessful attempt to shield her most private parts from his widening eyes. "Charles!" Neferet repeated his name. This time she added with a sob, "They've hurt me!"

"Neferet?" Obviously confused, Charles took one step toward her before halting. "Is it really you?"

"It is! It is! Oh, Goddess, that it would be you who discovered me out here, naked, wounded, and all alone. It is so terrible! So much more than I can bear!" Neferet wept as she covered her face with her hands, allowing him to get a more thorough look at her body.

"I don't understand. What has happened to you?"

"Charles!" his name shrilled behind them from the school grounds, making them both pause. "What is taking you so long?"

"Dear, I've found—" Charles began to call back to his wife, but Neferet moved quickly toward him. She clutched his hand, cutting off his words. "No! Don't tell her it's me. I couldn't stand for her to know what they've done to me," she whispered desperately.

His gaze was completely focused on Neferet's bare breasts when he cleared his throat and continued, "Frances, dear, be patient. I dropped the car fob, and just now found it. I'll have the car there in another minute or two."

"Of course you dropped it! You're so damn clumsy!" came the venom-filled retort.

"Go to her! Forget that you ever saw me." Neferet whimpered as she scrambled back within the shadows beside the school wall. "I can care for myself."

"What are you talking about? Of course I won't go and leave you out here naked and hurt. Here, put on my coat. Tell me what has happened to you. I know your penthouse was vandalized. Were you kidnapped?" Charles spoke as he moved to her. Taking off his suit jacket, he held it out to her.

Neferet's gaze went to his hands where they gripped the jacket, offering it.

"Your hands are so large." Overwhelmed by images from the past, Neferet found it hard to speak through lips that had gone cold and numb. "Your fingers. So, so thick."

Charles blinked in confusion. "I suppose they are. Neferet, are you in your right mind? You seem very out of sorts. How can I help you?"

"Help me?" Her ravenous mind thrust Neferet forward from Emily's past. "I shall show you the only way you may help me."

Neferet did not waste any more of her energy speaking to him. In a single predatory movement she knocked aside the offered jacket and slammed Charles against the wall. His breath left him in a shocked *oof* and he fell to the grass, gasping for air. She did not allow him time to recover. She pinned him to the ground with her knees and, making her hands into claws, ripped open his throat. As his thick, hot blood sprayed from his jugular, she fastened her lips over the gash and drank deeply. Even as he died, he did not struggle. Completely under her spell, he moaned and tried to lift his arms to more fully embrace her. His breath gurgled, ending his moans, and his legs kicked spasmodically, but Neferet's strength grew as he moved more closely to death. She drank and drank, draining him body and spirit, until Charles LaFont, mayor of Tulsa, was no more than a bloodless, lifeless shell.

Licking her lips, Neferet stood, staring down at what was left of him. Energy surged through her. How she loved the taste of death!

"Charles, goddamn it! Do I have to do *everything* myself?" His wife's voice was coming closer, as if she were moving toward them.

Neferet lifted her bloody hand. "Mist and darkness, I command thee. Shield my body. Now! Cover me!"

Instead of obeying her and hiding Neferet from seeking eyes, the deepest, darkest of the shadows only quivered restlessly. Through the night she felt more than heard their reply: *Your power wanes, reborn Tsi Sgili. Command us now? We shall see . . . we shall see . . .*

Rage was a luxurious emotion Neferet could not afford. She kept her anger close to her, choosing it over Charles LaFont's crumpled suit jacket. Clothed only in blood and rage and fading power, Neferet fled. She had reached the ditch on the opposite side of Utica Street when LaFont's wife began screaming.

Her screams made Neferet smile, and though Darkness did not obey her command and cloak her, the Tsi Sgili ran with the otherworldly liteness of an immortal. As she fled through the opulent midtown neighborhood, Neferet imagined how she must appear to any mortal who might be lucky enough to glance out her window. She was a scarlet wraith, a Banshee from ancient times. Neferet wished she could bring to life the Old Magick curse of the Banshee—that any mortal filled with hubris enough to dare to look upon her would turn to stone.

Stone . . . I wish . . . I do so wish . . .

The death of the mayor did not fuel her far. Too soon Neferet's fleetness faltered. Waves of weakness broke over her body with such intensity that she stumbled over the next curb, gasping for breath.

No houses here. Where am I?

Confused, Neferet looked around, blinking at the brightness of the 1920s style streetlights that dotted the park. Instinctively, she moved away from the lights and deeper into the shrubs and winding paths in the heart of the park.

It was on the small ridge, surrounded by sleeping azalea bushes, that Neferet's breath finally returned to her, allowing her thoughts to clear enough that she recognized her location.

Woodward Park—not far from the House of Night. Neferet looked up, searching for Tulsa’s downtown skyline. *The Mayo is too far away. I’ll not make it there before dawn.* And even if she could reach her penthouse before the sun lifted from the horizon and sapped her of what remained of her strength, how would she get past the humans that worked at the front desk? Darkness was not obeying her. Uncloaked, she would be a naked, blood-covered vampire—a thing to loathe and imprison—especially on the night their mayor had been killed by a vampire.

Perhaps she should have considered her alternatives more carefully before she’d ended LaFont’s miserable life.

Neferet felt her first sliver of panic. She had not been this alone and vulnerable since the night her father had killed her innocence.

The Tsi Sgili shuddered, remembering his large, hot hands; his thick fingers; and the stench of his fetid breath.

Neferet sobbed, remembering also the shadows that had comforted her as a young girl, and the Darkness that had soothed her broken innocence. “Have all of you deserted me? Have none of my dark children remained faithful to me?”

As if in answer, the bushes before her whispered with movement, and from within a fox emerged. The creature stared at her with no visible fear. Neferet was awed by the beauty of its amber and red fur, and the intelligence in its brilliant green eyes.

The fox is my answer—my gift—my sacrifice.

Neferet gathered the remnants of her power. Silently and swiftly, she struck, breaking the fox’s neck with a single blow. While the light faded from its eyes, Neferet laid the body across her lap and clawed open the dying creature’s throat. She lifted the fox so that its blood ran sluggishly down her arms, and her breasts, pooling around her like a warm spring rain.

“If it is a sacrifice you need, then for you doth this creature bleed! This blood only opens the door. Return to me and Tulsa will pay you more . . . more!”

The deepest shadows beneath the azalea bushes stirred. Slowly, almost tentatively, a few threads of Darkness slithered toward Neferet.

The Tsi Sgili blinked tears from her eyes. They hadn’t abandoned her! She bit her lip to keep from crying out in gratitude when the first of the tendrils brushed its frigid flesh against her while it sank into the warmth of the fox’s blood and began to feed. Others soon joined it, and though there didn’t come forth the hundreds, even thousands, of tendrils she had once commanded, Neferet was pleased that there were enough of them who answered her call that it seemed the ground around her had been transformed into a nest of Darkness. She inhaled the night deeply, feeling the power that pulsed through it. If she could just remain with her familiar threads she could feed them, and in turn they would hide her and nurture her until she truly regained her strength, and her purpose.

My purpose? What is my purpose?

Memories flooded her weakened mind with a cacophony of voices and visions: she was a young girl—*your purpose is to be Lady of Wheeler House!* She was a young High Priestess—*your purpose is to follow the Path of the Goddess!* She was a more mature vampyre who had begun to listen to the whispers of Darkness that seemed to drift to her on the wind—*your purpose is to help me break free of my earthly jail and reign at my side!* She was powerful, fed by threads fashioned from night and magick—*your purpose is to amuse me and to be my Consort!*