

A woman in a long, flowing purple dress is the central figure, her body angled slightly to the left. She has her right hand raised to her face, with fingers spread, and her left hand resting on her hip. Her eyes are closed, and her expression is serene. The background is a classical interior with arched windows and decorative wall panels. The entire image is bathed in a deep purple light, creating a monochromatic effect. Overlaid on the image is the title 'AS LONG AS YOU'RE MINE' in large, white, serif capital letters.

# AS LONG AS YOU'RE MINE

A NOVEL

NEKESA AFIA

AS  
LONG  
AS  
YOU'RE  
MINE

OTHER TITLES BY NEKESA AFIA

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE MYSTERIES

*Dead Dead Girls*

*Harlem Sunset*

*A Lethal Lady*

AS  
LONG  
AS  
YOU'RE  
MINE

A NOVEL

NEKESA AFIA

LAKE UNION  
PUBLISHING

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*Hi, family! Please do not read this book.*

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# CHAPTER 1

**1934**

The song is cloying enough to get stuck in my head. I learned it three months ago, and ever since, it's been on a dull repeat. I sing it while getting ready. I sing it on the drive to Sunset Studios. I sing it in the makeup chair, as my hair is set, as I'm put into costumes.

It's always in my head until right *now*. The words won't come. All of them are piled up at the back of my throat. I'm unsure which one is supposed to come first. Now that I'm on set, lights on me, makeup caked over my face, I cannot remember the lyrics.

Kenneth Webster has risen from his director's chair, his wide, flat hands waving in the air. Everything he does is punctuated by a gesture. "Can we do this scene again? And can *our star* please keep it together? We're wasting time and money today." Kenneth is in a mood. He's glaring at me. I've been on set since two in the morning. Some of that time was in hair and makeup; more of it was in costumes. But the majority of it has been spent running the same scene over and over again, trying to live up to Kenneth's exacting standards.

I place my hands on my waist, feeling beads of sweat bloom under the stage lights. A flurry of activity happens around me; a woman brushes makeup on while another adjusts the skirt of my dress. The girls behind me, a flock of colored dresses that look muted against mine, prepare to restart the scene.

This is a big deal for me. Everyone on set knows that. Every time we finish, Kenneth finds something wrong. I'm sure my feet are bleeding, but that's something to worry about later.

“Reset,” Kenneth says. This is my sixth film with him, but it’s the first one I’m starring in. I understand the risk he’s taken for me. Risks. Plural. “Action!”

He sits back down. My flock of girls lines up behind me, and we do it again.

Ramona Penderghast stands right next to me in a brilliant blue dress that contrasts with my red. The colors don’t matter. The film will be in black and white. Ramona smiles at me, part encouraging, part threatening. The flock of girls dances behind me. All our moves choreographed to perfection.

I need to convince the audience that I’m a woman worthy of love.

Sunset Studio’s pictures are all the same. Girl meets boy, boy meets girl, and, through a number of lengthy and complicated dance numbers, boy and girl fall in love.

It’s a successful formula.

“Cut,” Kenneth yells. We hold in place at the end of the number. He rises from his chair again, takes one long look at us. “Print. Moving on.”

Relief.

He turns away from us. Characters are broken; background girls go back to talking about what they’re going to do when they’re done for the day.

“Good work, kid.” Ramona remains by my side. She’s maybe my only friend at Sunset, and that’s saying a lot. We started at the same time, in the same acting and voice and etiquette classes.

“You think?”

“Stop being so modest.” She’s every bit the vixen. Her dark hair falls into her emerald eyes; her voice is low and throaty. She’s the perfect 36-24-36 hourglass, measurements I have to constantly work to achieve.

And yet I’m starring in this flick, while she plays the best friend.

“Thanks.” I smile.

Ramona blinks her big green eyes. “Why don’t we change and go to lunch?”

“Would love to but can’t. I need to go run my lines. Next scene,” I say, trying to look apologetic.

Ramona slinks off, tossing her hair over her shoulder.  
It's true I want to get off my feet, but I have something else.  
Something better than Ramona Penderghast.



He's waiting for me when I open the door to my dressing room. I've just been moved to Star Row, where all the big Sunset stars have dressing rooms. I'm aware that I have the smallest one. I'm just happy to be here.

I flick on the radio and turn on the lights to find Tommy Ross sitting on my couch. "You're early," I say. He laughs. I kiss him and then disappear behind my screen to change.

"Did old Kenneth keep you?" Tommy asks. "You Do Something to Me" is playing on the radio. I can hear him humming along.

"Ran it twenty times." I slide on my dressing gown and reappear from behind the screen.

"Well, you were wonderful every time." Tommy wraps an arm around me as I settle in next to him. I'm exhausted. I close my eyes.

"You were watching?" I ask.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I? Maybe I wanted to hear you say you loved me over and over."

"Ha."

He kisses me before I can say anything else, and I melt into him. This, right now, makes all those hours under the hot lights worth it. He pulls me onto his lap.

"Those are just lyrics, you know," I say with my lips against his.

"Are you saying you don't love me?"

"I'm saying we have to work some things out."

I can smell him; our heat collides as he slides a hand up my bare thigh. His fingertips make ripples on my skin as he touches me. His kiss is disorienting, throwing me off kilter when his lips meet mine.

Tommy and I met on my first Sunset film. He played the lead, and I was a featured dancer.

And now, we're doing this.

He's my costar now. I know he's married. I've never overstepped boundaries like this before. I've met his wife twice at parties, a stunning thing. Mrs. Ross is cold, reserved.

Being this close to Tommy distorts my thoughts. I meant to tell him here and now that we can't continue doing this, but when his tongue parts my lips, I lose all sense.

And I don't ask him to stop, because I don't want him to.

## CHAPTER 2

**1934**

I can't breathe.

I'm supposed to be on set, filming. Instead, I'm in a crumpled satin ball. The entire weight of the world is on me, and I can't breathe.

It came on suddenly and with no warning, as these things usually do. One moment, I'm humming along with the radio; the next, I'm pressing my cheek on the carpet of my dressing room, tears streaming down my face. The radio is still playing, and it sounds like it's a million miles away. I'm grasping at the dress that cages me in, and I think I'm about to vomit.

I can't let anyone see me like this, but it's inevitable; someone will come looking for me. I just hope it won't be Tommy. He doesn't know about my little episodes. I've done everything I can to hide them.

I can't let Kenneth see me like this either. If I can't make it to set, we'll have to push the schedule another day. We're already out of time and out of money. If this movie fails, I'll lose everything.

There's a knock on the door. When it opens, I can see a swirling skirt. I squeeze my eyes shut.

A hand presses to my forehead. I lie still.

"Lorelei." It's Ramona. I'd recognize her low, smoky voice anywhere. "Are you okay?"

It's a dumb question, but I think I'd ask the same if our roles were reversed. I open my mouth, and sobs escape.

Ramona kneels down, pulling my head into her lap. I'm shaking, dripping tears and snot on the skirt of her dress. She pushes my hair from my face. "You're okay," she whispers. Realizing that just makes me cry harder. "I know, I know," Ramona says over and over, her voice soft and low.



Slowly, I pull myself together. I stop crying, and I release the skirt of my dress. It's a supple douppioni, which means that I've put wrinkles in it. "I have to get to set." I get up, as unsteady on my feet as a newborn deer, and lean into the mirror. I'll have to redo my makeup, but I can do that quickly and then go.

"There's no way you're going to set." Ramona stands, her arms crossed over her chest. "If Kenneth gets mad, then let him. You're much more important than he ever could be." She steps toward the mirror, undoing the buttons that run up the back of my dress. I take a deep, grateful breath, in and out, as the world settles around me.

"He's going to . . ." I can't finish the sentence because I don't know *what* he'll do. He holds every part of my life in his hands, and he could ruin me if he wanted.

He knows more about me than anyone in my life, and that's not a good thing.

I look at my reflection in the mirror. With her hair pressed and eyes stained with mascara, this woman just looks sad. "You need to take a day off. Maybe two," Ramona says. I can tell she won't take no for an answer. Deep down, I know what she's doing. She's angling. She wants what I have, and she'll do anything to get it.

But I don't care.

I can't.

Everyone in Hollywood has their own goals, their own agenda. I want to be great, but Ramona does too.

"You stay here." She presses a kiss to my temple. The gesture is so maternal, so gentle, that I'm stunned, frozen for a moment. "I'll tell Kenneth."

I know what will happen. I've had too many days like this. The reason *Live, Love* is behind schedule is because of me. And they—maybe Kenneth or someone higher than him—will tell the press it's my fault. And then I'll be trapped at Sunset because no other studio will have me.

But I don't have it in me to argue. I don't have it in me to fight. I don't have it in me to report to set and pretend to . . .

I can't even remember what scenes we're doing. So it's better that I don't film.

I'm starting to spiral again; I can feel my breath hitching in my chest. Before she leaves, Ramona helps me slip out of my dress, hangs it neatly, and gets me on the couch.

I close my eyes, trying to stop the swirling thoughts from intruding again. I take my time; the radio is still on, invading my senses. I want to turn it off, but to do that, I have to stand up.

And I try. With my heartbeat thrumming in my chest, I try.

I take a half step and feel myself collapse.

And then the cycle starts all over again.



I hide out at home. My absence pushes *Live, Love* back another few days, and on the third, I'm lying in bed when there's a knock on the door.

I'm not about to move. I'm not about to let someone into this house. I've sent the maid away twice, and I can't do it again.

"Lorelei, you shouldn't keep your spare key under the mat."

I freeze. I pull my blanket over my head, curling up into a ball. It's Tommy. He's supposed to be on set.

"Kenneth didn't send me." His voice breaks the silence of the house, and it's like he knows what I'm thinking. "Lor, you disappeared for three days. Say something so I know you're not dead." I can hear him walking around. I'm wondering how long I can lie here, how long it will take him to go away. I squeeze my eyes shut, hearing him move from room to room. He's getting closer to my bedroom.

The door squeaks as it opens. I can feel him watching me.

If I pull myself out from under the blanket, he'll see that my face is red and puffy from crying. I haven't been able to stop sobbing since I left set. I'm

still wearing the same bra and slip from three days ago, the bands pinching into my waist and back.

But I can't move.

"When I was ten, I bet my brother I could hold my breath for longer than he could," Tommy says. "We timed it. He went for ten seconds. I went until I passed out. You're stubborn, Lorelei, but I am too. Make this easy on the both of us."

I can hear his laugh, slightly amused. I can't take it. Also, it's hot under the covers, and I'm starting to sweat.

I pull myself out. My hair is tangled in knots. I keep my brassiere covered, even though he's seen me in less. I paw at my eyes, trying to do something to make myself more attractive.

He says my name. His voice is so soft, and he kicks his shoes off, climbing into bed with me. He wraps his arms around me. I'm out of tears. "I'm . . ." He trails off. He doesn't know what to say. "You don't have to go through this alone."

He surprises me.

I was imagining the worst—his reaction, how he would see me—so focused on it that I couldn't begin to think that things would ever be okay. "You need to go back to sleep. Lie down." He moves with me, letting my face rest on his chest. I close my eyes and feel his arms around me. As I succumb to the twilight of sleep, Tommy pulls away and says, "I'm sorry." His voice is soft, barely a whisper on my skin. It feels as if I've been hit by a car, run over, and dragged behind it for miles.

I don't fight it; I need to sleep.

And when I wake, Tommy has cooked. Except he's a man and he doesn't know how to cook. He's put bread in the toaster, smeared it with butter. He brings it to me in bed, and I start to believe that everything will be okay.

# CHAPTER 3

**1954**

Thea Ross was intensely watching her father soak up attention. Tommy Ross had his hand on a woman's shoulder. He leaned in and said something, and the woman's laugh rang through the ballroom.

It was the middle of a long night. Thea wore an ornate black gown with gold peacock feathers embroidered on the bodice and skirt. She had to be stitched into the dress and could barely breathe, let alone eat. Her dinner sat in front of her, untouched.

She'd already taken two turns around the dance floor, her injured foot wrapped in a way that it didn't bother her. She wasn't even supposed to be dancing at all, not even a rigid waltz.

But her father had asked. And this evening was all for her father.

It was another Constellation Pictures event. The studio her father had founded. Thea had been attending these parties since she was a child. He'd moved from acting to directing, and now he owned a film studio.

Hollywood at large was finally honoring Tommy and his achievements, after decades in the film industry, and Thea had remained by his side for most of the night.

To Thea, Tommy was *Dad*: the man who had raised her, indulged her whims, educated her at home until she graduated early.

To the rest of the world, he was the actor and director who led films to financial success.

They sat at a table with her father's old friends and business partners: Jake Turner and his daughter, Willa, and Ingrid Belle and her son, Max Armstrong.