

The final chapter in a three-part story, where the hero finally steps out and is seen and proves that true love never dies.

## Love, Ash & Ember

by T. Renee

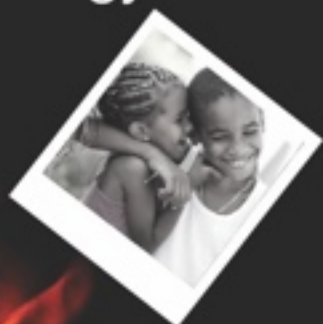
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# LOVE, ASH & EMBER

From The Hearts On Fire Trilogy



WRITTEN BY:

**T. RENEE**

Family  
Album

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ISBN: 978-1-64718-463-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

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Dumpson, Tiffany  
Love, Ash & Ember, By T. Renee  
Fiction/General/Romance/Drama  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020906615

Printed on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.  
2020

First Edition

## Things We Lost in the Fire

Happiness and levity,  
Unfinished thoughts and  
Unattained dreams.

A quiet place—  
A calming breeze,  
Unfiltered joy,  
Unfettered glee.

Love without limit, consequence or greed,  
Faith without question, desire or reason.  
Hope without doubt  
And  
Time without season.

A well of devotion,

A spring of conviction.  
A valley of favor,  
A mountain of altruism.  
Up in smoke,  
Greyed in dust.  
Scorched by flame,  
All is lost.

No monetary replacement,  
No appraised value  
Insurance rendered useless,  
The casualty insurmountable.

A fatality impossible to decipher.  
For nothing can replace  
What was lost in the fire.

Chapter One  
Fall 2010  
October – November

## TAMEKA

One week after agreeing to testify against Madison, Sophia, Raymond, and Justin, Tameka found herself back in the same emotional state as her seven-year-old self. Before she entered the group home over a decade ago Tameka was alone, lonely, bruised and emotionally broken. She had no one, nothing and no other place to go. Now, years later she was right back to where she started.

After she left the District Attorney's office the week before, she went back to her apartment at Nixon. After walking inside and stepping over the shattered and fractured pieces of what used to be her life that lay all about the floor, she slowly made her way upstairs to the bedroom where she sat down on her bed and read the letter that Alicia had given her from Lucas over and over again.

*Dear Tameka,*

*I was glad to hear you made the right decision to testify and do the right thing. I wish things could have ended differently... better... between the two of us not only for the twins but because I think we almost could have had something, you and I, but now too much as happened. Maybe you were wrong about the true love thing after all. I don't know if love is what could have been between us but if it was, well then that explains the tragedy of it all. I hope things work out well for you in the*

*future, maybe one day our paths may cross again and maybe the time and space between us will heal what you broke.*

*Always,*

*Lucas*

Tuesday morning, after spending the past week reading the same five lines of Lucas's letter, Tameka looked around her disaster area of a bedroom, she glanced at the semi-packed suitcase on the corner of her bed and realized she was partially packed with nowhere to go and she didn't care. All she could do was think about Lucas. After a moment she set her sight to the fragmented reflection of herself in the broken mirror that stood above her dresser. She felt as irreparably damaged as the mirror she punched just a week ago, so many tiny broken pieces just begging to fall apart.

At ten o'clock that morning, after a week of wallowing in self-pity, Tameka finally left her apartment and walked down three rows of apartments, past the deserted parking lot, past Madison and Sophia's empty apartments down the hill to the bus stop and got on the next bus headed downtown.

After getting off the bus which let her off down the street from the bakery where she was once employed, Tameka walked down the sidewalk, past the bakery, across the street and into the building that leased an office to Alicia, Licensed Insurance Professional and Financial Advisor.



Tameka sat calmly and quietly in the waiting area of Alicia's office while she watched the receptionist whisper on the phone about her presence. She wasn't sure if Alicia would see her or not, neither was she sure why she had even bothered to come to Alicia's office that morning, but regardless, she sat and she waited. After ten minutes of waiting in silence Alicia stepped into the waiting room.

"Tameka."

It wasn't until she heard Alicia call her name that she even noticed her presence in the waiting area. For the past ten minutes she had been sitting quietly and unmoving, just staring down at the grey carpet and her mind somewhere far off in the distance, an elephant could have walked in the room and Tameka would have been none the wiser.

"Yeah? Oh, sorry. Hi Alicia. Thanks for seeing me."

Alicia looked down at Tameka for a moment, completely expressionless, and then she raised an eyebrow and took a small step closer towards where she was seated.

"Well, you wanted to see me, why you wanted to see me—I'm not sure, but let's not dilly-dally out here all day. Come on, my office is just down the hall."

Tameka quickly got out of her seat and followed Alicia, who had already turned away from her and was heading down the hall. Once inside Alicia's office, the two women were now arm's length apart and without a word spoken between them Tameka managed to feel even smaller in that moment than she had when she first arrived to the building. Alicia stood in front

of her confident and tall in her leopard print Louis Vuitton heels, black leather pants and red silk blouse. To Tameka, even Alicia's *hair* looked confident, it was flat ironed to perfection and laid down in an edged-out bob. Sheepishly, Tameka turned her eyes to the floor and awkwardly smoothed down her wrinkled cargo jeans and tugged at the bottom of her grey sweatshirt.

“Yeah, I just wanted to say... thank you again for your time. I didn't want to just barge in on you like this but I didn't have your number to call. I mean, your number changed and ... Well, I just need to talk to you and I wasn't sure how else to reach you.”

Alicia casually raised her arm in the direction of the empty chair behind Tameka. After her arm flopped back down to her side, she slowly walked around her desk and took her seat and watched Tameka as she awaited an explanation for today's visit.

As she settled into the seat across the desk from where Alicia sat, Tameka still lacked the strength and confidence in herself to look Alicia in the eye.

“Well, first, I know it's been well over a year and you're probably still really mad, and I don't blame you, you should be mad. But, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry for everything, Alicia. I knew they were planning to rob you and I didn't do anything to stop them... I helped them do it, and I'm sorry.”

Alicia tilted her head slightly in an effort to make Tameka meet her gaze. The effort proved fruitless and Tameka's gaze remained firmly focused on the floor.

“Okay, so you’re sorry. Thanks—I guess. Better late than never. So, what is this? You in rehab or something? Is this one of your steps? You trying to make some half-assed attempt to make amends? If so, I should let you know lack of eye contact does not help you in your effort to try and reconcile with people and make them believe you’re really sorry; in fact it shows lack of character and true contrition.”

Despite Alicia’s tact, Tameka’s eyes never rose above the height of Alicia’s desk and when it did, it returned right back to the floor after a mere few seconds and listlessly searched the carpet for something that wasn’t there.

“I don’t understand what you mean. I’m not in rehab or anything. I just—I...” After a moment, in a small voice almost like they were the last words she would ever speak, in barely a whisper, Tameka raised her head and looked at Alicia’s face for the first time that morning. “I’m sorry.”

Tameka’s voice was barely audible but the pain and sorrow in it was so loud it thundered in Alicia’s ears and she flinched as the words fell from her mouth.

After shaking off the sudden feelings of remorse that she’d been struck with, Alicia relaxed her body. Since Tameka’s arrival she had been extremely tense and her body showed it, but now with sympathetic shoulders, she leaned her elbows on her desk and gave a tilt of her head as she studied Tameka’s somber, lusterless face.

“Tameka, are you all right? You don’t look—well, you don’t look like—you kinda look like you’re dying. You look... You just look so *empty*.”

Tameka's once big soft brown eyes were now large saucer-like holes that just sat on her face. They were completely vacant and emotionless, it was as if someone had shut the power off to the light that made her who she was.

"I'm fine, I guess. I should probably tell you why I stopped in today. I read the letter you gave me from Lucas and I just wanted to know if you've heard anything from him? Is he okay? Is he gone? Did he move back to Louisiana?"

Alicia sat back up in her seat but kept her worried gaze locked on Tameka's semi-incoherent face.

"Yes. Lucas is gone. He and the kids left right before the meeting you and I had with everyone. Tameka, you need to let it go and move on. Lucas doesn't want anything to do with you. You've gotta accept the fact that you screwed up big time with him and a simple *I'm sorry* ain't gonna cut, you need to let it go. I mean I get it, you miss the kids, but they're *his* kids now and after what you did, he doesn't want you anywhere near them. Now, with all that being said, you know, Lucas is a really good guy and he wouldn't want to see you like this, that's why he left you that letter. Just because he doesn't want you in his life, doesn't mean he doesn't want you to stop living yours. You need to snap out of it. This is your chance to do something amazing with your life now that you don't have those two fools you called *sisters* weighing you down. Do something, go somewhere, cook something... just *do something*. Don't let this beat you. You've got a chance to start over, be a better version of yourself. Hopefully this better version will own a comb and some clothes and likes long hot showers, all of which you seem to be in desperate need of right now, but you're grieving, so for today you get a pass."

Alicia's attempt at humor almost extracted a smile from Tameka. The left corner of Tameka's lip made a valiant effort to show amusement but the immobility of the right side forced an immediate retreat.

"Yeah, sorry. Most of my stuff is packed up and I don't know where anything is."

Alicia was now intrigued and leaned forward again onto her desk.

"Are you moving?"

"Yeah. I'm not really sure where to, yet. I mean, it's not like I've got that many options, you know." As she exhaled, her words seemed to follow in what seemed like one long defeated breath. "I just can't stay there."

Watching how sad and pathetic Tameka looked, Alicia took a deep breath then let the air blow out nosily through her lips.

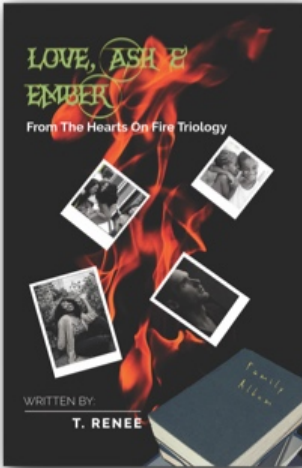
"Okay. In the spirit of Letti, this is what I'm gonna do. First, I'm gonna forgive you for all the shitty things you did and said to me in the past and then I'm gonna help you 'cause, well—you look like you're drowning and lucky for you, I happen to be an excellent swimmer." Alicia stood up out her seat and walked around her desk to where Tameka sat and grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to her feet. "First things first, you go home and finish packing. After you pack, *please* take a shower. Have yourself ready to leave by eight this evening and I will come and pick you up, okay?"

Tameka was thoroughly confused but her expressionless eyes couldn't show it.

“Pick me up? Pick me up to go where?”

“You need a place to stay. I've got a place for you to stay. So, be ready at eight o'clock tonight, okay? And *showered*. I am serious about the shower thing.”

Tameka nodded and turned her vacant eyes back towards the floor then slowly headed out the door.



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