



Sorrow

Tiffanie DeBartolo

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Sorrow is a romantic novel whose reluctant antihero is forced to learn the lessons necessary to turn him into the hero of his own life.

In Tiffanie DeBartolo's novel of redemption and enlightenment, *Sorrow*, a self-critical young man finds both himself and love when he answers a classified ad.

Gifted guitarist Joe's life has not turned out the way he had hoped. After his older brother died in an accident for which he blamed himself, he faced the cold criticism of his father. In a failed attempt to gain back his father's approval, he betrayed his best friend, Cal, by bailing on their dreams of becoming rock and roll stars in order to attend college.

At a desperate point post-graduation, Joe answers an ad to be an artist's assistant. His employer is a famous performance artist and empath, October. There is an immediate artistic and emotional connection between them, but October has a boyfriend, and he's someone who Joe knows well. Joe ends up abandoning his job and October. He hides out in a cabin in Montana, supporting himself through guitar lessons and following October online, never quite gathering the courage to contact her. It takes a punch in the nose from Cal to motivate him to go back and make reparations.

Joe's uneasy self-image is the nucleus around which this story is built. His penchant for running away when he's faced with difficult decisions erodes his self-confidence, but the depth of his love for October, and the loving forgiveness of Cal, bring him to a place where he can face the truth about himself, and about what he must do to become who he wants to be.

The novel is set against the backdrop of Northern California's majestic redwood forests. The redwoods play a symbolic role, helping to reveal Joe's emotional makeup and the evolution of his relationship with October. Sometimes, the symbolism is too heavy. More cogent are excerpts from the writing exercises that Joe does as part of a class he takes while in exile in Montana. These reveal Joe to be sensitive, confused, and relatable.

Still, Joe's tendency to get bogged down in spiraling self-recrimination becomes tedious and interferes with the smooth unreeling of the story. When the narrative flows unencumbered, it is more familiar and compelling, focused on love and redemption and populated by characters who are original and appealing. The final scene rises above its predictable elements to become gratifying and heartwarming.

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RANDI HACKER (October 19, 2020)

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