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The Underside of Joy

Sere Prince Halverson

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Set against the backdrop of Redwood forests and shimmering vineyards, Seré Prince Halverson's compelling debut tells the story of two women, bound by an unspeakable loss, who each claims to be the mother of the same two children.

To Ella Beene, happiness means living in the northern California river town of Elbow with her husband, Joe, and his two young children. Yet one summer day Joe breaks his own rule-*never turn your back on the ocean*-and a sleeper wave strikes him down, drowning not only the man but his many secrets.

For three years, Ella has been the only mother the kids have known and has believed that their biological mother, Paige, abandoned them. But when Paige shows up at the funeral, intent on reclaiming the children, Ella soon realizes there may be more to Paige and Joe's story. "Ella's the best thing that's happened to this family," say her close-knit Italian-American in-laws, for generations the proprietors of a local market. But their devotion quickly falters when the custody fight between mother and stepmother urgently and powerfully collides with Ella's quest for truth.

The Underside of Joy is not a fairy-tale version of stepmotherhood pitting good Ella against evil Paige, but an exploration of the complex relationship of two mothers. Their conflict uncovers a map of scars-both physical and emotional-to the families' deeply buried tragedies, including Italian internment camps during World War II and postpartum psychosis.

Weaving a rich fictional tapestry abundantly alive with the glorious natural beauty of the novel's setting, Halverson is a captivating guide through the flora and fauna of human emotion-grief and anger, shame and forgiveness, happiness and its shadow complement . . . the underside of joy.

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