



## SF BAILEY

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Sue grew up in northern England, close to purple moorland and long, silvery beaches. Books were her earliest friends. When she was small, she made up stories and brought them to life with paper people on cardboard theatre stages. Sue has shared in the real-life stories of many children through her career in social work, and has five inspiring children of her own. Study at Bath Spa University has enabled her to fulfil her lifelong dream of writing a novel for young readers.

In 2016 Sue was awarded the Bath Spa University Undergraduate Prize for Writing for Young People. She now lectures part-time in creative writing.

*Snow Foal*, was shortlisted for the 2017 Joan Aiken Future Classics Prize, and received an Honourable Mention in the 2017 United Agents/Bath Spa Prize.

### *About Snow Foal*

Addie is taken to live with foster carers on an Exmoor farm, far away from her city home. She hates the winter farm, where everything is grey, dead or frozen. Addie doesn't belong there, with selfish Sunni and the small boy who screams like a wild creature in the night. She's supposed to be at home, looking after Mam.

But no one is listening. No one understands. No one except a tiny wild foal, found all alone in the icy moorland drifts. *He* needs his mam, too.

And whatever the dangers, Addie is going to take him back to her ...

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# SNOW FOAL

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## *Chapter One*

### *Winter*

*Everything around him was changed: white, shifting, silent. The wind had form now. It swirled around him, like feathers from the forest floor, hiding the sky. Hiding his mother.*

*The foal sniffed the ground. That had changed, too. It clung to his muzzle. It stung.*

*He smelled the air, seeking his mother's warm, milky scent. He called. Listened. Called again. He thought he heard his mother's voice lifting through the trees. Then he remembered.*

*His mother was gone.*

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Addie peered out through splinters of frost on the hall window. No one about except Mrs Donovan, shuffling up her drive with her bags. Could Addie go now? She had to. She was starving. And Mam would need something when she woke.

She crouched on the floor next to her mother. 'I'm getting milk, Mam,' she said. 'And bread. I'll be quick.'

Mam shifted her shoulders, then rolled on to her side. She mumbled something, and went back to sleep. Addie would only be five minutes. Mam would be OK.

Addie stood on the doorstep and pulled up her hood. Her breath floated

on the air for a moment, then disappeared. She counted the coins again: just enough, with the fifty pence from under the fridge. She checked up and down the grey street. Nobody at all now. Just cracked puddles and litter drifting in the gutter; the still orange light from the corner shop.

She hurried past the squashed row of brown brick houses with their faded doors and broken fences. She stayed close to the kerb, kept her head down. The baby at number six was screaming again. Someone shouted – a man's voice, deep and angry. A dog started to bark.

Addie pushed open the shop door. The bell clanged. Addie peered round the shelves. Please let it be Mr Borovski today, she thought, not Mrs Crabtree, with her thin nose poking into everyone's business. Mrs Crabtree with her mean eyes and mean words.

No such luck. Mrs Crabtree came out from behind the counter and folded her arms across her bony chest. She watched Addie's every move, hovered like a hungry crow.

Addie thumped the brown loaf and milk down by the till.

'One pound, ten pence,' she said. 'The bread's reduced.'

She pointed to the yellow sticker and counted the coins into Mrs Crabtree's hand. The shopkeeper poked at them with a thin finger. She sniffed.

'Where'd you find it this time? Down the back of sofa?'

Addie grabbed her shopping and turned away. She wasn't going to give Mrs Crabtree what she wanted. She needed to get back to Mam.

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There was no sound from inside the house. Addie rummaged in her coat pocket for her key. It had slipped through the hole and into the lining. Again. Why hadn't she remembered about the hole? She put down her shopping, wiggled the key free, and unlocked the door.

Then she saw him. Darren Oates. Where had *he* come from? She snatched up her bread and milk, tried to slip around the door before he noticed her. The carton of milk slid from her grasp, bounced on the broken edge of the step and exploded like a white bomb on the gravel path. Milk splashed the air, trickled between the tiny stones.

Addie watched it disappear. No more milk. No more money.

‘Clumsy cow!’ Darren was at the gate, leaning on his rusty bike. He was smirking, as usual.

‘Get lost, Darren.’ Addie snatched up the carton, stared him in the eye, and moved to cover the doorway.

‘Not very friendly.’ Darren threw the rusty blue bike on to its side. He vaulted over the gate.

Addie backed towards the doorway.

‘Go and ride your stupid bike,’ she said. ‘Get out of my garden.’ Her heart thumped under her coat. She hoped that Darren couldn’t tell.

Darren sniggered. ‘Garden?’ He kicked at the gravel, kicked over the plant pot by the step; kicked the clump of dry earth and twigs inside it – high into the air and into the street.

‘Goal!’ he shouted. He came closer, nodded towards the partly open door. ‘Where’s your weirdo mam, then? In for visitors, is she?’

Addie pushed at Darren’s chest. He stumbled backwards. Addie turned and tried to squeeze into the house. Darren grabbed her hood. She lost her footing, stumbled against the door. It swung wide open; clattered against the wall.

Addie’s heart thundered. Could Darren see Mam? Was she still there, on the floor?

Darren twisted Addie’s hood in his hands, pulling her coat collar tight against her neck, so that she could hardly breathe. He spun her round and dragged her close to his chest. She kicked at his shin. He yelped; drew in a sharp breath.

‘Big mistake,’ Darren said, through his teeth. He pushed Addie backwards. In through the open front door. Into the hall.

Mam hadn’t moved.

Darren let go. He stared at Mam, stared at Addie. ‘She dead, or what?’ he asked, backing away.

‘Get out,’ Addie said, ‘or you *will* be.’

Darren barged past Addie. ‘Stinks in here,’ he said. ‘Smells of nutters.’ And he ran.

Addie shut the door and leaned against it. She squeezed her eyes hard, pressed back her tears.

Darren Oates. Biggest blabbermouth in Gas Street School. Darren Oates who hated her. Darren Oates, whose loudmouth mam would love to get Addie's mam into trouble. Again.

She'd really done it now.

They would all come back – the police, the social workers – all of them, with their smiles that don't reach their eyes, their knowing what's best for other people. There was a black hole where Addie's stomach used to be.

She knelt on the cold tiles. She shook Mam's shoulder. Once. Twice.

'Mam! Wake up. You've got to wake up!'

Mam opened her eyes a little. She smiled her lovely, soft smile. Just for a moment. She whispered something.

Addie leaned closer. She moved a strand of stringy hair from Mam's mouth, smelled the bitter whisky on her breath.

'Mam,' she whispered. 'Mam.'

Mam's smile slid away, like it was too heavy for her face.

Addie lifted Mam's hand and held it between her own. No point hiding the bottles. The ones Mam promised not to buy any more. When the social workers got here, they'd know. This time, they'd take Addie away for good.

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Addie waited, listened for footsteps; voices. The knock at the door. The eyes through the letterbox.

Hail rattled on the window, doors slammed, children called, cars stuttered into life. Mam slept.

Then the siren. The coloured lights splitting the frost on the window, spinning across the floor; spinning over Mam. Blue/red/blue. Heavy boots on the gravel, the ring, ring, ring of the doorbell, the thump of fists on the thin door.

Addie stared down at the black buttons on her coat. One of them hung loose, on the end of a dark thread. She tugged the button free, threw it to the floor and watched it disappear amongst a pile of shoes and coats. She wrapped the dark thread around her little finger, pulled it tighter and tighter, until it hurt.

'Sorry, Mam,' she said.

## Chapter Two

*Driven by hunger, the foal left the shelter of the old oaks, and drifted across the open moor. He nuzzled the newly white earth, seeking green blades of grass, or the prickly yellow gorse he had been learning to eat alongside his mother's milk.*

*He moved slowly, his body tensed for flight. He listened for the black monster, with its glaring eyes and thunderous roar.*

*And for the humans who had forced his mother into its terrible jaws.*

\*

They didn't let Addie go in the ambulance with Mam. She'd be fine, they said. She was coming to already. Addie would see her very soon. They made Addie let go of her hand, made her sit down in the wrong chair in the lounge.

They made tea with too much sugar in it. They spoke to Addie in quiet voices. Their radios crackled and hissed. Their silver buttons flashed under the light. Their eyes swept the room.

Penny, Addie's social worker, was on the way, the woman said. She put her hand on Addie's arm. It was small and dry. Penny would get Addie sorted for the night, she said; make sure she was safe. Explain things.

Addie stared at the clay figures on the bookshelf by her chair. She remembered the softness of the clay in her hands, the warmth of Mam's fingers on her own as they pushed and pulled the figures into life. The clay people stared past Addie with empty eyes.

A grey skin grew across the mug of tea beside her. The windows darkened. The police woman kept on smiling.

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*As night fell, and the moon spilled silver light across the moorland, instinct pulled the foal towards the protection of the hedgerow.*

*He pushed his soft muzzle beneath frozen branches, twisted his tongue around the bitter, brittle leaves nestled beneath. He shook snow from his nostrils, and stretched forward, searching for more food.*

*Then he was sliding, falling: thin legs flailing amidst a tangle of sharp twigs.  
Snow slid with him, pressed him into the ditch behind the hedge.*

*When he opened his eyes, the foal could no longer see the moon.*

### *Chapter Three*

‘Not much further, Addie,’ Penny said. ‘We should see the farmhouse soon.’ She squinted out through the windscreen, adjusted her round glasses. ‘This weather’s slowed us up a bit. You must be so tired.’

Addie shrugged, watched the wipers whip back and forth through the sleet and snow. Penny’s car struggled on, taking Addie further and further away from her brown brick home. Further away from Mam.

She couldn’t see much at all since they’d left the town, with its pale streetlamps and vivid neon signs. Just glimpses of flat fields, shadowy forests and spiked hedges. Trees, edged with white, trembled like ghosts in the beam from the car headlights.

‘Can we ring the hospital when we get there?’ Addie asked. ‘To tell Mam I’ll be back in the morning?’

A golden light cut through the darkness, revealed a wooden sign on a tall pole. Penny slowed the car, turned it to the left. Her long nails flashed red on the steering wheel.

‘It’s late, Addie,’ she said. ‘Your mam needs to rest, sweetheart. I’ll go check on her first thing. See what everyone thinks. And then I’ll come and talk to you. I promise.’

She leaned forward over the steering wheel, slowed the car to a crawl.

‘There we are,’ she said. ‘They’ve left the gate open for us. We’re here.’

‘I’m not staying here tomorrow,’ Addie said. ‘Mam’ll be worried about me.’

Penny sighed. A soft, sad sound. Was she even listening?

The car bumped through the gate and along a rough track. Addie’s stomach lurched. She squinted through the darkness, chewed at the skin around her thumb nail.

Where *were* they?

And when would Penny take her back home to Mam?

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The farmhouse was huge: the biggest house Addie had ever seen. Wide windows threw yellow light on to a snow-covered courtyard. Smoke curled from tall chimneys into the night.

The front door opened as Addie and Penny approached, and a small woman in wellington boots hurried across the yard to meet them. She was holding a jacket around her shoulders. Addie saw that she was wearing pyjamas underneath.

‘You made it,’ she said. ‘I was worried. The weather’s really closed in since this morning.’

‘Hi, Ruth,’ Penny said. ‘Sorry, it’s got so late. These roads ...’

‘Never mind. You’re here now, that’s the thing,’ Ruth smiled at Addie. ‘Let’s get you inside.’

She hurried them through the door into a long, bright hallway full of jackets, boots and bags. ‘Come on into the kitchen. And let me have your coats,’ she said, ‘I’ll put them by the fire to dry.’

The fire in the kitchen was a real one, inside a huge brick hearth.

‘Get it going a bit more, shall we, Addie?’ Ruth said, smiling again. ‘Sit here, love.’ She pointed to a wooden rocking chair by the hearth. ‘Let’s get you warmed up.’

She bent down and poked at the fire with some kind of stick. Small red flames flickered and jumped between the logs inside. Addie smelled smoke.

‘There’s hot chocolate, if you’d like,’ Ruth said. ‘And I’ve made sandwiches for you both.’

‘Perfect. Thank you,’ Penny said. She put her briefcase on the table. Addie stared at it. She knew all about that briefcase, with its files full of secrets and lies.

She looked away.

She was thirsty. And freezing cold, even in Ruth’s warm kitchen.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Hot chocolate. Please, Ruth.’

‘Good. Just pop your trainers off, I would, Addie,’ Ruth said. ‘They look soaked.’

Addie perched on the edge of the rocking chair, pulled at her wet laces, took off her shoes. She held them up for a moment. Where was she supposed

to put them? Ruth was deep in conversation with Penny, over by the stove. Addie tucked the trainers under her seat. She looked around.

It was the kind of kitchen you see in films, or in magazines at the doctor's surgery. Big tiles on the floor, big wooden furniture, big, dark beams across the ceiling. There was an enormous fridge, covered in stickers, scribbled notes and photographs of children. Addie wondered who the children were, and whether they all lived here, with Ruth and Sam.

Whatever Penny and Ruth were planning, Addie's photo was *never* going on that fridge.