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Opening Extract from...

BIG BONES

Written by Laura Dockrill

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CRUMPETS

The first thing I ate after my asthma attack was a crumpet. OK. Not *a* crumpet. It was more a set. A set of crumpets.

'Can you push them down again, please? They still look raw.'

'As if *that's* what you're thinking about now, BB, after you've just nearly died,' Dove snaps as she pushes the crumpets back down into the toaster. 'Besides, you don't get a *raw* crumpet, you idiot.'

I am not one of those people that just *can't* eat. I can always eat. Even when I'm sick. Even when I'm sad. I can even eat when I watch people being sick on TV.

'Don't call me an idiot. You're lucky I'm alive. Push them down again.'

I like my crumpets really toasted and slathered in thick butter. I like it when all the butter trickles into the holes of the crumpet and leaks through the bottom and puddles onto the plate, then you get to soak up all the salty yellow pond with a warm sponge

of crumpet innards.

'You know Mum's gonna make you go to the doctors now though, don't you?'

'Yep.' I pull a clump of mascara out of my eyelash and roll it into a little black ball like a squished fly. 'And Dr Humphrey is going to tell me I'm fat.'

'*Overweight*. They don't say *fat* at the doctor's.'

'Fine, *overweight* then. Whatever.'

'It's stupid anyway. Everyone is basically overweight on that stupid chart thing.'

'You're not.'

'On that chart thing I probably am.' NO WAY IN HELL. Dove could make an HB pencil look fat.

'Although I do think those nonsense BMI chart things were like created in like the 50s where everybody was tiny . . . have you seen Grandma's wedding dress? It's like a dress for a doll, I wouldn't even be able to get one leg in that, the things are tiny, they aren't realistic any more. Even our feet these days feet are huge.' I see smoke rise out of the toaster in foggy streams, I panic. 'OK, they're done, pop them out now.'

'I reckon you could've probably done this yourself, BB,' she says as she dumps the clumpy warm discs in front of me.

'Dove, I nearly just *died*. The least you can do is make me some crumpets. Pass the butter.'

FINGERNAILS

We are waiting to be told I'm fat. Both Mum and I. And we chew our nails in the waiting room at the doctors. We both know that we aren't chewing our nails because we are nervous, because we aren't nervous. We are chewing our nails because we both love to chew.

Mum just has better willpower than me.

I ADORE food. I was the sort of child that, if I ever got pocket money, instead of buying a toy or sweets, would go ahead and buy myself a fully loaded jacket potato with cheese and beans.

'Don't touch the magazines,' Mum says out the corner of her mouth. 'They are covered in diseases.' I think about all the things I've already touched in the doctors: the door, the bell thing, the banister. All the germs that are now in my mouth, dissolving on the incy white dots on my tongue into some deadly

sickness. I don't want to touch the magazines anyway. I HATE these types of magazines. The way they hoop those red rings around women's bodies on the beach, individually isolating their body parts like a line-up of cream cakes being judged on a baking show. Too fat. Too thin . . . Too cellulite-y. Too wobbly.

Too *real*.

You know, I bet you any money that all the women that earn a living out of drawing those red circles around celebrity's body parts are probably sitting on their own fat bums in some clammy office eating a packaged sandwich, hating themselves. What an existence. I'd much rather be the one with red hoops around my body parts than being the one drawing them.

'Did you have a good day at work, darling?'

'Ooh yes, the usual, I got to draw loads of red rings on pictures of naked women and then put the pictures on the front of magazines.'

'Ah, great.'

Dr Humphrey isn't there so we have a nurse instead. I prefer a nurse anyway. I always feel they are less smug. More human-beingy. One of us. This one is quite fat herself so I'm hoping she doesn't have the audacity to go round mentally drawing red rings and

pointing fingers.

'Most girls normally hate getting on the scales,' she comments as I jump on.

'Not BB,' Mum jokes. 'I thought the other nurse might have warned you.'

I roll my eyes. No. I don't mind getting on the scales, because I've got nothing to hide, nothing to be embarrassed of and nothing to take me by surprise. I have a pair of eyes. I know my body.

'You need to lose weight,' the nurse says, real frank. It's like her accent immediately gets more Nigerian. Well, I've heard it all before. Yawn. 'It will help your asthma.' She is wearing a really nice gold watch. It's thin and antique-looking; it looks beautiful against her dark skin, like it's in a velvet box. 'And your blood pressure too. You are only sixteen but you are at serious risk here, Bluebelle, of diabetes, of high cholesterol, cancer. And more asthma attacks.'

'All right, chill out. Aren't we all at risk of cancer? A girl from school won't eat packaged salad because of the risk of cancer. I mean, obviously she's absolutely batcrap crazy, but still. Cancer seems to be in everything.

'Hmmm. I don't think I can lose weight.'

Mum rolls her eyes. Again. The nurse chuckles,

kisses her teeth,

'Of course you can. Just move *more* and eat *less*.'

Wait a minute . . . sorry, I think I just heard the words 'EAT LESS'? She makes it sound so easy. In fact, I'm gonna tell her that but with sarcasm.

'You make it sound easy.'

'It *is* easy. It's three meals a day, there's not *that* much room to go wrong. Eggs for breakfast, chicken salad for lunch, fish and vegetable and rice for dinner. See? Easy. Peasy.'

No pudding. *Or* pie.

Dry.

She writes some stuff down on a little blue card, probably my weight because it goes on for AGES. The end of her biro is chewed. See, she loves chewing too. A woman after my own heart. She raises a brow while she's writing, like she's writing out a cheque for someone that doesn't really deserve it. Then, staring me right in the face, she begins to speak, the end of the chewed Biro pointing at me.

'I know *you girls*. You think because you have such a pretty face you can get away with being *very* fat?'

All right; *very.*

Firstly I didn't think doctors and nurses were allowed to have actual objective opinions of patients'

looks. It's distracting. They should see *all* the body parts as blank/facts. *Arm. Head. Nostril. Liver.* You can't go around telling a patient that she's *pretty*.

'No,' I laugh. 'I think I have a very pretty *everything* actually.'

You weren't expecting *that* curveball to swing your way now, were you? Ha!

She overacts as if she's swallowed a fly and laughs all smug.

'Excuse me, well, you can look pretty in the grave then.'

Oh. *Ouch.*

Mum starts to cry.

What the *actual* hell? No. What's she crying for? I thought we had this under control.

'Mum, don't cry, Mum. Don't. You never cry.'

'I'm not crying.'

'Well you are, look. Mum. That's tears. Look, all down your face.'

'I just feel, I'm sorry, I . . . When you were little I used to tell you what a good girl you were for eating everything off your plate . . .'

Errr . . . yeah . . . OK . . . AND . . .

'And now when you're stressed . . . maybe it makes you eat?' DO NOT SAY IT'S FOR ATTENTION.

'For comfort,' she adds. 'And maybe I did this to you? It's my fault.'

'You? Did *what* to me? I know I can be a greedy little pig, Mum. I eat the roast potatoes, the cheese, the ice cream, the white bread, the *everything*, Mum. You don't force feed me. *I* make *me* fat, not you and also . . . there's nothing to be sorry for. I like food and I like how I look, there's a lot to be said for that in a girl my age. Most girls I know despise their bodies.' I shake my head. Why is she crying? 'Jesssssuuuus Christ, Mum, if anything you should be proud, really. Mum?'

'See,' says *this* nurse, 'you are selfish, being so fat. You are making your own mother cry.' *Oh shut the hell up, you*. I find myself getting caught in a debate with her. I am sticking up for my own fat.

'But I'm healthy. I eat so well. I don't get what the – Mum, don't cry.'

'You cannot be eating well if you are this obese.'

WINGS

OBESE? Says the actually QUITE FAT HERSELF nurse. What does she EVEN know? She's not even a doctor. I HATE the nurse.

'Mum, I eat well, don't I? We're so *organic*. Tell this woman, please?'

'We do eat well at home.' Mum defends us between sniffs. 'But her dad and I, we split up . . . we . . . well, we are separated, for the moment, it's not the first time . . . we just . . . it's complicated . . .' She wipes her tears and looks at me. I'm looking at the slits in the blinds, the weird beads joining the material together, the filing cabinet, thinking of all the patients that have been told all the good and bad news on this red plastic chair. And then she throws me *right* under a bus. 'You do comfort-eat from time to time, Bluebelle.'

'No, Mum, I don't.'

'That might be it,' the nurse interjects. 'Parents breaking up can be very stressful and upsetting for a *teen*.' She says the word like it's a disease. *Teen*. She has her hands on her hips. 'You need chicken soup and more exercise.'

I think of my little sister, Dove, running freely over

roofs and buildings. She's so light it's almost as though she has a pair of invisible wings stitched to her back. I think of my own wings, weighing me down like an overstuffed turkey.

Mum, glassy eyes peering out at the world, mumbles, 'It's me and Dad.'

Errr. No. 'This has ZERO to do with you and Dad breaking up, *again*,' I growl. 'ZERO.' Absolutely nothing. 'You're both such attention seekers. I was fat way before you two had problems. Can we just go home now?'

'I think the nurse has a point, Bluebelle. I think it's time we get this sorted.'

'Mum! This is what we do, remember? This is our hobby. We come here, we get told I'm fat and then we go home . . . I don't know why you're making such a drama this time.'

'Yes, BB, but most times we come here you haven't just nearly died from an asthma attack.'

I knew this would happen, that my parents would blame my enjoyment of food on their un-enjoyment of each other. I can't help but feel the need to cut my eye at Mum for backstabbing me in the back fat.

The nurse begins to rummage around in her cupboards.

‘Take this.’ She hands me an exercise book. ‘I want you to write down what you eat every day.’

‘What? I’m not a robot.’

‘Ha! Well you eat like a feeding machine.’

This nurse does. Not. Care. One. Bit.

I don’t. Actually. IF I were a feeding machine I would trade me in for a new one because I would want it to be eating ALL the time, which I DON’T DO.

‘If you say you’re healthy, I need to see it.’ She passes me the book; I pass it back to her; she presses it back into my hands like it’s a game. ‘And if you eat as healthy as you say you do, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about.’

‘Mum, tell her, I don’t need to write down what I eat, I don’t need to be monitored.’

‘Just try it for six weeks,’ the nurse suggests. ‘Then come back to me and we can take a look.’

‘SIX weeks?’

‘Six, yes.’

‘But it’s the six-week summer holidays, Mum, no, tell her – I want to be wild and eat what I want.’

‘Not *this* summer, I’m afraid.’ The nurse dips her face down and raises her drawn-on brows. ‘You’ve had your fun.’

NO. WAY. I'm not EVEN started.

'I'm not a child.'

'In the eyes of the law, technically you are, Bluebelle,' Mum butts in. 'If anything serious happens to you, it's me who gets in trouble. It's just a food diary. It's a good idea, see it as you would a diary.'

THE FOOD DIARY

A diary. I could keep a diary. And I realise it might be my only chance. Right here, when Mum is feeling vulnerable and weak and this horrid nurse is here. I'm going to use this to my advantage and make Mum crumble right beneath her.

So I just go for it. It's now or never . . .

'I don't want to go to college. I want to end school. Goodbye. Done. NO. MORE. SCHOOL.'

'No way,' Mum snaps.

The nurse *oooooooh*s like a bunch of kids would in a playground when someone trips up some stairs. She gets comfortable like she's watching a chat show.

'We're not doing this again.'

'I've got it planned out. Even Julian from Careers says it's possible.'

'Bluebelle, no, I don't care what *Julian* from *Careers* says, you aren't allowed to leave school, we've been through this. Do we have to do this at the doctor's?'

'Mum, it is possible, it's totally legit. I have to get an apprenticeship . . . I can just do extra hours at Planet Coffee AND if I can get Alicia to fill out this application for a Barista Appenticeship scheme thing I could potentially get paid for working and learning at the same time . . . '

'So what is it you're telling me? That your ambition is to be a barista?'

'Well . . . No, I don't know, not yet. I just know that there is absolutely nothing for me at that stupid school and it can at least buy me some time until I figure out what it is I want to do.'

'You're just worrying about your exam results, Bluebelle. They're done now. I'm sure you did fine. You need to stop worrying about them.'

'This is not about GCSE results.' Secretly I am worried about my results. I fell asleep in my English exam because the poem was so dry; I don't know why they don't show us any good poems. And I *thought* I did OK in Geography until I sat next to Diane at

lunch and all of her answers were VERY different to mine and she knows everything. The nurse cosies down in her squeaky chair.

Mum adds, 'And if the worst comes to the worst, we know you will have done well in your art exam.' I should have done, yeah, but art was actually the *ultimate* worst though. Basically I had so much time left after drawing my fruit-bowl still-life composition that I coloured the whole backdrop in black charcoal. I don't know what came over me. My creative mind betrayed me. My piece looked like it had been hijacked by a goth. The image will haunt me for the rest of my waking life.

And THAT was when I had the stupid asthma attack. In art. The one exam I actually thought I'd be OK in. And everybody stood over me on the splattered grey lino floor, watching me struggle like a slug with salt poured on my back, whispering in their stupid girly whispers, not knowing what to do. MORE reasons for the stupid school to continue the rumours that I've been fatally impacted by my parents' split. 'SHE WAS SCRIBBLING OVER EVERYTHNG IN BLACK CHARCOAL, MISS, AND NOW SHE'S HAVING A PANIC ATTACK AND DYING! SHE'S HAVING A MELTDOWN!'

I can't go back to that place. I just can't.

SARDINES

'Mum. Just hear me out.' The nurse doesn't care – this is far more entertaining for her than giving out hayfever tablets and sticking her fingers up old people's bums to check for piles.

'Not now. We will talk about this later,' Mum says to the nurse, not even looking at me.

'You said you would hear me out if I sat down with Julian from Careers.'

'That was just to pacify you. Come on, let's not do this now.'

'Pacify me? You're quite happy to sit here and talk about my body – that's not private, no? Or you and Dad breaking up, but *you* don't want to talk about *my* life. It's *my* future. Not yours. And I'm happy to talk about it in front of this nurse. I don't want to go to college. I don't want to go to university. I want to work at Planet Coffee. I'll do my normal hours plus the apprenticeship and take *my* time and *think* about

what *I* want to do next.'

'It's called a gap year,' Mum says as if she's *trying* to show the nurse that she's all read up on this.

'No, Mum, because a gap is a gap between two things. School and then more school. I don't want a gap. I want a severe cut. Finished. Over. Done.'

'Bluebelle, it's the start of the six-week holidays, school think you're coming back in September, you can't just –'

'Why not?'

'Can you not just listen to the nurse and keep the food diary?'

'I didn't say I wouldn't keep the diary.'

'Thank you, take the diary, now can we go, please?' Mum gathers up her handbag; I halt her like a traffic warden.

'I'll keep the diary, so long as you are OK about me leaving school.'

'I'm not talking about this now.' She tries to push past me.

'*You* didn't go to college, Mum.'

The nurse glances at Mum. I didn't want to have to use that poisonous dart to be honest, but she's driven me to it. Trump. Card.

'It was different then.' Mum looks apologetically

to the nurse. Almost hoping the nurse might've also dropped out.

'It's always going to be different, Mum. I wish you would remember that when it comes to this stupid BMI scale too. It was different then, that's why I'm being treated like a heifer when I'm actually not, it's just that times have changed and EVERYONE'S bigger. Course they are. Half the girls at school eat a box of fried chicken on their walk home. You should see the size of their boobs. But look at me, here I am, just 100% embracing it – that things are different. Everything's different. That's what makes life so exciting. Once upon a time, Mum, we were monkeys. Actual monkeys. We change. Now do we have a deal?'

The nurse tries not to laugh and holds her hands up and shrugs. 'Don't ask me.'

'Have you spoken to your dad about this?' Mum asks.

'*Really*?' We both know Dad's opinion does not count.

'OK. Rules are . . . you keep the diary for six weeks, I want to sit down with this Julian from Careers, you need to talk to Alicia from Planet Coffee, you go to work *and* –'

'There's *more?*'

'You sign up to the gym.'

'MUM! NO!' *Don't you laugh at me, idiot nurse.*

'You heard the nurse: move *more*. Exercise is good for you.'

'But Mum! I have asthma! You know this. I'm not allowed to do exercise, it makes me die. Even school don't make me exercise!'

'No, actually exercise is good for everybody. If you have your Ventolin and you listen to your body, you should be fine,' the nurse offers.

'See?' Mum raises an eyebrow at me. 'And the only reason school don't make you do it is because you deliberately throw the ball into the boys' field behind so the girls can't fetch it. You think I'm an idiot. You're doing it.' She points at me. 'Gym. Membership.' She says it like it's a poem, like they are two words that rhyme but they clearly don't. She wants to threaten me. It doesn't work. It's a crap poem.

'MUM!' I feel so betrayed. 'Well, you're paying for it.'

'Bluebelle, I don't have that kind of money. You work, don't you? You're the one that wants independence; if you want to act like a grown woman then you can pay for yourself too. And that includes taking care of

your body.' She puts her hands in the back pockets of her jeans that fit her *too* well. Mum always looks good in jeans, like a GAP model. An older one, obviously, but a hot one still. 'Some mums make their kids pay *rent*!' She makes the word *rent* sound all hard and sharp like a swear word. Then she looks at the nurse for approval, like she wants a gold star put on her jumper. She's showing off in front of her new friend The Nurse. 'We'd all love a gym membership!'

'I think I'm too young to join a gym.'

'No, you're not, you can be a member from sixteen, and some gyms even do a discount for under eighteens.' Mum's BFF, the nosy nurse, intervenes *again*, almost as if she's giving good news. I hate these two bad cops.

'Do we have a deal?' Mum pouts.

CAN I really see myself doing this? Big Bones keeping a *food* diary like some sad celebrity in rehab AND going to the gym? Except without the cool paid bit where some magazine prints it.

'This isn't a diet, you know. I'm not dieting.' The only people I know who have ever dieted are ones I don't really like. And my dog. And he doesn't count because he's got four legs, is not a person and every day was agony not being able to give him my leftovers. Mum looks at the nurse.

'Deal,' I grunt.

'Take the diary.'

'Thank you.'

'This diary is going to be a good read! See you in six weeks.' The nurse celebrates with a smile so hard I see her fillings. They are the colour of sardines.

And I HATE sardines.

BONES

Hi, nurse. Or doctor. Or whatever you are. Weirdo with too much time on their hands . . . Welcome to this scraggy notebook all about what I eat, disguised as what you are really reading.

What you are reading is a promise. Between my mum and me. It's my food diary. So before you go around prodding the big judgmental finger, remember *you're* the one reading this. I know you're probs used to people sucking up to you, pretending they don't smoke half the cigarettes they actually do, but to be honest I'm kind of livid that I even have to write this stupid thing. I know this is your job to go probing

around into people's private lives, but I guess I just sort of, SILLY ME, kind of liked the security of thinking that doctors and nurses were *far too busy saving people's lives* and stuff to have the time to read something like this. Unless you actually ARE the complete weirdo that gets off on this kind of stuff.

Yes, before you ask, I am fat.

Yes. I just called myself fat and that's allowed.

And . . .

I'm not greedy.

I just love food.

AND I'm not unhappy.

I just love food.

And when you love the moments when you're eating food more than the moments when you're not, you maybe just get a bit fat, I guess.

NO BIG DEAL.

BIG

I like being big.

Because there's something *of* me. I feel *whole, there, alive*, kind of 3D. I bolster myself, I look after *me.*

I'm not just fat either. I'm big all over. Tall. Chunky. Big. Strong. Like a Range Rover. *Whatever*. It's how I was designed.

Doesn't mean I don't have a heart.

I don't even know what the obsession is with being small anyway, do you? All the girls at my school go on and on about is how to get thinner as quick and as ferocious as possible. Honestly, they'll stoop to the wormiest, shallowest, ugliest pits of lowdom to get there and will stop at nothing. And once they've done all the starving one can do, overdosed on paracetamol and cranky coffee and nail biting – and their breath stinks like an old fish tank – they'll binge on 1000 donuts, cry themselves into a frenzy and do it all over again. It's so tiresome and dull. Not one of the girls at my school sits down and says, *right, great news, girls, I've found this amazing reel of wool, let's go and knit ourselves some sick cardigans* or *hey girls, this lunchtime let's climb a tree* or *hey girls, I think my next-door neighbour is an undercover spy . . . let's stalk him and find out*. Not the ones I've met, anyway.

Is it a girl thing? Boys seem to want to be big. Full of bravado and banter and big and loud and it seems they want us to be tiny and petite and taken care of. What's all *that* about? You know, in some parts of

the animal kingdom the female is the bigger beast. Woman spiders eat the boy spider after they've mated – *that's* how REAL it is in the animal kingdom. They know how to do it. Don't you just think that's cool?

So before we become friends or whatever, you need to know that I embrace my body. It's mine. And I live inside it. And I take care of it. Don't read this because you want to perve on my size, indulge in my indulgence and think, *how fat are we talking here?* I'm being honest with you, so please just accept that.

What I see in the mirror is a BEAUTIFUL, HEALTHY young woman with a positive attitude towards food. Sorry about me knowing how to speak like an actual expert but it's true. And that, to me, is no reason for me to be writing some food diary . . . get the people with eating disorders to do it, not me.

My real name is Bluebelle. But most people call me BB. I wasn't enormously thrilled with the nickname initially because it makes me sound like one of those posh blonde girls that expects a flat white after school instead of Coke like the rest of us. And wears a pashmina. Nobody puts BB in the corner.

Once, somebody asked me what the BB stood for. And before I could answer them back, they answered for me.

'Big Boned?' they suggested. 'I mean, I'm not being rude, but does the *BB* stand for Big Boned?'

And before you ask, yes, they *were* being rude. Because 'big boned' is the kind of term they give people like me. To try and reassure people like me that they don't *believe* it's our fault that we're fat. Like being fat's a bad thing. Truth is, 'people like me' – meaning, oh yeah, hi, *me* – don't actually care what you believe.

But the name sort of stuck. Because I like to own my fat. So that's who I am.

There are two Bs in Bluebelle and two Bs in Big Bones, which seems to make sense as I am double in everything.

So call me BB.

BB for Bluebelle.

BB for Big Bones.

































A heart-warming story from the unique voice of Laura Dockrill, about Bluebelle, aka BB, aka Big Bones – a sixteen-year-old girl encouraged to tackle her weight even though she's perfectly happy, thank you, and getting on with her life and in love with food. Then a tragedy in the family forces BB to find a new relationship with her body and herself. Moving, funny and memorable.

This new novel from the sparkling Laura Dockrill introduces Bluebelle and her hilarious take on food, body image and how we look after ourselves and others.

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HOT KEY BOOKS

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