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opening extract from

Burn My Heart

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published by

Penguin Books Ltd

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'If you don't stop that, the Mau Mau will come to get you!'

Anyone who was a child in Britain in the 1950s will probably remember hearing about the Mau Mau. The stories were frightening and, yes, some parents used the name as a threat . . . even though the Mau Mau were 4,000 miles away in Kenya.

These two words that alarmed many people in Britain, for at least ten years, then seem to have disappeared. They no longer made News. They hardly appeared even in history books. So what was this all about? Why the silence? With the scent of something secret, the detective in me became curious. I grew up in South Africa, 2,000 miles further south of Kenya, and there too we had many secrets.

So just a few words of history before the story begins . . .

Many Africans fought alongside British soldiers during the Second World War. Many of them died in the name of Freedom. After the war, Africans declared that it was about time that they had their own freedom in their own countries. But the white settlers in Kenya refused even to share power.

These wazungu, *as they were called by Africans (*mzungu *for one white person), demanded that the country stay in British hands. They insisted that Africans were like children, not ready for independence. When the African leader Jomo Kenyatta called for land, education, freedom, decent wages and equality, they called him a dangerous agitator. To most settlers, 'good' Africans were those who were loyal to them and the colony.*

Kikuyus led the fiercest resistance. It was their fertile land in the highlands that the wazungu *had taken for their farms. Many younger Kikuyus became impatient with older leaders like Kenyatta. They wanted action. A movement grew that became known as the Mau Mau. It was a secret society whose members took oaths and swore to fight unto death to get back their land. Any Kikuyu who was seen to help the white settlers was hated as much as the 'uninvited guests'. This story begins in the year before the State of Emergency. While the setting is real, my characters are all imagined.*

KENYA HIGHLANDS – NOVEMBER 1951

I

'It's our secret, hey?'

'The fence is broken! Over here, Mugo!'

Mathew lifted the straggling barbed wire with the barrel of his gun. The other end remained attached to one of Father's new wooden posts. It was the bottom strand nearest the ground. Above it, row upon row of barbed wire stretched taut and intact, more than two metres high, between him and the bush. The new fence felt like a cage. The old fence had only reached his chest and its sagging wires had been easy for him and Mugo to push apart. Weak like old skin, Mugo had once said.

Careful not to touch the barbs, Mathew pinched the wire between his finger and thumb. He studied it. It hadn't come loose by itself. The other half hung from the adjoining post. It had been split in the middle. Sensing an adventure, Duma barked. Before he thought to stop her, Duma had stretched herself out and snuffled her way through the gap.

From the other side, she wagged her long copper tail at Mathew like a crazy feather duster. It would be difficult for a grown person to slip underneath. If the wire had been deliberately cut, why only the bottom wire?

Mathew squatted, his new Red Ryder rifle tucked under his arm. The blue-steel barrel of the gun pointed down. The hard tawny earth gave nothing away or had Duma already swept away the evidence? Mathew frowned up towards Mugo, his speckled green eyes squinting against the sun.

'See any tracks?'

Mugo's jet-black eyes scoured the clumps of rough grey grass either side of the fence before he shook his head.

'Hapana . . . Nothing.'

Mathew trusted Mugo's eyes to pick out the tiniest detail. Mugo was already thirteen, two years older than Mathew. His name even meant 'seer'. Before coming to work in the kitchen, he had been a herd boy. He knew all about the surrounding bush beneath their mountain.

'What did it, Mugo? An animal?'

'Hapana.' No. Not animal. Mugo shook his head again.

'People?'

Mugo said nothing. In the sun his cheeks glistened like the smooth polished walnut stock of Mathew's gun. But his forehead creased with worry lines.

Mathew followed the direction of Mugo's gaze to a whistling thorn tree on the other side of the fence. Had something snagged there on one of its long jagged spikes?

'I'm going to see,' Mathew announced.

Mugo sprang to life. 'Hapana, young bwana! Your father will be angry!'

'I'm only going to those trees!'

'Hapana! We must tell the bwana about the fence!' Mugo urged.

'He's gone out, Mugo,' Mathew retorted impatiently.

'Then we must tell –'

'Juma? His mother is sick and he's gone to see her. Father said he could.' Juma was Father's new foreman. Mathew grinned rather smugly. 'Don't worry, Mugo! We'll sort it out!'

'We can tell my father!' Mugo argued earnestly. He pointed to the blue gum trees in the direction of the stables, his fingers jabbing the air as if shocked by a bolt of electricity. Mugo's father, Kamau, was in charge of the stables.

'We'll do that but we've plenty of time to get someone to mend it before tonight. I just want to check if something's there.'

Before Mugo could reply, Mathew pushed his gun through the gap in the fence, flattened himself and began crawling. As long as he didn't go far and stay too long, why should Father ever

know? He felt a little surge of pleasure at his defiance.

The bush on the other side was part of their land, all the way to the river. It extended far downstream into the plains and upstream through the more thickly wooded lower slopes of Mount Kenya. 'Grayson country', as Mathew's grandfather used to call it. According to his mother, even as a toddler, Mathew used to beg the ayah who looked after him to let him go into the bush. However her instructions were to keep him inside the fence. But by the time he was four, Mathew had latched on to Kamau who was responsible for Father's white stallion and who had worked on the Grayson farm since he was a boy himself.

With young Mathew's nagging and begging, Kamau was given permission to lead the child on a pony to the nearest stretch of river when he wasn't too busy. When Mathew could manage the pony himself, Kamau would ride beside him. One of his best feelings in the world was being perched at the top of the ridge early in the morning from where the two of them would watch wildlife come to drink in the water below. Kamau knew every animal and Mathew had never tired of listening to his stories.

Kamau's younger son, Mugo, had been one of the Grayson's herd boys until the day he had saved

Mathew from a deadly snake. Mathew, then six, had been with Father on his rounds to check that all the cattle were fenced inside the bomas before sundown. They had to be kept safe at night from lions and hyenas, even the occasional leopard from the mountain. Mathew had found an anthill near the entrance to a boma and begun poking it with a stick. Suddenly a black mamba had slithered out, rearing its head. If sharp-eyed Mugo hadn't yanked him away, its poison could have killed him within minutes. Father had praised Mugo for reacting so smartly and, soon afterwards, he was brought to work in the Grayson's kitchen.

In time, Mathew persuaded his parents to let him go into the nearby bush just with Mugo. That is whenever Josiah the cook would release him. Josiah used to grumble but usually gave in, especially after Mathew was sent to boarding school and only came home for holidays. At school, he would often lie awake in his narrow dormitory bed, planning expeditions with Mugo. Those plans helped him get through the long weeks away from home.

But recently things had begun to change. His father had said that Mathew wasn't to go out into the bush without him. It was a 'precaution'. Like his father always being armed these days . . . and now there was this new fence. Mother had only informed him about it in the car yesterday, on the way home from school for the weekend. There was

nothing special to worry about, she had reassured. Their area was still quite peaceful. '*We're just being careful,*' Father had added. '*Those agitators won't get far here! I've always looked after my labour well so they're loyal. They won't want to upset the apple cart for themselves!*'

Mathew pulled himself up to his feet on the other side of the fence. Duma shook herself with delight as Mathew raised his Red Ryder like a commando.

'Come on!' he called to Mugo. 'I need you over here.'

Mugo continued to look unhappy and sighed loud enough for Mathew to hear. However he removed the red fez from his head and pulled off his white tunic. He folded the tunic with care before placing it on a tree stump with the fez on top. Sensible Mugo! Mathew knew how Josiah would berate the boy if there were just a spot on his uniform. He glanced down at his own dust-smeared shirt and trousers. Josiah's wife, Mercy, would grumble and tut-tut at him, but that would be all. She took such pride in returning his clothes freshly washed and pressed that he was sure her gripes were only show.

Mathew watched Mugo's muscles flex as he edged his body under the barbed wire. Duma was ecstatic at the adventure, sniffing at Mugo, glancing up at Mathew, and barking.

'Shh, Duma! Quiet, girl!'

It was broad daylight so it couldn't be that dangerous in the bush near to the fence. All the same, when Duma quietened down and Mugo was at his side, Mathew felt safer. He ignored the concern written across Mugo's face.

'I'll look for tracks this way. You go that!' Mathew pointed his two index fingers at right angles. 'We'll just go as far as those thorns over there so I still see you. Then we walk towards each other, swap over and come back, OK?'

Mugo frowned and remained silent.

'Oh, buck up, Mugo! Don't be such a wet blanket! I'm going anyway.'

As Mathew set off, Duma's lean copper face swung from one boy to the other. Her dark, elegant eyes looked worried.

'Here, Duma, here!' Mathew patted his thigh. But as Mugo started to walk, she padded after the kitchen toto.

Mathew let her go. He needed to concentrate if he was going to find any evidence of whoever might have cut their fence. If his detective work paid off and he had to admit breaking the new rule, surely Father wouldn't be too upset? He was actually pretty fed up with Father. For weeks he had been looking forward to going out hunting with him today. Whenever he had felt miserable at school, he had cheered himself up thinking about it. Father

had promised that he could try out his new Red Ryder properly. He had already spent hours assembling it, cleaning it, and learning to align the sights. He had practised its lightning loader and repeater action on targets far away from the house. He had also brought down a couple of chirpy bulbuls that had been eating fruit in Mother's orchard. But today was meant to be the first time he could try out the gun on something bigger. That was until Father had been called away to fix a neighbour's generator. '*Sorry, son, it has to take priority!*' It seemed to Mathew that other things always took priority.

He set off now, using the Red Ryder barrel to probe clumps of grass as he studied the earth for any tracks. His eyes also veered over nearby bushes and thorn trees for any giveaway signs. Every now and again, he looked across to check how Mugo and Duma were doing. Boy and dog were working as a team. Mathew felt a pang of jealousy. Duma was *his* dog. She had come to him as a longhaired red setter puppy. He had named her. It wasn't that she looked much like a cheetah – 'duma' in Swahili – but because he wanted her to be the fastest dog in the world! He was older now and knew she would never qualify for that title, but he loved her dearly. When he first had to leave her to spend his weeks away at school, he had cried bitterly and, to his shame, had wet his dormitory bed. Matron hadn't been pleased, especially when under interrogation,

and in tears, he had revealed that he was missing his dog. '*If you'd been weeping for your mother, I might understand!*' she had scolded in her Scottish 'no-nonsense' accent.

Mathew had almost reached the cluster of thorn trees, when a flicking caught his eye between the sprawl of branches ahead. He stopped dead still. The flicking had stopped. He held his breath, then released it gently when he saw that it was only an impala. However, when the buck lifted its head and turned to look at him, he was spellbound. It was a grown male with a magnificent set of curving, curling horns! Perhaps longer than his arms! The buck remained perfectly still, the black tips on its white ears primed liked antennae.

Trying not to tremble, Mathew slowly raised his rifle. This was his chance! What a trophy, if only . . .! He pressed the stock under his armpit, brought his left eye in line with the barrel while crooking his left forefinger round the trigger. But before he could squeeze the trigger, the buck swung its head and fled. At the same moment, Duma barked, rushing across the long grass ready to chase. Mathew called her to heel.

'Silly girl!' he said crossly. 'I almost got him!' He wasn't sure who had broken the spell, Duma or the impala. Either way he had lost his moment. But, maybe all wasn't lost. Mathew turned to Mugo, who had followed Duma.

'Let's go to the ridge! We'll see everything from there.'

'Hapana, young bwana! It's not safe! We must go back.' Mugo's pitch rose in distress.

But Mathew's nerves were tingling. How could he give up the prize when it was so close? The impala could be drinking at the river. To go to the ridge wouldn't be that much further. He and Mugo had been there countless times. He ejected the straggling barbed wire from his mind.

'You're over-reacting because of the new fence, Mugo. Even Mother says it is only a precaution. Follow me!' Mathew ordered.

It was roughly the same distance as they had already covered from the fence. Mathew was tempted to run, but Father's voice in his head restrained him. '*Don't run with a gun.*' It was also stupid to think he could ever keep up with the impala. As long as the impala didn't feel it was being chased, it might stay near the river.

Mathew kept to the open grass with the thicket of thorns on their right. Despite shaking his head, Mugo had followed. This time, Duma obstinately pushed to the front.

'Don't you dare bark this time!' Mathew whispered. Duma cocked her head with an offended 'Do you think I'm that stupid?'.

Mathew strained to keep inspecting the ground ahead as well as constantly skimming his eyes in a

hundred-and-eighty-degrees arc. When the undergrowth thickened beneath the thorn trees on their right, he was aware of a little nagging voice inside him: '*Give up! Anything – or anyone – could be in there!*' But Mugo was right behind him, wasn't he? Mugo knew the bush like the back of his hand. Mugo was surely only worried because of Father's anger if he found out. If he actually shot the impala, Mathew could say they had seen it near the fence and they had just scrambled underneath to get it, couldn't he?

The ground became rockier as they neared the ridge. Clumps of boulders rose between the long dry grass as they headed for the viewing hut built by his grandfather. Mathew opened the door.

'Here, Duma, here!' He called quietly. 'Inside, Duma, here, girl!'

Duma obediently returned and followed Mathew into the hut. As soon as she was in, he slipped out and shut the door. If he found his impala he didn't want her frightening him off this time! Duma lifted her front paws up to the viewing window and whined. Mathew poked his arm through the window and fondled her ears.

'Won't be long, Duma, girl!' he said and turned to survey the riverbank below. It looked deserted. Without rain for a few months, there was almost as much bank as water. Either side of the clearing below were tall yellow fever trees. The thorns and

bush on their right extended down the slope not very far from where they stood.

'Anything?' Mathew asked Mugo. Impalas would blend easily with the shady red earth under the fever trees, but he couldn't detect any movement. He felt disappointed and irritated, especially as Mugo remained quiet. 'We'll see more if we go down a bit.'

Without waiting for a response, Mathew cut diagonally across the slope. If he couldn't see anything from halfway down, he would give up. Patches of sunlight penetrated the giant fever trees below, illuminating the yellow-green bark. The shade looked inviting and cool. Mathew looked back up the slope and stopped. If he went much further to the right, he would lose sight of the viewing hut. He became aware of the sweat between his palm and the blue steel. For the first time he began to have doubts. Perhaps his Red Ryder had made him feel braver than he was.

He was about to admit defeat and turn back when Mugo's hand touched his shoulder. He followed the line of Mugo's index finger. Good old Mugo, after all! There was his impala! It stood stock-still between two tree trunks with its head and fine horns raised in profile. Had it heard them? For it to be in range, he needed to get a little closer. He began to tiptoe forward as softly as possible, first one step, then another, his heart beating louder

than his footsteps. Entering the umbrella thorn trees, he ducked the lower branches to avoid the thorns and not to rustle their long golden seedpods. Just a little further and his position would be perfect.

For a second time he silently raised his gun. He aligned the sights before slowly bringing them to bear on his target. He had to aim for the head and not tremble. His finger curled around the trigger. *Steady*, he told himself. *Steady!* He squeezed the metal. The after-shock went through his body at the same time as he heard a terrifying trumpeting and a crashing of branches. Before he could see whether he had brought down the impala, Mugo was tugging him and yelling.

'Ndovu! Ndovu!'

Elephant! Great flailing ears and a raised trunk came plunging through the bush on the slope above them. Mathew felt his left arm being almost wrenched out of its socket as he stumbled behind Mugo towards the river.

The only way to go was down. They were trapped between the beast and the water. Even the lowest branches of the fever trees looked too high to climb. How safe was a tree anyway from a charging elephant? Only one tree offered any hope of escape. Its trunk was split in two with one section soaring upwards at an angle. Mugo pushed Mathew in front of him. Up, up, he signalled. Clambering on to the tree, Mathew tried to pull himself up but

the gun under his right arm hampered him. He was gripping all he could with his left hand while his knees scraped along the bark.

'Haraka! Haraka!' Mugo urged him. Hurry! 'Give it!' Mugo held out his hand for the gun.

Mathew hesitated. He knew the rule even if it wasn't written down. '*You never put a gun in the hands of a servant.*' Father trusted Kamau more than any other servant but he had never asked him to hold his gun for him. '*You, and you alone, are responsible for your gun.*'

'No, I can –' He was about to say he could manage when his ears were blasted by another trumpeting. If the elephant chose, it could reach the tree within seconds. Mathew shakily passed his rifle to Mugo. Using both hands now he scrabbled upwards. He heard Mugo shuffling behind. Mugo had better not drop the gun! The elephant would crack it just by putting his foot on it. But Mathew didn't dare look back until they were high above the elephant's reach. He prayed silently. *Please God, don't let the elephant try to push the tree down or shake us off!* He had once seen an elephant demolish a tree. It had lifted it up, roots and all, just so it could eat the juiciest leaves at the top. That tree hadn't been quite as big as this one, but a maddened elephant could do almost anything.

As the branch narrowed, Mathew began to feel dizzy.