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Opening Extract from...

Black Hills

Written by Dan Simmons

Published by Quercus

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DAN
SIMMONS

BLACK
HILLS

Quercus

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Quercus
This paperback edition published in 2011 by

Quercus
21 Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1A 2NS

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84916 090 2

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

This book is dedicated to my parents, Robert and Kathryn Simmons, and to my wife Karen's parents, Verne and Ruth Logerquist. It is also dedicated to my brothers, Wayne and Ted Simmons, and to Karen's brother, Jim Logerquist, and sister Sally Lampe.

Most of all, this book is dedicated to Karen and to our daughter, Jane Kathryn, who are *Wamakaognaka e'cantge* – 'the heart of everything that is' for me.

Hecetu. Mitakuye oyasin.

So be it – all my relatives! Every one
of us.

Along the Greasy Grass

June 1876

Paha Sapa pulls his hand back sharply but not before he feels the rattlesnake-strike shock of the dying *Wasicun's* ghost leaping into his fingers and flowing up his arm and into his chest. The boy lurches back in horror as the ghost burns its way up through his veins and bones like so much surging venom. The *Wasicun's* spirit scalds a painful path through the nerves of Paha Sapa's shoulder and then pours out into his chest and throat, roiling and churning like an oily thick smoke. Paha Sapa can *taste* it. And it tastes like death.

Still expanding, the ghost spreads through Paha Sapa's torso and down and out, making the boy's arms and legs feel both weak and heavy at the same time. As the *Wasicun's* ghost fills his lungs with a terrible, expanding, thick-filling heaviness that shuts off all breath, Paha Sapa is reminded of the time, he was a child barely able to toddle, when he almost drowned in the Tongue. Yet even through his current terror, this boy just short of eleven summers senses that this – invasion – is something infinitely more terrible than mere death by drowning.

This, Paha Sapa thinks, is what Death feels like when it crawls in through a man's mouth and eyes and nostrils to steal his spirit.

But instead of Paha Sapa's spirit being dragged *out*, this stranger's spirit is being forced *in*. Death acts here more as terrible intruder than thief.

Paha Sapa cries out as if wounded and crawls away from the staring corpse, tries to stand to run, falls, stands again, falls again, and resumes crawling away from the corpse, kicking and waving his arms and gasping as he rolls downhill across grass, dirt, cacti, horse shit, blood, and more dead *wasichus* in his blind eagerness to shake the ghost out of his body. But the ghost stays with him and grows larger inside him.

Paha Sapa opens his mouth to scream, but this time no sound emerges. The ghost is filling Paha Sapa's gasping mouth and throat and nostrils as surely as if someone has poured hot liquid buffalo fat down his throat. He cannot breathe. The boy crouches on all fours and shakes like a sick dog but cannot force himself to vomit. Black dots swarm as his field of vision narrows. The ghost cuts into him like a scalping knife, slicing deeper behind his eyes, burrowing into his brain.

Paha Sapa collapses onto his side and rolls up against something soft. When he opens his eyes he realizes that he is only a finger's length from another dead *wasichu's* face: this bluecoat is only a boy, perhaps just five or six summers older than Paha Sapa; the dead *Wasicun* boy-soldier has lost his hat and his short-cropped hair is red, the first red hair Paha Sapa has ever seen; the dead boy's skin is paler than that of any *Wasicun* Paha Sapa has ever heard described and the small nose is dusted with freckles. Paha Sapa vaguely realizes that no breath issues forth from the cave of the soldier's mouth, opened painfully wide as if in a final scream or as if ready to lunge and bite into Paha Sapa's gasping, terrified face only

a handsbreadth away. He also notices dully that one of the *wasichu's* eyes is merely a bloody hole. But Paha Sapa sees that the other eye, open and staring, is precisely the blue of the afternoon sky visible beyond the corpse's small, pale ear.

Gasping for breath, Paha Sapa stares into that dead eye, its blueness seeming to fade and pale even as he stares, as if seeking some answer there.

– *Black Hills?*

More warrior ponies thunder by, two of them leaping Paha Sapa and the *wasichus'* corpses, but vaguely – distantly – Paha Sapa realizes that one of the ponies has stopped and that a warrior has slid off and is crouched on one knee next to him. He vaguely, distantly, feels a strong hand on his shoulder, rolling him onto his back.

Paha Sapa loses sight of the red-haired boy's one-eyed corpse and is now looking up at the kneeling warrior.

– *Black Hills? Are you shot?*

The kneeling warrior is slender and paler of skin than most Lakota and has gone into battle as naked as the *heyoka* he is, wearing only a breechclout and moccasins, his hair tied simply into two long braids and sporting a single white feather. The lean man's body paint consists only of hailstones and a lightning streak, reinforcing the first impression that the thin man is indeed a living lightning conductor, a *heyoka*, one of the receiver-of-visions warrior-protectors who dares to stand between Paha Sapa's people, the Natural Free Human Beings, and the full fury of the Thunder Beings.

Then, blinking, Paha Sapa notices the pebble behind the man's ear and the narrow but livid scar stretching back from his left nostril – an old bullet wound, inflicted at point-blank range by a jealous husband, a scar that has left this *heyoka* warrior's lips slightly curled up on the left side, suggesting

more grimace than smile – and Paha Sapa realizes that this is *T'ašunka Witko*, Crazy Horse, cousin to Limps-a-Lot's first wife.

Paha Sapa tries to answer Crazy Horse's query, but the ghost's pressure in his chest and throat allows only choking noises to emerge. Just the slightest trickle of air reaches Paha Sapa's burning lungs. Even as he tries again to speak, he realizes that he must look like a fish gaping and gasping on a riverbank, mouth wide, eyes protruding.

Crazy Horse grunts in contempt or disgust, stands, and leaps onto his pony's back in a single graceful motion, his rifle still in his hand, then rides away with his followers shouting behind him.

Paha Sapa would weep if he could. Limps-a-Lot was so proud when he introduced his first wife's famous cousin to his adopted son just four nights earlier in Sitting Bull's lodge, and now this absolute humiliation...

Still lying on his back, Paha Sapa spreads his arms and legs as wide as he is able. He's lost his moccasins and now he curls his toes and fingers into the soil in the same way he's done since he was a small boy when the first *touch-the-earth-to-fly* visions came. At once the old feelings flow in – that he is clinging to the outer surface of a swiftly spinning ball rather than lying on a flat world, that the sky hangs below him rather than above, that the hurtling sun is just another sky shape wheeling through the sky like the stars or the moon – and with that familiar illusion, Paha Sapa begins to breathe more deeply.

But so does the ghost. Paha Sapa can feel it inhaling and exhaling deep within him. And, he realizes with a shock that makes his spine go cold, the ghost is speaking to him. Or at least speaking to *someone* from inside him.

Paha Sapa would scream if he could, but still his strain-

ing lungs pull in only the thinnest trickle of air. But he can hear the ghost whispering slowly and steadily – the harsh-sounding and unintelligible *wasichu* words resonating against the inner walls of Paha Sapa's skull and vibrating against his teeth and bones. Paha Sapa understands not one of the words. He clasps his hands over his ears, but the internal hissing and whispering and muttering continue.

There are other shapes moving among the dead around him now. Paha Sapa hears the trill of Lakota women and with incredible effort he rolls onto his belly and then struggles to his knees. He has disgraced himself and his uncle-father in front of Crazy Horse, but he cannot continue to lie like one of the dead with the women here.

As he struggles to his feet, Paha Sapa sees that he has startled the nearest woman – a Hunkpapa woman he knows named Eagle Robe, the same woman who earlier this day he saw shoot the black-*Wasicun* scout named Teat whom Sitting Bull called friend – and in her fright, Eagle Robe lifts up the same heavy *wasichu* cavalry pistol with which she killed the black scout, raises it in both hands, aims it at Paha Sapa's chest from only ten feet away, and pulls the trigger. The hammer clicks on either an empty chamber or a cartridge that misfires.

Paha Sapa staggers a few steps in her direction, but Eagle Robe and three other women scream and run away, quickly disappearing in the shifting clouds of dust and gunsmoke that continue to roll across the hillside. Paha Sapa looks down and realizes that he is covered almost head to foot with blood – his dead mare's blood, the ghost-*Wasicun's* blood, and more blood from the other corpses, horse and man, that he has rolled across and lain upon.

Paha Sapa knows what he must do. He has to return to the

corpse of the *Wasicun* on whom he counted coup and somehow convince the ghost to go back into the man's body. Gasping, still unable to wave or call to the half-seen warriors thundering by on their ponies in the dust, Paha Sapa stumbles uphill toward the dead man lying among dead men.

The battle is moving to the south again, and as the dust and gunsmoke begin to drift away on the very slightest of evening breezes coming over the ridgetop above – the high grasses dance and rustle to the wind's touch – Paha Sapa estimates that there are somewhere around forty dead *wasichu* horses lying in a rough circle ahead of him. Most appear to have been shot by the bluecoat soldiers themselves. There are about as many *wasichu* corpses as there are horse carcasses, but the human corpses have been stripped by the Lakota women and now stand out on the hillside like white river boulders against the tan dirt and blood-soiled green grass and darker shades of torn horseflesh.

Paha Sapa steps over a man whose scalped head has been smashed almost flat. Curds of gray have been spattered onto the tall grass that stirs in the evening breeze. Warriors or, more likely, women have cut out the man's eyes and tongue and slit his throat. His lower belly has been hacked open, and entrails have been tugged out like a buffalo's after a hunt – slick strands of gray gut wind and coil like glistening dead rattlesnakes in the bloody grass – and Paha Sapa notices that the women have also cut off the man's *ce* and balls. Someone has shot arrows into this *Wasicun's* opened body, and kidneys, lung, and liver have all been pierced multiple times. The dead man's heart is missing.

Paha Sapa continues stumbling uphill. The white corpses are everywhere, all sprawled where they fell and many hacked into pieces, most mutilated and lying atop great

splashes of blood or atop their own dead horses, but he cannot find the *Wasicun* whose ghost now breathes and whispers deep in his own guts. He realizes that since he has been only semiconscious at best, it's possible that more time may have elapsed than he is aware of since he counted coup on the man. Someone, perhaps surviving *wasichus*, may have hauled the corpse from the battlefield – especially if the man was an officer – in which case Paha Sapa may never be able to get rid of this ghost.

Just when he is sure that the dead man is no longer lying among the scores of other corpses here on this bloody field, he sees the *Wasicun's* tall, balding forehead protruding from a pile of white bodies. The stripped corpse is half-sitting against two other naked *wasichus*. Some woman or warrior has slashed his right thigh open in the customary mark against the Lakota's dead enemies, but the man has not been scalped. Paha Sapa stares dumbly at the receding hairline and short-cropped light hair and realizes that the scalp was simply not worth the effort of the taking.

But what short stubble of hair there is looks very light, although as much reddish as yellow. Could this possibly be Long Hair? Could it be the ghost of Long Hair that Paha Sapa now carries like some terrible fetus? It seems unlikely. Certainly some Lakota or Cheyenne warriors would have recognized their old enemy Long Hair and treated his corpse with either more outrage or more honor than this all-but-ignored body has received.

Someone, probably a woman, has jammed an arrow far up the corpse's flaccid-in-death, forever plump, pale *ce*.

Paha Sapa goes to his knees, feeling expended cartridge shells ripping the skin of his knees, and leans forward, pressing both his palms against the *Wasicun's* pale chest, setting

his hands near a large, ragged wound where the first rifle bullet struck the man's left breast. The second and more lethal bullet wound – high on the man's pale left temple – shows as a simple round hole. The corpse's eyelids are lowered, eyes almost closed as if in sleep, only the narrowest crescents of white visible under surprisingly full lashes, and this *Wasicun's* countenance, unlike so many of the others, looks composed, almost peaceful.

Paha Sapa closes his own eyes as he gasps the words that he hopes are ritual enough.

– *Ghost, be gone! Ghost, leave my body!*

As Paha Sapa repeats this gasping incantation, he presses down firmly on the naked corpse's chest, hoping and praying to the Six Grandfathers that the pressure will invite the ghost to flow back down his arm and hand and fingers and into the cold white form.

The *wasichu* corpse's mouth opens and the dead man emits a long, satisfied belch.

Paha Sapa jerks his hands back in horror – the ghost seems to be laughing at him from its safe nest inside Paha Sapa's brain – until he realizes that he's only pressed some last bubbles of air up and out of the dead *Wasicun's* bowels or belly or lungs.

His body shaking, Paha Sapa presses his hands against the cold flesh again, but it is no use. The ghost is not leaving. It has found a home in Paha Sapa's warm, living, breathing body and has no wish to return to the empty vessel lying there among the equally empty vessels of its murdered friends.

Sobbing now like an infant, ten-summers-old Paha Sapa, a sniveling boy again who thought himself a man just an hour earlier, crawls away from the heap of corpses and falls

to the ground and curls up like an unborn thing, all but sucking his thumb as he lies there weeping between the stiffened legs of a dead cavalry horse. The sun is a red orb in the dusty sky as it lowers toward the uplands to the west, its crimson hue turning the sky into a reflection of the bloody earth beneath it.

The ghost continues to whisper and gibber inside his brain as Paha Sapa slides sideways into an exhausted state that is not quite sleep. It is still gibbering and whispering when Limps-a-Lot finds him sometime after sunset and carries him, still unconscious, back to the mourning and celebrating Lakota village in the valley below.

On the Six Grandfathers

February 1934

It's time for Thomas Jefferson's head to explode.

Visible in the rough sketch of stone is the parted hair, so much lower on the forehead than the hair above Washington's forehead immediately to the left and higher than the emerging Jefferson. And rising out of the white-and-tan granite below the hair and forehead is the long rectangle of a blocked-out nose, terminating just about even with the sharp line of Washington's chin. Also emerging are the overhang of brows and the indentations of the eyes, the right eye more finished (if one can call a circular hole within an oval hole finished). But the two heads – one almost completed, the other just emerging – appear too close to each other for even the non-artist's eye.

Paha Sapa was resting in the shade of the powerhouse in the valley the summer before, carefully and slowly going through his dynamite box even though work on the project was officially in hiatus, when he'd heard two older tourist ladies arguing under their parasols.

– That's George in front, so the other has to be Martha.

– Oh, no. I have it on good authority that they're putting only presidents up there.

– Nonsense! Mr Borglum would never carve two men snuggled up to each other like that! It would be indecent! That's definitely Martha.

So today, at four p.m., the first Jefferson has to go.

At four o'clock sharp the sirens sound. Everyone off the heads, everyone off the faces, everyone off the stairway, everyone off the rubble slope beneath. Then there settles in the briefest winter silence, unbroken even by crow call from the snowy ponderosa pines on either side and below or by the otherwise constant creak of the supply tram being hauled up or down, until suddenly three booms echo across the valley, and Jefferson's forehead explodes outward. There is the briefest pause as rocks fall and dust dissipates – then another blast as Jefferson's indistinct masses of hair and the overhang of brow explode into thousands of flying, falling granite shards, some as big as a Model T. This is followed by an even briefer pause during which more rocks clatter down the slope and crows whirl black above, and then Jefferson's nose and right eye and the remaining hint of his cheek erupt outward in half a dozen simultaneous final blasts that roll down the valley and echo back, diminished and tinny sounding.

The debris seems to fall and roll for long minutes, although the real work has been done in seconds. When the last smoke and dust drift away on the cold breeze, the rock face shows only a few subtle folds and minor spurs that will require burring away by hand. Thomas Jefferson is gone. It is as if he never existed there.

Paha Sapa, against all rules but with special dispensation, has been hanging in his bosun's chair out of view of the blast around the east side of Washington's massive head

during the explosions, his feet set against a subtle ridge on the long expanse of virgin white rock that has already been blasted down to good stone in preparation for carving at Jefferson's new site. Now he kicks out, waves up to Gus, his winchman, and begins bouncing across the bulge of hair, cheek, and nose of George Washington, the winch crane above swiveling smoothly with him as he seems to fly. He thinks what he always thinks when he begins to move this way – *Peter Pan!* He saw the play performed on the Pine Ridge Reservation by a traveling troupe from Rapid City years ago and has always remembered how the young woman playing a boy flew around and above the stage on her all-too-visible wire harness. The steel wire that holds Paha Sapa hundreds of feet above the stone valley floor here is one-eighth of an inch thick, less visible than the girl-Peter Pan's was, but he knows that it could hold eight men of his weight. He kicks harder and flies higher; he wants to be the first to see the results of the fourteen large charges and eighty-six small charges he personally measured and drilled and tapped into place on Jefferson's head that morning and afternoon.

Balancing on Washington's right cheek, waving to Gus to lower him to a point level with the first president's still-being-worked lips and line of mouth, Paha Sapa looks to his left at his handiwork and finds it good.

All one hundred of the charges have fired. The masses of parted hair, eyebrows, eye sockets, eye, nose, and first hint of lips are gone, but no errant gouges or lumps have been left in the inferior rock where the first Jefferson carving was mistakenly started.

Paha Sapa is bouncing weightlessly from the right corner of Washington's chin, still some hundred and fifty feet above the highest point of the rubble slope below, when he senses

rather than sees or hears Gutzon Borglum descending on a second line from the winch house above.

The boss drops between Paha Sapa's bosun's chair and the remains of the first Jefferson rock face and Borglum glowers at the newly exposed rock for a minute before swiveling easily toward Paha Sapa.

– *You missed some little spurs there on the far cheek, Old Man.*

Paha Sapa nods. The spurs are visible only as the slightest hint of shadows within the patch of weak February light reflected from Washington's cheek and nose onto the now empty rock face. Paha Sapa feels the cold as the last of that reflected February light fades away on this south-facing slope. He knows that Borglum had to criticize *something* – he always does. As for being called Old Man, Paha Sapa knows that Borglum will be celebrating his sixty-sixth birthday in a few weeks but never mentions his age to the men and has no idea of Paha Sapa's real age; he will turn sixty-nine in August. Paha Sapa knows that Borglum calls him Old Man and Old Horse in front of the other men but actually believes that the only Indian he has working for him is fifty-eight, which is what the Homestake Mine records show.

– *Well, Billy, you were right about the charge sizes. I wasn't sure we should use so many little ones, but you were right.*

Borglum's voice is its usual dissatisfied growl. Few of the workers love him, but almost all of them respect him, and that's all that Borglum wants from them. Paha Sapa neither loves nor respects Borglum, but he knows that statement would be true about his feelings toward almost any *Wasicun*, with the possible exception of a few dead men and a living one named Doane Robinson. Paha Sapa squints at the clean rock face where the three-dimensional Jefferson sketch was half an hour earlier.

– Yes, sir, Mr Borglum. Any more large ones would have cracked that fault open and you'd be patching for six months. Any fewer little ones and we'd be blasting for another week and buffing a month more after that.

It's the longest sustained speech Paha Sapa has given in months, but Borglum only grunts. Paha Sapa wishes the other man would just go away. He has a dynamite headache – literally a dynamite headache. Paha Sapa's been working with his bare hands in the cold all day, cutting, shaping, and placing the charges since early morning, and, as all powdermen know, there is something in dynamite, possibly from the nitroglycerine beading up out of it like dangerous sweat, that seeps through a powderman's skin, migrates to the base of his skull, and brings on these thudding, blinding headaches that make normal migraines seem insignificant. Paha Sapa tries to blink away the onset of the red film over his vision that the dynamite headache invariably brings with it.

– Well, it could've been cleaner, and I'm sure you could've used less dynamite and saved us some money. Be ready to set the new charges on the upper third of the new site early in the morning for the noon blow.

Borglum waves for his own winchman spotter, his son, Lincoln, to crank him up.

Paha Sapa nods, feeling the stab of pain and vertigo that the nod brings on, and waits for Borglum to reach the winch house before he will kick around for one last, closer inspection. But before the boss disappears up into the dark rectangle at the bottom of the overhanging winch house, he shouts down—

– Billy ... you'd like to use enough powder to bring Washington down too, wouldn't you?

Paha Sapa leans far back with only the tips of his toes touching the rock, his body almost horizontal in the bosun's chair with only the one-eighth-inch metal cable holding him there in space two hundred feet above the valley floor, and looks up at the dark shape of Gutzon Borglum hanging fifty feet above him, a small silhouette against the rapidly paling February South Dakota sky that is almost the blue of a dead *wasichu* horse soldier's eye.

– Not yet, Boss. I'll wait 'til you finish all the heads before I bring them all down.

Borglum coughs a laugh, signals his son, and is cranked up into the winch house.

It is an old joke between them and the question and answer, always the same, have long since been wrung dry of any remaining humor. But does Borglum ever suspect, Paha Sapa wonders, that his premier powderman is telling him the truth?