

double eagle

SNEED B. COLLARD III


PEACHTREE

ATLANTA



PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112

www.peachtree-online.com

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Cover design by Maureen Withee
Book composition by Melanie McMahan Ives

Manufactured in United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Collard, Sneed B.

Double eagle / written by Sneed B. Collard III. -- 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: In 1973, Michael and Kyle's discovery of a rare Confederate coin at an old Civil War fort turns into a race against time as the boys try to find more coins before a hurricane hits Alabama's Gulf coast.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 978-1-56145-480-8 / 1-56145-480-X

[1. Coins--Collectors and collecting--Fiction. 2. Buried treasure--Fiction. 3. Hurricanes--Fiction. 4. Alabama--History--1951---Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.C67749Dq 2009

[Fic]--dc22

2008036746

APRIL 24, 1862

The Alabama coast—April 24, 1862

*E*ven in the darkness of the pilothouse, the knuckles of the captain's hands gleamed bone white. He gripped the wheel of the Skink and peered out at the dim silhouette of Fort Morgan, one of two forts guarding the mouth of Mobile Bay. Both forts were in Confederate hands, and while the captain kept his boat within the protective reach of their cannon, he knew he was safe. But now, following the directions of his pilot, the captain steered the Skink past the forts and out into the Gulf of Mexico—Federal gunboat territory. With each chuff of the paddle wheel steamer's engines, he could feel the blood thicken inside his veins.

It had been a harrowing week for the captain, and indeed for all sons and daughters of the Confederacy. For months, rumors of a Union attack on New Orleans had swirled all along the Gulf Coast. Finally, a few days earlier, Confederate spies had confirmed the news: an attack was imminent. Throughout the Crescent City civilians and soldiers scrambled to defend and, in many cases, flee the

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South's most important port. Several local businessmen had hired the Skink to whisk both personal and commercial freight to the safety of Havana, Cuba. But as the steamer was preparing to leave, a Confederate major had unexpectedly arrived with an additional cargo chest. The major ordered the chest taken not to Havana, but to Fort Henry at the mouth of Mobile Bay.

"But that's well out of our way!" the captain had protested. "It will put us in added danger from Union war-ships!"

The major showed little sympathy. "Agree now or I will commandeer this vessel for military duty."

The captain's mouth opened, then closed again. His choice was made. And in case the captain had any second thoughts, the major left two soldiers on the vessel to make sure his orders were executed.

As the Union Fleet assembled to begin shelling the defenses that protected New Orleans, the Skink slipped out into the Gulf of Mexico under cover of darkness. That night the captain cursed his fortune. If it weren't for the last-minute command to deliver the mysterious chest, he would already be running through open water toward Havana. Instead he was forced to hug the coastline, on constant alert for fickle currents, shifting sandbars, and Union gun-boats.

But throughout the rest of the night and the next day, his luck held. The Union blockade was still in its infancy and posed only a modest threat to Confederate shipping. Besides, the captain reasoned, the Union navy undoubtedly had its hands full with the attack on New Orleans. As

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they passed from New Orleans to Pascagoula, Mississippi, the captain didn't spot a single Union vessel. Even better, a new moon and thick cloud cover helped obscure the Skink from enemy eyes. Twenty-four hours after leaving New Orleans, just after sunset, the Skink steamed safely through the western access channel to Mobile Bay and docked at the pier of Fort Henry.

Following the major's instructions, the captain handed over the mystery chest to the fort's commander. Brigadier General Josiah Buckford seemed surprised by the delivery.

"What are its contents?" he asked the captain.

The captain looked at the two soldiers who had accompanied him. They shrugged and one responded, "Ain't no one told us, sir."

"I also do not know," the captain told General Buckford.

"Very well." Turning to several soldiers on the pier, the general barked, "Take the chest to my quarters. Do not open it." Then, returning his attention to the captain, he said, "Allow us to offer you refreshment after your journey. I would like to hear your observations on the situation in N'Orleans."

"Thank you, sir," the captain replied, looking up at the cloud-covered night sky, "but if it's all the same to you, I'd like to get underway while we still have concealment of darkness and the tide runs high."

The general nodded. "I understand."

After taking on more coal, the Skink chugged away from the dock. Instead of heading out of Mobile Bay's main entrance, the captain chose the preferred route of blockade-runners and made his way to the easternmost channel, the

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one protected by the guns of Fort Morgan. The fort slipped by to the port side without incident, and after running along the coast for another mile the captain spun the wheel starboard, turning the Skink south toward open waters. Two miles from shore the captain began to breathe more deeply. Finally they were safe.

Then, without warning, the pilot shouted, "Captain! A Union warship!"

"Full steam!" the captain ordered, but even as the words left his mouth, he saw the warship's outline less than half a mile away. He knew that their situation was dire.

"Perhaps they do not see us," the pilot said.

A warning shot from the Union vessel erased any doubts.

"Raise sails!" the captain ordered his crew. "We need every breath of speed we can muster."

"Shouldn't we surrender?" the pilot asked. "We don't stand a chance against their cannon."

"Silence! I will not spend the rest of the war rotting in a Yankee prison or turn over my boat to the Union cause!"

But the warship was already bearing down. Another warning shot rent the night air.

"More steam, man!" the captain shouted at his engineer.

"The boilers will overheat!"

Just then the captain looked out to see the warship turning to a full broadside position. His throat filled with bile and before he could give another order, the Union gunboat's deadly cannon opened fire.

JUNE 1973

Chapter 1

The Divorce Shuffle stinks. I knew from firsthand experience: It was my fourth summer flying across the country from California to Florida to visit my dad. It wasn't that I didn't want to see him. In fact, the opposite was true. I missed my father all year long and couldn't wait to be with him again. But the transition, well, that was tough.

Life with my mom and stepdad in California followed a comfortable routine. On school days we got up at six-thirty, ate toast and eggs for breakfast, and left the house by eight. After school, if it was cross-country or track season, I stayed for practice. If not, I caught the bus home, changed my clothes, and took off riding bikes with the other guys in the neighborhood. Dinner at six o'clock sharp. Homework. Then my favorite time of the day. I dug out my coin collection and spread it out on my desk. I powered up my new Pioneer SX-454 receiver, put on the

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headphones, and dialed in the latest tracks from Led Zepelin, the Rolling Stones, and the Who on the world's greatest radio station, KMET-FM in Los Angeles. After an hour or two rocking out and poring over my latest coin finds, I flopped into bed to rest up for another, almost identical day.

Okay, so it wasn't the most thrilling existence, but it was comfortable. I knew what to expect.

Not so with my dad.

Unlike my mom, my dad hadn't remarried. He'd had girlfriends now and then, but nothing had stuck. No surprise. My dad...well, he did what he wanted to—a habit that didn't exactly nurture long-term relationships. After finishing his PhD at the University of California at Santa Barbara, he'd landed a job as a biology professor at the University of West Florida in Pensacola. During my six to eight weeks with him each summer, the days were as unpredictable as the Gulf Coast's turbulent weather.

Some days my dad would shake me awake and announce an expedition to look for turtles or snakes or pitcher plants. Other days he'd take me out to his lab and put me to work inhaling formaldehyde fumes while I sorted samples of sargassum weed he'd collected in the Gulf of Mexico. Many days, while he worked on a grant proposal or scientific paper, I'd read adventure novels or look for alligators down at the campus bayou. To my friends back home, this all sounded groovy, and I have to admit that except for the formaldehyde, I liked it pretty well.

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But it was also a big adjustment. That first week my dad always managed to tick me off somehow—by accident or on purpose, I could never be sure. Only after we got into a big fight or two did things settle down enough for me to embrace the new routine, or lack of it.

This year, though, my dad decided to throw something entirely new at me—something that caused me more than my usual level of “arrival anxiety.” As soon as he picked me up at the Pensacola Airport, he whisked me across the Alabama state line in his beige VW Squareback. He drove us under the city of Mobile through the Bankhead Tunnel. Then, we rattled down the west side of Mobile Bay toward a place called Shipwreck Island, where he had taken a summer job teaching invertebrate zoology at a brand-new marine lab. It was there, not Pensacola, where I would be spending the next two months.

As our beige beast bumped onto the three-mile-long drawbridge that reached out from the mainland, I saw the long silhouette of Shipwreck Island looming dark and mysterious across the sun-splattered surface of the Intra-coastal Waterway. My stomach knotted and I began counting my teeth with the tip of my tongue, something I always did when I was nervous. *What will our living quarters there be like? I worried. How many new people will I have to meet? What am I going to do all summer while Dad is teaching? Why can't he just stay in one place like a normal parent?*

I would soon learn the answers—at least to my first three questions.

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* * *

After crossing the drawbridge we passed through a little village, if you could call it that. A large marina with about a hundred boats filled the protected inlet to our left. On the right sat a gas station, a restaurant, a couple of houses, and a store called “Bait ’n Stuff.” The Bait ’n Stuff looked like the main game on the island for shopping of any kind, and it featured a hand-painted sign that read “Best Tamales This Side ’a Pascagoula.”

I laughed, momentarily forgetting my anxiety.

“Did I miss something?” my dad asked.

I pointed to the sign. “Are there *any* other tamales this side of Pascagoula?”

My dad grinned. “I see your point.”

At a T intersection we turned left and rumbled down a long, straight road through a forest of pine, oak, and palmetto. Here and there another road opened up on either side, and I glimpsed a few houses tucked among the trees. Two miles later, we reached a treeless expanse that seemed to encompass the entire eastern tip of the island.

A sign read “South Coast University Marine Laboratories.” My dad slowed and turned right through an open chain-link gate. I squinted at a collection of bleached cinder-block buildings that looked more like a prison than a place of higher learning. We parked in front of a long, two-story, whitewashed building that sat squat and permanent,

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as though it had been carved from a single, massive block of concrete.

“Welcome to SCUM-Lab,” my father said, using the nickname the place had acquired during its first year of operation. “Whaddya think?”

“It’s not the Holiday Inn,” I observed.

My dad chuckled. “You’re right. At Holiday Inns, the roaches don’t eat nearly as well. Let’s go check out our accommodations.”

My dad had already told me that until recently the lab had been a United States Air Force radar base. The base had been constructed to withstand a nuclear attack, which explained the bleak, durable construction of the dormitory and other buildings. When the base closed, Alabama’s major universities had petitioned Congress to turn it over to the university system for a marine biology lab. It was obvious that they’d forgotten to ask for any money to fix the place up.

I trailed my dad up the front staircase to the second-floor hallway of the monolithic whitewashed building.

“This was the base barracks for enlisted men,” my dad said. “Now it’s Home Sweet Home.”

He stopped outside of Room 208, inserted a key, and opened the door. I entered to find a cell-block room inhabited by a sagging double bed, a dresser with peeling veneer, and a desk with enough coffee cup rings on it to make a dozen Olympic flags.

I studied the bed. “We’re sharing that?” I asked, already

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dreading the prospect of sleeping next to my dad's chain-saw snore.

"It's not quite as grim as it looks," he said. "We're lucky. We got a deluxe suite."

I followed him into the walk-through bathroom and out the other side to a second bedroom. "See?" he said. "You get a room all to yourself."

The relief must have showed on my face. My dad laughed and punched me on the shoulder. "Don't look so glum. You're going to like it here," he told me.

How would you know? I wanted to say, but I kept my mouth shut.

"Come on," he said. "I'll give you the grand tour."

* * *

Leaving our "deluxe suite," we clattered down the rear metal fire escape of the barracks. Even before we reached the bottom I heard the lightning crack of billiard balls smashing together.

"Sounds like someone's in the rec room," my dad said.

We walked through an open door to find three men clustered around a pool table. One guy was leaning forward over the table, cue poised for a shot, but he straightened up when he saw us. "Hey, Doc!"

"Hey, Doc yourself," my dad said. "Professor Robert Halsted, this is my son Michael."

"Call me Bob," the man told me. Professor Halsted looked about my dad's age—in his midthirties or so—and

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was also my dad's height of about five foot ten. His medium-length brown hair hung down his neck and a scruffy, untrimmed beard wrapped around his chin. "Welcome to Alabama," he said, his handshake warm and friendly.

My dad turned to the second man. "Rod, my son Michael." At six foot three or so, Rod towered over everyone else in the room. Younger than Professor Halsted—in his early twenties, I guessed—Rod had a deeply tanned face and a full head of curly hair that poofed out like a sun-bleached sea sponge. He wore a string of beads around his neck, but I guessed they were there to look cool, not to promote peace, love, and understanding.

"Rod's in my invert class," my dad explained.

I expected Rod to shake hands with me too, or at least show some interest. Instead he just mumbled, "Hey, kid" and returned his attention to the pool table.

Finally my dad turned to the last person in the room. "And Mike, this is the boy I've been telling you about, Kyle Daniels."

My dad used the word "boy," but Kyle Daniels looked well on his way to becoming a man. He stood only an inch or so taller than I did, but in that yellow tank top his shoulders looked half again as wide as mine. His almost-white hair hung straight and shaggy over his sunburned ears, and his blue eyes glinted even before he said anything.

Kyle stepped forward and stuck out his hand. "How ya doin', Michael?" He flashed me a smile so bright my pupils groaned.

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“I’m okay,” I muttered.

“I’ve been telling Kyle you were coming,” my dad said.

Kyle nodded. “Yeah. Glad to have you around. This place can get a little dead.”

“Mmm-hmm.” You’d think I’d also be glad to have Kyle around, especially marooned out on an island at the very tip of Alabama.

I wasn’t.

Kyle’s presence was just one more uncertainty I had to deal with. One more relationship I had to work out. Worse, I realized, he represented something I usually didn’t have to deal with in the summers—*competition*. My dad had already told me that Kyle was a year older than me—fifteen to my fourteen. What my father hadn’t mentioned was that Kyle was also stronger and better-looking than me. And his annoyingly cheery smile probably meant that he had a great personality. If that wasn’t enough, Kyle had gotten here before me and had a chance to get in good with everyone before I arrived. Didn’t my dad’s student Rod blow me off just the moment before?

No, I wasn’t happy about Kyle Daniels. Sixty seconds after meeting him, I wished a tornado would roar down on Shipwreck Island and blow him away.