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ANDY ANDREWS



"With the skill of a virtuoso, Andy Andrews continues his string of successful writing performances in *The Heart Mender*, his latest entertaining masterpiece. The plot, characters, and storyline combine to summon the reader into an unforgettable experience."

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I)

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The HEART MENDER

A STORY OF SECOND CHANCES

Andy Andrews



NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

To the Stimpson family of Mobile, Alabama.

S

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



I am often asked if I have a favorite among the books I have written. Yes, I do. And this is it. *The Heart Mender* is not only what I believe to be my best work, it is the most compelling—bringing all aspects of a mystery, love story, and thriller to the table in order to deliver a life-changing principle.

What is my greatest career disappointment? Again, I would answer, "This manuscript you hold in your hands." Not this title—just the manuscript. You see, the manuscript was previously published under another name—*Island of Saints*—and for the most part barely even saw a bookstore! Through issues of bad timing, little previous success of my own, and zero publicity, the book was quickly forgotten.

The few people who *did* find the book, however, became (and remain) extremely vocal about their love for the story and its power. Soon a movie producer found it, and the ball, which had seemed lost in deep weeds, started rolling again.

Now released with a more appropriate title, the backing

of a happy publishing company, and a few rabid supporters who still call this their favorite book, *The Heart Mender* is ready to go. And now there is only *the biggest question of all* waiting to be answered . . .

"Is this story true?"

Without exception, every person who has read this book has asked that question.

And the answer is . . . yes . . . for the most part. All the numbers, the history, the dates, and the items I found are real. I have changed some locations and most of the names. The principal characters do exist, but perhaps not in the *specific* manner in which they are presented. Curiously, a few of the main characters' experiences turned out to be more common than I had previously believed. When the first incarnation of this manuscript was produced, I received communication from several families with proof that they, too, had begun their lives in this country with the very same kind of history as that of my friends.

At the end of this book (and don't read ahead!) I decided to add a "Where Are They Now?" section, which I think you will enjoy. And before *you* ask . . . yes . . . for the most part, it will be true!

> Andy Andrews Orange Beach, Alabama



CHAPTER 1



IT IS EARLY SUMMER AS I SIT AT MY DESK AND FINALLY begin the process of sorting what I know to be true from what I merely suspect. As I form the words and type them into record, I shall endeavor to separate facts from the legend and myth in which they have now been shrouded for decades.

As an author, I usually have a particular work living in my head—complete with its title, plot, subplots, and ending—for months before leaping, as fully formed as I can make it, onto the page. At present, however, I haven't even a working title for this manuscript. The book you are holding, if indeed it has come to that, was nothing I ever intended to write. My next two books have been outlined and are ready to begin, but I have become distracted by an attempt to solve a mystery literally thrust into my life by the earth itself. Let me explain . . .

I live with my wife, Polly, and our two boys on a small island situated along the Florida/Alabama coastline of the northern Gulf of Mexico. There is a single, small bridge connecting us to the mainland. Orange Beach, Alabama, just to our west, is where we bank, vote, attend church, and shop for groceries. Perdido Key, Florida, is to the east. A thirty-second drive from the bridge in that direction crosses the Florida state line and passes the world-renowned Flora-Bama Lounge, a loosely constructed conglomeration of wood, brick, and tent material most famous, I suppose, for being famous. Therefore, it is always packed, and if the wind is right, sometimes late at night I can hear strains of "Redneck Mother" or "You Don't Have to Call Me Darlin' . . . Darlin'" from my dock.

Over the past twenty years, this previously ignored coastline has increasingly become a prime destination for summer tourists and winter snowbirds drawn to the area by the turquoise water and dazzling white sand. The beach, one of the few in the world to be composed of only one mineral—in this case finely crushed quartz—is part of a onehundred-mile stretch of beach that includes the Florida towns Panama City and Destin and is known as the "Miracle Strip."

Our home is situated on a dune line that rises twenty-five feet from the water's edge and runs east to west, affording a view of the water on both sides of the island. The landscaping is minimal at best. Here and there we've managed to coax a few flowers out of the sand, and several potted palms grace the dock. Polly holds with the belief that "natural is better," and I, having not forgotten the chores thrust upon me by my garden-crazy parents, am happy to agree.

So, instead of grass demanding to be mowed and azalea bushes begging to be fertilized or pruned or have pine straw placed by hand around their precious roots, we have sea oats and wax myrtles and ancient oak trees growing in the sand. And they grow quite nicely without any help from me. Most of the time. Last September, I noticed the largest wax myrtle on our property had begun to die. In the almost one hundred years of its existence, the tree had grown to well over forty feet and shaded an area the size of a tennis court. It crowned the top of the dune near our kitchen porch, and boaters often noticed this magnificent monarch even before they saw the house. Because of its height and close proximity, my family was keenly aware of the tree's impending demise.

By the new year, no semblance of life was left in its branches. I was surprised to find myself strangely relieved, as if an old friend had finally passed away after a struggle that had become too difficult to witness. And after a proper period of what I called mourning and my wife termed "yard work procrastination," I knew it was time to remove the tree.

The wax myrtle, also known as the southern bayberry, was used by the Indians and early American colonists to make candles. Its distinctive, fragrant scent comes from volatile oils contained in tiny glands on the leaves. These oils render the tree highly flammable and remain in the tree long after it dies. Dead wood infused with combustible resin is not a good combination when it is located so near a house, and so it was with a heavy heart (and a portable radio tuned to the NFL play-offs) that I struck my first blow against the trunk of the tree.

I am an ax man. Ever since, as a teenager, I saw the movie in which a chainsaw was the weapon of choice, I've never been especially keen on that particular sound. So, instead of a quick rip and a crash, it took until early afternoon to chop down the tree and haul its scattered pieces away, leaving only the stump as a reminder that anything had been there at all. But as much as we loved the tree, no one wanted the reminder. "Dig it up," my wife urged in what she felt was an encouraging voice, and I did.

Granted, when surrounded by sand, a stump is not the formidable opponent it becomes when its roots have embedded themselves in clay or a rocky soil. There is, however, something to be said for a root system having spent a hundred years in search of nourishment. Tremendous mats of stringy, underground branches stretched in far larger networks than their leafy counterparts had ever accomplished in the sunshine. I was shocked and exhausted, I had a hole in the ground the size of my grandfather's Buick, and I was starting to think in regard to my dear wife, *What she doesn't know won't hurt her*. I was about to reverse course and hide the roots that were left by covering up the whole mess when my shovel struck something that didn't feel like root.

For a brief moment, the shovel stuck. It was as if I had hit a monstrous wad of gum or taffy. And the sound was different. I had grown accustomed to the high-pitched *swish* of the steel shovel as it cut through the sand, but this tone reverberated as a dull *thunk*. At the time, I didn't think it sounded like metal, but that's exactly what it was.

With the shovel's retreat, I exposed a hand-sized portion of rusted . . . something. Sand poured into a slit in the object that had obviously been opened by the slicing of the shovel. On my hands and knees, I quickly pulled wads of tiny roots away from the item and, with my fingers, pried it loose. It was a can.

I turned the heavily rusted object over in my hands, being especially careful not to cut myself on any of the sharp edges. It was large . . . like the gallon-sized cans a restaurant uses for vegetables or refills of ketchup. The can was sealed at both ends, but the rust, I noticed, had created several tiny holes in its surface in addition to the large one made by the shovel's blow.

The presence of the holes made it apparent that the can was not filled with food or liquid of any kind, but still, it was heavier than an empty can should feel. And it rattled when I turned it.

Although I assumed the clatter to be caused by shells and sand, I was curious and pried apart the thin, fragile metal.

Inside the can, dank and mildewed, was what I determined to be an old chamois once soft leather now stiffened by age and the rusty dampness in which it had been imprisoned. Pulling the leather free from the can, I saw that it had, at one



time, been carefully folded. Now, though, it was shrunken somewhat, blackened by mold and almost hard on its edges like a big, ugly potholder that someone had starched.

The leather folds came apart easily in my hands, and as they did, a button fell out and onto the sand at my knees. A silver button. Though somewhat tarnished, the face of the button was beautifully etched with an anchor. From its back



extended a single loop surrounded by letters so tiny that I was unable to make out anything more than a K, an R, and on down the line of script, what I thought might be an A.

Placing the button on the kitchen porch behind me, I tugged harder at the leather from which it had come and tore a piece completely off. Three more buttons, identical to

the first, along with a ring, fell into the sand. The ring was also silver, a bit more discolored than the buttons, and had as its center point an eagle surrounded by a wreath. The ring also had letters—these much larger—which ran the entire outside circumference of the circle. I read the words aloud: "Wir Fahren Gegen Engelland."



Not being able to translate or even identify the language, I set the ring aside with the buttons and continued to peel apart the crusty leather. With the final layer laid open, I slowly set the chamois on the sand and gazed openmouthed at what it held. There were four more buttons, making a total of eight, a silver anchor badge about 2 inches tall by 1 ½ inches wide, some kind of black-and-silver medal with a bit of red, black, and white ribbon attached, and three, only slightly water-damaged, black-and-white photographs.







The first photograph was a simple head and upper body shot of a man in military attire. I didn't recognize the uniform, but saw immediately that the buttons in the picture were the same ones I now had in my possession. In fact, I counted them. Eight silver anchor buttons in the photo . . . and eight on my porch. I really couldn't tell if the man in the picture was twenty or forty, and in that way, he reminded me of old pictures I have seen of college

kids in the nineteen thirties or forties. They all looked years older than they actually were.

The man was not smiling. It was as if he was not entirely comfortable with the idea of having a photograph made. He was not thin or fat, though "thick" might have been an accurate description of his body type. The same eagle that appeared on the ring was also on display on the right breast of his uniform jacket and the top of an odd, beret-type cap. Stitched in large, Gothic script along the lower brim of the cap was the word *Kriegsmarine*.

The second photograph was smaller and had a decorative black border framing the print. In it were three figures: a young woman in what struck me as the best dress she owned, a man in a suit and white shirt with no tie, and a baby in a wagon between them. Whether the child was a boy or girl, I couldn't tell. Though the woman looked directly (fearfully?) into the camera, the man's attention was focused toward the child, causing his face to appear in profile. I wasn't certain, but I thought that maybe he was the same uniformed man in the previous photograph.

It was the third photograph, in addition to the ribboned medal, that had my attention. The black-and-silver military decoration was cast in the shape of a cross. At the bottom leg of the cross was a date, 1939, and in its center a more familiar symbol. I blinked as I touched it with my finger and shivered, whether from the January chill or something unseen, I didn't know.

Quickly I looked again to the last photograph. Men on a boat of some sort . . . lined up as if for inspection. On the right corner of the front line, yes, there was the uniformed man from the first picture. Four officers in highly decorated military overcoats were in the foreground of the shot. Three wore dark clothing with what I imagined to be gold or silver



trim. The fourth man, to the far left of the photograph, was dressed immaculately in an outfit cut in the same design, but of a paler material. It was this man whose face I recognized. This was the man for whom the symbol on the medal had been created. But why on earth was a picture of Adolf Hitler buried in my backyard?





CHAPTER 2

A WEEK LATER, I WAS STILL NO CLOSER TO ANSWERING MY question. Where had this stuff come from? At least the Internet, with its various search engines, had begun to fill in some of the blanks about what the actual pieces were. And the swastika embossed on the medal gave me some idea of what I might find.

After rushing inside and fanning out the items on the kitchen table for my astonished wife, I retreated to my office and cranked up the computer. The first word I searched was *Kriegsmarine*, the script on the man's hat in the first picture. I quickly found that it was the name of the German navy controlled by the Nazi regime until 1945. Previously titled the Reichsmarine, the Kriegsmarine was formed in May of 1935 after Germany passed the "Law for the Reconstruction of the National Defense Force." This law brought back into existence a German military presence that had been essentially banned by the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I.

I next typed in *Kriegsmarine buttons* and was instantly rewarded. There, on my computer screen, was an enlargement, front and back view, of a button exactly like the eight in my possession. The front of the button proudly displayed the anchor while the magnification of the back side clearly revealed the word *Kriegsmarine* stamped in a semicircle. Remembering the letters I had barely made out on the back of the first button I found, I dug an old 8X photographer's loupe out of my desk and looked at the back of one of the actual buttons. There it was, the same semicircular engraving of the same word that stared back at me from the computer.

As I moved my eye from the magnification device, I noticed that the photographer's loupe—a small plastic piece with the brand name Lupe—had an engraving of its own. "Made in Germany," it said. If it hadn't been so weird, I would have laughed out loud.

The medal—easy to find—was an Iron Cross. First instituted by King Friedrich of Prussia in 1813, it was adopted as a piece of political imagery by Adolf Hitler during the opening hours of World War II and became the most recognizable decoration to be won by a member of the German military. The Iron Cross was awarded for bravery in the face of the enemy. The actual medal itself was seldom worn, but often carried. An Iron Cross recipient usually displayed only the brightly colored ribbon by running it out the top right buttonhole of his jacket. In the first photograph, I could see that very piece of red, white, and black cloth featured prominently on the Kriegsmariner's uniform.

Next, I began a frustrating search for the *silver anchor* badge by typing in those exact words. After trying German silver anchor badge, German silver rope anchor badge, and German Navy silver rope anchor badge with no luck, I substituted the words *pin* and *medal* for badge, Nazi for German, Kriegsmarine for Navy, and every combination of those terms I could concoct, with the same results. Nothing.

Pausing for a moment, I sat back and stared at the badge/pin/medal/whatever on my desk. I had literally scanned the pictures of more than one hundred German decorations and military awards, but hadn't come close to anything resembling this impressive piece of masculine jewelry. Picking it up, I placed the silver badge on the gray background of my laptop. Then, I saw something that, unbelievably, had escaped my attention. On the left side of the pin, from the anchor's flange at the bottom to its cross bar at the top, rested a large U. Matching it on the right side was a B of equal dimension. Both letters appeared as mere decorative support, so I reassured myself I wasn't a total idiot for having overlooked them. But now that I did see them, it was as if I could see nothing else-like the optical puzzles that, when you finally see the picture, you wonder how you could have ever missed it in the first place.

 $U B \ldots$ I wondered. My eyes narrowed. U-boat? Immediately I typed in *Kriegsmarine U-boat silver anchor badge* and got the hit that led me to a picture of the badge in my possession. Subsequent searches using several different search engines finally gave me a fairly complete background on the medal.

Interestingly, it was commissioned by the German government in 1910 and worn at that time by officers in the submarine corps. For some reason, the Nazi regime chose not to include the medal in its official notices of recognition. Thus, I found that this particular design was worn by several U-boat officers during World War II as a deniable way of protesting Hitler and his policies. These officers, who either inherited the badge from a relative or had a copy made by a jeweler, considered themselves Germans, not Nazis—a curious but apparently not uncommon distinction. The U-boat connection also led me to a picture and history of the ring. The engraving, *Wir Fahren Gegen Engelland*, translated "We sail against England." Under close examination, again with the loupe, I could see a swastika in the eagle's talons, all set on top of a tiny submarine, surrounded by a wreath. The written information about the ring was specific: it was worn only by an officer of the Unterseebootwaffe—the German submarine force. But who? The man in the first picture? And still the question lingered . . . why was it abandoned and buried here?

After I identified all the items, I turned my attention to the final photograph—the one with Hitler. Three additional officers appeared in the picture with the man most sane people still consider the sheer embodiment of evil. The officer standing immediately to the Führer's left, pointing at something unseen, was in shadow, but by comparing pictures and searching Kriegsmarine files online, I soon identified him as Admiral Karl Doenitz, commander of Hitler's U-boat fleet, later commander in chief of the Kriegsmarine.

I was never able to match a picture with the second officer who stands just behind and to the left of Doenitz or the third officer, of whom one can see only his head. I could only determine, with observational techniques honed by years of watching detective shows on television, that one of them seemed old and fat while the other appeared young and handsome.

"THIS IS A LITTLE GIRL."

I looked up from my book. Polly was holding the picture of the man and woman with the baby in the wagon. Sitting at the other end of the couch with her feet in my lap, my wife had just stuffed another pillow behind her back and was drinking a cup of tea as she gazed at the photograph.

"What makes you think that?" I asked. Having attached little significance to that particular picture, I had given it a cursory examination at best and certainly had not attempted to guess the sex of the child. "Why do you say 'girl'?"

She placed the cup on the small table beside her and sighed softly. "It just is. It's a baby girl. The mom looks so sad."

I was quiet. The boys were at their grandmother's, and Polly and I were spending the weekend alone. It had rained constantly—a slow, foggy, winter drizzle that hangs on the coast sometimes for days. We had not turned on the television a single time, choosing instead to read or talk by the fireplace in our bedroom. The conversation had turned frequently to one or another of the items that had been buried under the old wax myrtle. Polly, for some reason, had taken the photograph with the child and used it as a bookmark. Several times, when she didn't think I was looking, I caught her frowning as she stared at the simple, but somewhat odd, picture.

I had long ago learned to trust my wife's intuition. Her perceptions about people, their feelings or intentions, were uncannily accurate. That is not to say I understood or always agreed completely with her conclusions; however, more than a few times I had been stunned by the precise detail she was able to discern.

I closed my book and eased it to the floor. Polly continued to hold the photograph, but stared out the rain-streaked window. "Dear," I said softly. "What's happening in that picture? Try to imagine it for me."

She didn't look at me, but pushed a lock of dark hair

from her eyes and began to speak. "They are a family . . . a young family. The man and woman have been married a short time. This is their first child . . ." Polly cut her eyes at me. "And it *is* a girl. I don't know why I'm so sure of that, but I am." I nodded, urging her to continue.

"The man is the same man in the first photo . . . the guy in the uniform . . . so this is a picture that was made before he left for the war." She paused and took a deep breath. "The woman is very sad . . . she's scared. Her baby is less than a year old, and she doesn't think they'll ever see the man again." Polly was quiet for a moment, then added, "I don't think they did."

IT RAINED FOR THE REST OF THE MORNING AND INTO THE afternoon. After lunch, I had gone to the dock alone and, under the covered area, lit one of the Mexican firepots. Warming my hands, I studied the blaze and reflected on Polly's thoughts about the family in the photograph. Her words had left me unsettled. I couldn't get any of it off my mind, and my work was beginning to suffer. I had already fielded several calls from my publisher and business manager about "the next book." "How is the manuscript coming?" they wanted to know as the date of my next deadline was politely worked into the conversation. "Great," I lied. "In fact, let me get off the phone and get back to work."

In actuality, I hadn't even begun. The two books I had been so excited about a week earlier had faded deeply into the recesses of the procrastination depot in my brain. The couple or three times I had attempted to write, my mind wandered so madly as to render my powers of concentration virtually nonexistent. Again and again, one basic question gnawed at me and refused to let go: How had all these items come to be hidden here, of all places?

Without warning, an idea of enormously obvious proportions popped into my mind. Why hadn't I used the Internet to explore a possible connection between the Gulf of Mexico and the Kriegsmarine? Quickly I put out the fire while shaking my head at the awesome ability I seem to possess that allows me to overlook the apparent.

Moments later, in my office, I connected to Google and typed in *German U-boats in Gulf of Mexico*. Less than a second later, I was staring wide-eyed at the results of the search. There were 1,940 hits on the topic I'd requested. I couldn't believe it.

I clicked on the first Web site and read the first sentence. It said, "During the years 1942 and 1943, a fleet of over twenty German U-boats cruised the Gulf of Mexico seeking to disrupt the vital flow of oil carried by tankers from U.S. ports."

I swallowed hard and read the second sentence. "The U-boats succeeded in sending fifty-six vessels to the bottom; thirty-nine of these are in the state waters of Texas, Louisiana, and Florida."

Furiously I clicked on site after site, each adding to or confirming the information of the last. In fact, the only discrepancy I could find was the number of merchant ships the U-boats sank. I was convinced, however, that the true number, depending upon which source I believed, was between fifty-six and sixty-two. And remember, those were only in the Gulf of Mexico.

Reading more, I was astounded to learn that when the Atlantic coast was included, only a handful of U-boats had sunk 397 ships—and that was in the first six months of 1942 alone! Eventually, before Hitler called them back, the U-boats destroyed more than 800 vessels in American waters. Unbelievably, many of those were within sight of people on the beach.

Cape Hatteras in North Carolina became known as "Torpedo Junction" as bodies and cargo began to float in. On May 4, 1942, sunbathers in Boca Raton, Florida, watched in horror as the U-564 surfaced and torpedoed the tanker *Eclipse* in broad daylight and in full view of the beach. The German submarine then turned and blasted the freighter *Delisle* and her cargo of camouflage paint. The subsequent explosions and shock waves rumbled over the panicked tourists on the beach with a deafening roar.

Explosions and burning wrecks, all along the eastern seaboard and Gulf coast, were regularly seen at night. Dead men, debris, and oil began to wash ashore, and still, America did not institute the blackouts that were in effect along the coasts of England and Germany. Even when the merchant ships turned out their own lights, the U-boats had only to surface and use the background of the U.S. coastline—whose lights could be seen for more than twenty-five miles—to target the huge vessels.

What was the cost in lives? I wondered. The answer was easily found. During less than a two-year period, more than 1,300 navy men, 201 Coast Guard personnel, and exactly 5,682 merchant marines lost their lives due to U-boat attacks *in American waters*!

Now I had another question: Why had I never heard about this? It was all undoubtedly true. There was too much documentation. The information exists in droves on the Internet, in hundreds of thousands of old newspaper files, and in well over two hundred books on the subject. So . . . why was I so ignorant about this astonishingly recent period in my nation's history? More to the point, why had *everyone* seemingly forgotten?

During dinner, as I laid out everything I had learned, Polly sat quietly and listened, occasionally shaking her head in wonder at the facts that were "news" to her as well. Then, in response to the question, "Where do I go from here?" she gave me a practical answer.

"Ask the old people," she said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

(10)

Hailed by a New York Times reporter as "someone who has become one of the most influential people in America," ANDY ANDREWS is a best-selling novelist and in-demand corporate speaker for the world's largest organizations. He has spoken at the request of four different U.S. presidents and at military bases worldwide. Andy is the author of the New York Times bestsellers The Travelers Gift and The Noticer, as well as The Lost Choice and Return to Sawyerton Springs. He lives in Orange Beach, Alabama, with his wife, Polly, and their two sons.

> Andy can be contacted or engaged for an event at AndyAndrews.com

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REFERENCES



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George Herbert	Robert D. Smith
Scott Jeffrey	Andy Stanley
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