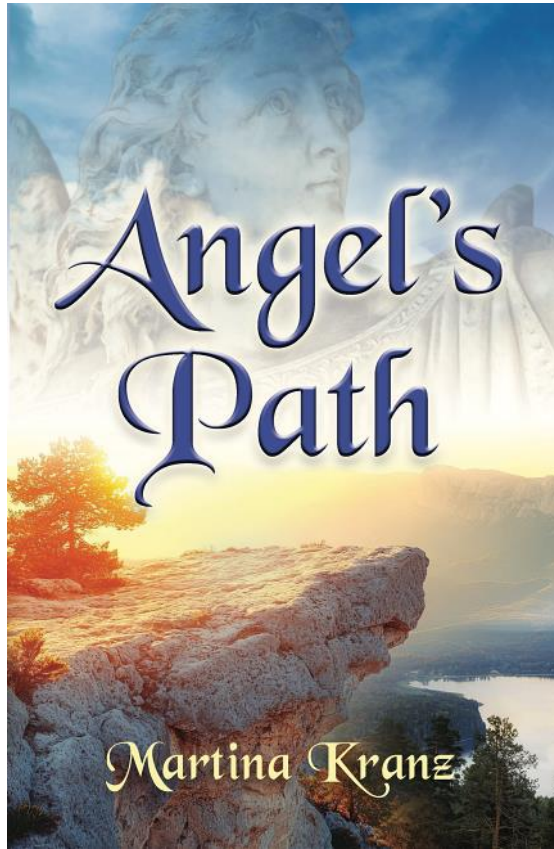




Dara Mannix attempts to remain independent, but her desire to help Tristan Hale restore his estate's garden overrides her will. Tristan soon learns that he feels so much more when he works beside her. Will their teamwork develop into more?

Angel's Path
By Martina Kranz

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Prologue

Archangel Chamuel stood at the edge of a cloudbank, looking down through a gap in the silver-white heavens. He watched the world turn beneath the morning sun—kingdoms rising and falling, his river winding through Mist Men Wood, and human lives crossing and parting like the threads on the Lord’s loom. Beside Archangel Chamuel stretched a tapestry wider and taller than a castle wall. Thousands of golden strands glimmered within it, each one a mortal life.

Archangel Chamuel touched two threads. “These two,” he whispered. “The Lord chose these two.”

Angel Barbelo drifted closer. “The knight and the healer?”

“The same,” Archangel Chamuel answered.

Angel Barbelo frowned as she peered downward. “An odd match.”

Archangel Chamuel nodded and looked down at the knight, clearing his land. “The scars cover half of the knight’s body. The villagers still stare at him. He believes no one could ever look upon him and see anything, but what Lucia has left behind.”

Angel Barbelo watched the healer in her small cottage. She was grinding herbs, pausing now and then to ease the ache in her leg. “And she believes that she is a burden; that anyone who chooses her will eventually tire of waiting for her to catch up. She holds her pain well, but every step costs her.”

Archangel Chamuel smiled. “Humans are curious creatures. They spend so much time measuring their broken pieces but never noticing what those broken pieces have taught them.”

He touched the healer’s thread. “Her pain taught her compassion. She never rushes the sick because she understands what it means to hurt.”

Then he touched the knight's thread. "And his scars taught him gentleness. He knows what it is to be feared for something beyond his control."

Angel Barbelo looked between the two glowing strands. "So that is why the Lord chose them?"

"No." Chamuel's smile widened. "Those are merely the reasons they will each understand other." He gestured downward. "I arranged an opportunity for the knight and the healer to meet in adversity."

The tapestry shimmered.

Angel Barbelo smiled. "They will travel a difficult road ahead."

"Oh, most certainly," Archangel Chamuel said and folded his wings. "There will be misunderstandings, fears, and moments when each is convinced the other deserves someone better."

"Do they?" Angel Barbelo asked.

"No. They deserve someone who sees them clearly," Archangel Chamuel said. He looked at the great tapestry and the two threads to be intertwined. "The Lord does not bring some souls together because they are perfect. HE brings them together because each one knows how to treasure what the world calls imperfect."

And after that, Archangel Chamuel let the threads align side by side and touch their ends together, ready to intertwine.

Chapter 1

At dawn, with her bread, spades, medicinal supplies, flint, and flask of wine packed in her sturdy leather satchel, Yoki emerged from the stone doors that concealed her comfortable hill home. She glanced at the orange-tinted sky and with stiff muscles and gray hair flowing freely, Yoki walked into Mist Men Wood. The sound of unseen creatures in the underbrush filled the silence along with a few birds perched in the branches above her. She passed beneath the towering oaks with gnarled branches, their canopies filtering sunlight to the forest floor; she passed moss-covered rocks and huge fallen logs, the air filled with the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves. Being a dwarf and wearing her green cloak, she could hide anywhere in this forest—blend into the foliage or crawl into a log if she had enough time to outwit the wolves, bandits, or demons that lurked in the shadows.

Weeks ago, Yoki's legs began to ache—mostly at night, but a little more each day. No matter: she knew the ruby was here somewhere. As she walked deeper into Mist Men Wood, the path she followed disappeared. As she climbed over larger rocks and logs, she kept up her trek as one who had weathered countless storms, and her eyes were sharp and focused, and her hearing was keen and sensitive. Hooves rustled through dead leaves. Yoki turned toward the sound when two deer bound from the trees. Before she could move her stiff legs, she fell backward and landed hard on her back, knocking the breath from her. After a few minutes, she stood and brushed the leaves from her hair and noticed the blood on her hand. Her thin skin had ripped open. She took a bandage and some medicinal cream from her satchel and wrapped her wound. It was nothing.

At midday, she should have stopped to eat, but she did not feel hungry. While her old body was willing, she kept going, taking rests and drinking water from small streams along the way. Traveling deeper

into Mist Men Wood, she felt its breathing, as she encountered more ancient trees—some whose bark were etched with rune, yet she had no idea what they meant. The forest seemed to have eyes and watch her every move. In some parts along her trek, the canopy hung so thick that the forest grew dark and cold, as if winter were on its way. Finally, in one of the cold spots, Yoki stopped to catch her breath and wipe the sweat from her brow. As she inhaled deeply, someone moved through her. It was not evil, like Lucia had been. This spirit felt peaceful and serene, not wanting anything or searching for anyone. As she looked up at the fluttering leaves of the canopy, she exhaled long and slow. Mist Men Wood did indeed possess spirits. All kinds of them. Yoki wiped her brow again and stood, refreshed and ready to continue her quest.

As night fell, Yoki reached the ebony center of Mist Men Wood. She made camp beneath a large oak, lighting a small fire with her flint to ward off the chill. While eating her bread and cheese and drinking from the flask of wine she had stowed in her satchel, she watched the shadows dance across the tree trunks. An owl hooted in the distance. Two hedgehogs scooted from underneath the thick underbrush. Yoki cackled, “Sorry loves. Find your food elsewhere. I do not have nough’ to go round.” The hedgehogs skittered back underneath the underbrush.

Someone moved through her again. This time, the spirit lingered around her, like it was waiting. Waiting for another. The solid oak against her back comforted her. She ate more of her bread and cheese and took another drink from her wine flask. Suddenly, the scent of roses hung in the air. The red rose reminded her of the Burning Heart of Mist Men Wood. If she found this ruby, it would be the coup of her life.

The shadows moved. Yoki squinted and gazed into the darkness. A figure of a man, who wore a robe that shimmered like the moonlight, stepped from darkness into the firelight. The solid oak against her back comforted her.

“Hello, Yoki,” the man said. His voice sounded like big, deep church bells pealing and vibrating through the church’s wooden floorboards.

“H...hello,” Yoki said. “Who are you?” His face was so handsome, it almost hurt to look at him.

The man smiled. "I am Chamuel. You are brave for an old woman to be out here alone."

Yoki cackled. "I am not brave, just greedy. I want Mist Men Wood's big, Burning Heart. And besides, bravery knows no age." She stopped midway through taking a bite of her bread. "How did you know my name?"

"I have...seen you at the market," Chamuel said.

"I've certainly not seen you," Yoki said. "If I did, I would have remembered."

"Like you, I try to move around...quietly and unseen. May I join you?" Chamuel asked.

"Please yourself," Yoki said and took another bite of her bread. "What do you want?" she asked with a mouthful of bread. "Every man wants something when he speaks to a woman, dwarf or otherwise."

"First, I want to say that you are right. Bravery knows no age," Chamuel said.

Yoki huffed. "What do you want, man? Hopefully not food. I do not have anything to spare. I am an old dwarf and need all my food."

"I do not want anything," Chamuel said. He sat on a rock near the fire. "But I will tell you where the Burning Heart is."

Yoki swallowed her bread and gave Chamuel a suspicious look. "How do you know where the Burning Heart is? *And* why would you tell me where it is?"

Chamuel smiled. "I know where the Burning Heart is because I am the one who put it there. I will tell you its location because you were the only one brave enough to travel alone deep into Mist Men Wood to find the Burning Heart. To believe it was here. Dwarf or otherwise."

Yoki laughed. "I am like a child who likes to find pretty baubles and keep them. I do not even care about the vile demon Lucia the Lilith. If I find the Burning Heart, I only want to brag to the other dwarves about finding it. To prove that, even my old age, I am still smarter than they." She popped the last bite of her bread into her mouth.

Chamuel smiled and gazed into Yoki's eyes.

Peace flowed over Yoki. Her body was no longer stiff. She swallowed the bread and took a drink from her wine flask, never taking her eyes from Chamuel's.

“Ahead, in the center of the clearing, you will find a magnificent oak, the largest in the entire forest. There, you will find the Burning Heart.”

“Why did you put that big ruby there anyway?” Yoki asked. “Seems kind of silly to me.”

“I placed it there in honor of our Lord. In honor of His sacred burning heart.”

“Why did His heart burn? That addles my brain. I can understand if he was in love.”

“He was in love.”

Yoki sat forward. “With whom?”

Chamuel’s eyes glowed. “The human race. He loved you so much. He died for you.”

Yoki cackled. “That I do not understand either.”

“You are part of the human race.”

“Oh no sir! I am not! I am a dwarf.”

Chamuel laughed. The deep bell-like sound echoing through the forest. “You are human, only half the size and live much longer.”

“I would rather not think of myself as human,” Yoki said. “They act silly and make no sense.” She drank again from her wine flask.

“Find the Burning Heart Yoki.” His voice wavered as if he spoke from underwater. “Find the Burning Heart.” Chamuel faded from Yoki’s sight.

Yoki drank the last drop of wine from her flask and gazed into the fire. “That man was an angel but not one from the forest.” She leaned against the tree. The wine made her relaxed and made her mind wander. *How could anyone love another person that deeply? Much less an entire race.* She understood that the Christ died on the cross because in springtime, people told the story. She thought he died because his people falsely accused him and sentenced him to death. However, she did not know what crime he had been convicted of. People had said He was God’s son. Other people believed He was not. She wasn’t sure what she thought. Yoki laid down with her back against the tree. She snuggled deep into her warm cloak. Sleep came instantly.

In the chilly morning, Yoki awoke stiff and sore, but she stood and hung her satchel over her shoulder. Her fire had gone out. She walked toward the clearing. When she reached it, the clearing was bathed in ethereal light. As Chamuel had said, the oak tree stood in the middle. Its trunk was as wide as a house, and its branches reached toward Heaven. But tall, thick, and thorny brambles surrounded the tree.

Yoki pulled her two spades from her satchel and threw them on the ground. Spades could not do a great deal damage to those brambles. How would she reach the tree? She could not dig underneath. It would take a fortnight, and she did not bring enough provisions to last that long. She needed a sharp tool, like an axe. Defeat overwhelmed her. She sat there and stared at the spade for a while, fuming over her rotten luck. A ray of sunlight broke through the clouds and glinted off the edge of her spade. Yoki looked at it. That edge was sharp. It was not like an axe, but it was sharp. She picked up the spade. Time to chop at the bottom of the bramble branches.

Yoki stepped over to the first bramble stem and swung the spade. It sliced cleanly through the stem, and she jumped to the side as it fell to the ground. If the branch caught her, the thorns would rip through her cloak and tear her flesh. Chop. Jump. Drag away. Chop. Jump. Drag away. From side to side. Soon, she had created a small hole, but weariness threatened to make her give up, so she sat and rested for several minutes. Sweat had beaded on her forehead. She removed her cloak, walked over, and set it on her satchel. Back at the hole, she began to chop again. Halfway through the brambles, she needed to rest again, but her body was growing more tired and weak, and her spade grew duller with every swing. She dragged the recently cut branches to the growing pile.

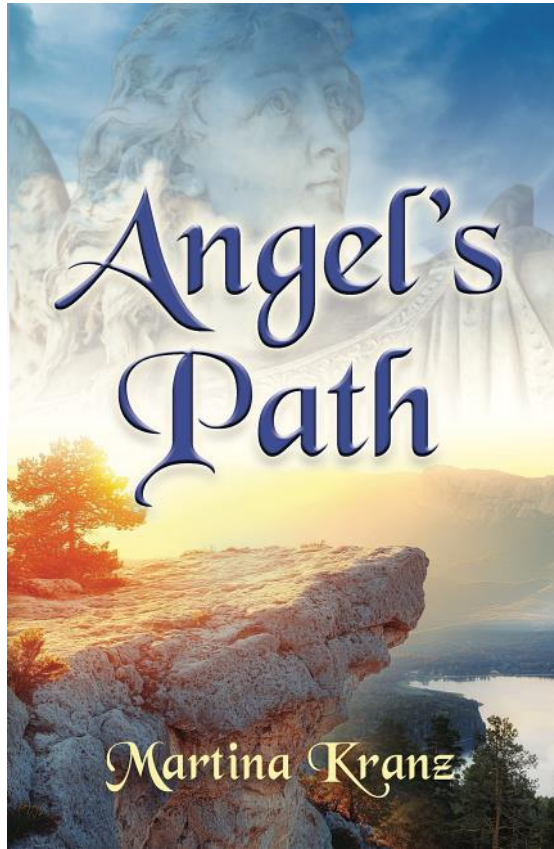
Back inside the tunnel through the brambles, Yoki sat and took a deep breath. It was already midday. If she had to, she would camp here for the night. She had just enough bread for breakfast, and she could fill her flask in the stream nearby. After a longer rest, she chopped again. As night fell, she broke through to the oak tree. The Burning Heart of Mist Men Wood lay nestled in its enormous roots, glowing with a soft red light and almost pulsating like the heart of a living creature. With reverence, Yoki approached the ruby. As her fingers

closed around it, warmth and energy coursed through her. The years seemed to melt away; she stood taller, her strength returned, and her mind cleared. More than her physical rejuvenation, she felt a profound connection to the world around her.

Yoki walked back through the tunnel. She tucked the Burning Heart of Mist Men Wood into her satchel and donned her cloak. Shivers racked her body. After the heat of the day and the sweat that soaked her clothes, the chill cooled her too quickly. Digging in her satchel, she removed her flint, piece of iron, and a second wad of straw to start a fire. There was no need to look for tinder. It lay right in front of her. She took several bramble branches, cut them in half with her spade, and stacked them. Soon, a fire blazed high and warmed her body. Before she lay down, she stepped inside the loop of her satchel strap and wrapped it around her waist. If anyone or anything tried to take her satchel, they would need to take her along with it and be ready for a fight...

About the Author

Martina was born and raised in western Pennsylvania, where the forests, hills, and mountains inspire her imagination. The military transplanted her to Minot, North Dakota, where she lives with her husband, Ed, and her son, Nicholas. Since childhood, she has always loved reading and writing. Martina earned a bachelor's degree in English from Minot State University and a master's degree in library and information science from PennWest University in Pennsylvania.



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