

The cover art is a vibrant, comic-style illustration. A woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a grey hoodie, is the central figure. She has a determined and slightly fearful expression, looking towards the viewer. She is holding a black handgun across her chest. The background is a dense forest with tall, thin trees. In the foreground, several dinosaur heads are visible, some with their mouths open as if roaring. The color palette is dominated by warm oranges and yellows, suggesting a sunset or sunrise, contrasted with the cooler blues and purples of the shadows and dinosaur skin. The entire scene is framed by a white, stylized archway.

▪ EDITED BY ▪
ADDIE J. KING
ALANA JOLI ABBOTT

▪ AN ANTHOLOGY ▪

NEVER TOO OLD TO SAVE THE WORLD

▪ FEATURING STORIES FROM ▪

JOHN F. ALLEN ▪ J.D. BLACKROSE ▪ JIM C. HINES
MAURICE BROADDUS ▪ SARAH HANS ▪ R.J. SULLIVAN
KATHRYN IVEY ▪ ERICKA KAHLER ▪ VASEEM KHAN
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JAYMIE WAGNER ▪ LASHAWN M. WANAK
LUCY A. SNYDER ▪ LINDA ROBERTSON

NEVER TOO OLD TO SAVE THE WORLD

Edited by
Alana Joli Abbott and Addie J. King

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Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler
Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott

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Cover Design: Jeremy D. Mohler
Interior Layout: Mikael Brodu

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— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

<i>"Lean In: The Lord of Hell Is Coming"</i> by Ericka Kahler	5
<i>"Big Momma Saves the World"</i> by Maurice Broaddus	18
<i>"A Legacy of Ghosts"</i> by Sarah Hans	37
<i>"The M.A.M.I. Incident"</i> by Guadalupe García McCall	54
<i>"Adya and the Messengers"</i> by Jaymie Wagner	71
<i>"Soccer Mom Saves the World"</i> by Addie J. King	95
<i>"My Roots Run Deep"</i> by John F. Allen	111
<i>"It's My Nature"</i> by JD Blackrose	130
<i>"Truthteller"</i> by Linda Robertson	143
<i>"Utopia"</i> by Vaseem Khan	170
<i>"Jackalope Wives"</i> by Ursula Vernon	185
<i>"Granny"</i> by R.J. Sullivan	201
<i>"Launch Day Milkshakes"</i> by Jim C. Hines	216
<i>"The Sunspear"</i> by Alexandra Pitchford	223
<i>"Once a Queen"</i> by Alana Joli Abbott	238
<i>"By the Works of Her Hands"</i> by LaShawn M. Wanak	249
<i>"All the World's Treasures"</i> by Kimberly Pauley	265
<i>"Strange Wings"</i> by Kathryn Ivey	281
<i>"The Mountain Witch"</i> by Lucy A. Snyder	295

**LEAN IN: THE LORD
— OF HELL IS COMING —
by Ericka Kahler**

Vincent followed the man he was pretty sure was a demon into the office of the CEO of MA Culpepper, LLC. It unnerved him that they both wore similar suits, though the demon's tie was bright crimson silk while his was a boring polyester navy blue. Vincent adjusted his tie tighter against his Adam's apple. His fingers gripped the handle of the briefcase as he sat in the chair the demon gestured to.

Mary Ann Culpepper breezed in behind the demon. "Thank you, Dipshit," Mary Ann said. Vincent blinked in surprise, but realized she was talking to the demon, not him. He shifted his eyes to the creature. Instead of going on a demonic rampage, it simply nodded its head at Mary Ann and left the room. She sat down into an over-sized leather chair that vaguely resembled a throne, despite being an ordinary executive office chair.

"So, Mister..." she trailed off expectantly.

"Uh, Vincent Dunferline." He fumbled his briefcase onto the small table next to his chair. It tipped over and crashed to its side

on the polished veneer. He patted it nervously before looking up at Mary Ann again. Her hand was stretched toward him, inviting him into a handshake. He took a very deep breath before reaching out and clasping it. Her hand felt warm and soft. Ordinary.

"I have a very busy day, Vincent. Can I call you Vincent?" Mary Ann asked.

This was it. This was the moment he'd been preparing for his entire adult life. He took a deep breath. "Mary Ann Culpepper, you've been chosen."

She tilted her head to the side. "Wait, you aren't the guy from the IRS?"

"Oh, I am," he said. "But I am also a member of an ancient order that is charged with saving the human race from the demon incursions. I took your case so I could make contact with you and tell you about your sacred duty."

Mary Ann sat up straight in her chair, then let out a huff of breath. "Well, finally."

Vincent blinked. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Hold on a sec," she pushed a button. "The IRS auditor is also a member of the Order. I'm going to need you to make some more room on my schedule for him."

"The Lord of Hell is coming," a deep, gritty voice said through the speaker.

"I know. Today of all days, right? Thank you, Dipshit." Mary Ann sat back. "So you finally figured it out. You picked a rather inconvenient day to show up, but I think I can make it work. Should make the IRS audit a bit easier, so that's a bonus. Come on, make your pitch."

"My pitch? I don't think you understand. I am a member of the Order of St. Anthony of the Tomb, and we've been searching for the Chosen One, the one prophecy tells us has the power to see the demons—"

“Wait, wait,” Mary Ann leaned forward toward him. “I started this company three years ago, and I met Dipshit two years before that. Seems like your Order doesn’t have a very efficient process for locating your Chosen One. But anyway, you were saying, about a prophecy?”

Vincent sat on the edge of his chair. “Once a generation a woman is born who is the inheritor of the legacy of St. Anthony. She has the power to identify and slay the demons hiding in our world. The Chosen One is the only one who can save us from the demon hordes coming out of Hell. Our Order is charged to find you and teach you how to use your gifts to protect humanity.”

Mary Ann sighed in a sort of nostalgia. She glanced down at her watch. “Don’t worry about your prophecy, I got it covered.”

“Got it... covered?”

Mary Ann twisted her head to look over at the door. “It might be faster if we covered the Chosen One stuff and the supposed labor law violations at the same time. The Lord of Hell is coming, and my afternoon is pretty booked.”

“So, um, you know about the demons?”

Mary Ann snorted. “Obviously. Most of my labor force is demons.”

“WHAT?” Vincent took an unsteady breath and glanced around the office. He’d been right; the man escorting him in here had been a demon. He popped the locks holding his briefcase closed and pulled out his case file for the audit. Flipping it open, he scanned the corporate summary he’d prepared on MA Culpepper, LLC. The paper fluttered at the edges as he re-read the information. “You have over 150 employees.”

“Independent contractors.”

“What?”

“Legally, they aren’t employees, they’re independent contractors.”

Vincent looked up from his folder. Mary Ann held out a hand and gestured at his folder. “The audit? We can do that part first if

you like. It's the official position of my company that the demons are independent contractors, who are responsible for their own social security and Medicare taxes. I'll have Dipshit bring in the records." She hit a button on her desk phone. It buzzed. "Bring the 1099 forms and payroll ledgers," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Vincent glanced toward the door. He had to lower his folder back to the table to keep his hands from shaking. "You're saying there are almost 150 demons, just in this building alone?"

"Yeah. You and your Order didn't notice?"

Vincent closed his eyes a moment, mentally shifting from the page of numbers in his hand to the last time he'd updated the Order's number. "We...uh. Well. We can't see them, and the demon infestation fluctuates periodically. We just thought there had been a decline in demon-related—wait, *you're* tracking the numbers of demons on Earth?"

He caught Mary Ann's eyeroll before she answered. "Of course I keep track. They get pretty violent if left to their own devices. I think of them like toddlers. Set a few rules, make sure they know you're enforcing them, and provide plenty of rewarding activities to fill their time so they don't destroy everything they touch."

Vincent gasped, and he felt his mouth drop open in a moment of shock. As soon as he realized he was sitting there gaping at her like a stunned fish, he snapped his mouth closed again. He'd wanted to seem cool and competent, but Mary Ann must have seen his reaction, because her earnest expression turned into a smirk.

"Oh, you assumed the only way to handle demons was to bind them and kill them? You're obviously not mothers. Tempting as it is, we're forced to find other solutions. Ultimately, that works out better for humanity."

"With the demons?"

"With the toddlers. But turns out, works like a charm on demons, too."

The door opened, and the man who had originally escorted Vincent through the office entered with a large stack of file folders. Mary Ann pointed at the table in front of Vincent, and Dipshit—heaven help him, now *he* was thinking of the demon by that name—set them down next to his briefcase. He then stepped back to stand next to Mary Ann.

Vincent stared at the two of them. He was so good at arguing, at poking holes in defenses, in bringing people around to his point of view—and all of that had abandoned him. He knew he should be feeling something, but his mind couldn't process the unexpected turn this conversation had taken. "I prepared for this. I thought of every argument to convince you demons are real. I practiced for weeks. And when I finally get the words out, you— You already know." He stuttered to a stop.

Mary Ann went on as if she didn't notice the seismic shift of his reality. "Of course I know. I can see them. It's part of the Chosen One gig. It was my first clue, actually. I noticed my first demon, Dipshit here, at the park when I took my kids to get out some of the excess energy they always seem to have. At first, he manifested as distorted space, where the air seemed to have molecules big enough for me to see, swirling around each other like water in a flowing river."

"The Order calls it the Roil," Vincent found himself saying on autopilot. He'd rehearsed this, too, not knowing how much she would be open to learning in their first meeting. He shook his head to clear the fog. "When they manifest. We call it the Roil."

Mary Ann snorted. "That's dumb. I'm not calling it that. So anyway, there I am watching this thing appear right next to my children, who are screaming like demons in the little plastic tube slide. I had no idea what it was or where it came from, so I did what any good mother would do and went to collect my kids. But by the time I got there, there's this creepy guy standing near, and his face looks all wrong. Deformed and grotesque."

Beside her, Dipshit growled. Vincent tensed, waiting to see what Dipshit would do. But then Mary Ann put up a hand, her face contrite.

“No, wait, I’m sorry. I am sorry. I’m not supposed to use language like that to describe how I perceive demons. It’s hurtful.”

“You’re being politically correct with demons,” Vincent blurted out before he could stop himself.

“It’s not politically correct,” Dipshit’s low voice put in. “It’s part of the corporate communication agreement.”

Vincent shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I’m not sure I heard that correctly—corporate communication agreement? You’re the Chosen One. You can’t have demons working for you.”

Mary Ann’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. “Is that a legal opinion? Because I’m not sure how your religious beliefs pertain to my employment practices.” Beside her, Dipshit snickered. She patted his sleeve, and his face settled into neutrality. “But I got off-track. I was telling you how Dipshit and I first met. So there he is, and I can tell he isn’t just some creepy guy. There was this whole dangerous aura around him, as well as the face, what’s the word...?” She tapped on Dipshit’s arm.

“The alternative aesthetic.”

“Yes. His face, with its alternative aesthetic. Then he took a step toward my kids. I was afraid if I tried to just walk away he’d hurt us, so I got up in his face and yelled, ‘Back off, Dipshit!’”

Vincent jumped back in his seat. Surely, this would be the thing to set the demon off on a killing spree. Instead, Dipshit laughed. “What did I say to you, again?”

Mary Ann smiled. “You said, ‘Dipshit. That’s so rude. I like it. You may call me Dipshit.’”

Dipshit grinned. “And she did. She repeated it many times during her tirade about what she was going to do to me if I touched her children. It was wonderful. When they hire in, she names every new demon that comes to work here. Just like she did me.”

Mary Ann leaned toward Vincent. "I give them rude names. Anything that would make a twelve year old giggle. I think it appeases their anti-social instincts to have a name that shouldn't be said in a professional setting. The latest worker satisfaction surveys indicate the naming ceremony is one of their favorite things about working here."

Vincent reached out to touch the edge of his briefcase. Inside, he saw the artifacts he'd brought, to show her, to prove her noble destiny. Next to it was the very ordinary looking stack of manila file folders Dipshit had brought in, full of 1099 forms, they claimed. His briefcase held the cherished treasures of the Order, yet they didn't have any place here, among a building full of demons with a corporate communication agreement and welcoming ceremonies. How could he pull them out now? "We— I— The Order must have made a mistake. You can't be the Chosen One. The Chosen One slays demons, she doesn't employ them."

Mary Ann vented a huge sigh of frustration. "They're legally listed as independent contractors." She pursed her lips and tilted her head, then continued in a calmer tone. "Demons can't get social security numbers. Yet. We've got a demon about to graduate law school who has some exciting ideas around requesting asylum status, but that's not worked out yet."

Vincent started shaking his head in tiny motions back and forth, as if by repeating it enough times he could deny the reality of demon immigration she'd so calmly proposed. "Demons can't be reasoned with," he said. "They are agents of chaos and evil on this earth."

Dipshit growled again, this time staring down at Vincent. His hand started clenching into a fist. Vincent inched his hand toward the briefcase on the table, wondering if he could grab the holy cross before the demon could grab him. Mary Ann crossed her legs and leaned back, letting her foot bob up and down. He thought she looked like she was waiting for something.

“That’s a very insulting stereotype,” Dipshit said after a moment. Mary Ann clapped her hands together lightly. “Well done.”

“The corporate communication agreement does not allow me to rip his head off,” Dipshit mumbled.

Mary Ann handed him a coffee mug. Dipshit crushed it in a one-handed grip. Vincent jerked as pieces of ceramic crashed to the floor, breaking on the hard surface. Dipshit stomped on the pieces until there was nothing left. Mary Ann waved Dipshit to the door. He took a few more moments to glare at Vincent, but finally left.

Mary Ann closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “You hurt his feelings.”

“How did he do that? There’s nothing left of it. Not even dust.” Vincent leaned over, searching for any remnants of the cup on the floor. Nothing.

“Surely your folder there lists what this company does.”

Vincent pulled himself away from the blank, empty spot on the floor and turned to the folder lying out on the table. “Umm... construction.”

“Well, yes. But we’re best known for demolitions work. I can undercut the competition by twenty percent because I don’t have any waste disposal costs.”

Vincent found himself intrigued, despite himself. “What do they do with it?”

Mary Ann’s face tightened. “I don’t know, exactly. Dipshit tried to explain it once, but he kept talking about unmaking, as if that was something anyone could do. He was a little surprised I didn’t know how. I brought in some scientists once to study the unmaking process, but truthfully, what they told me didn’t make any better sense than Dipshit’s explanation. They all got very excited and started spewing physics things like ‘conservation of matter’ at me. The best I understand it, the demons are breaking down the molecular structure and turning it into atoms, or something. The

demons assure me it's not dangerous. The scientists aren't so sure, because they can't figure out how the demons do it without things exploding. But I'm thinking of branching out into hazardous waste disposal as soon as those scientists can assure me there won't be any negative side effects from the unmaking."

Vincent, again despite himself, let the possibilities fill his head. The way Mary Ann was talking, demons could solve humanity's problems, not just go on a genocidal killing spree until they were stopped. It ran counter to everything the Order had taught him. Not in the details, that was the strangest part. She didn't deny the demons were demons, and she claimed they had all the powers the Order had carefully deduced they had from centuries of written reports. She just—used their abilities toward her own ends. What was wrong with that?

"That is blasphemy," he muttered, more to himself than her. But she must not have realized that, because her face suddenly grew more intense as she leaned in to respond.

"It's the corporate dream," Mary Ann said. "Amoral, soulless employees who thrive doing the work the company needs them to do? Demons enjoy both mind-numbing, tediously repetitive tasks and violent destruction. It would have been blasphemy not to take the big, fat business opportunity Dipshit and his kind presented." She paused. "Look, I was in the middle of a messy divorce with two kids and a crappy, dead end job. And then I started to see these demons everywhere I went. And they were acting out all the rage I felt inside, but I didn't have the luxury of destroying things to make me feel better. I had to build a life for my kids. So I used the resources I had available. I put the demons to work. I like to think they, and I, can make the world a better place."

Vincent looked at her, but his mind was too busy to see the woman in front of him anymore. She didn't seem to have any idea of the danger she had put herself and all of humanity in. He tried

to think of some way to tell her, something that she might understand. "But demons can't be trusted."

Mary Ann smiled and held one of her hands out, palm up. "Turns out they take to therapy really well." She flipped her hand over and started gesturing as she continued. "The tedium of corporate day-to-day tasks soothes them, and spots on the demolition crews allow them to actualize their violent tendencies in socially constructive ways. My crew of demons can tear apart a skyscraper down to the molecular level, so there is literally nothing but a bare patch of dirt left when they're done. Now that is the service our clients pay a shit ton of money for. And the demons love it."

One hundred fifty demons all working in concert, doing something they loved? Vincent's stomach churned. That number was far more than the Order had calculated, and they were being used to destroy entire buildings. But, if the algorithms he'd written to detect demonic violence patterns were correct, they weren't doing much else. After a moment, he asked, "If you have 150 demons working here, how many have you sent back to their home in Hell?"

"Sent home?" Mary Ann frowned. "I think, like three, but that was before the therapists came on staff and our HR department has really got the hang of rolling on the new arrivals. I think word's gotten out, and they are leaving Hell to come here."

Vincent grabbed the knot of his tie with a shaking hand. Some of what she said made sense. How wonderful would it be if the demons were no longer a threat? Becoming productive members of society? Solving ecological problems the human race had created for itself? Could demons actually be made—good? For a moment Mary Ann's vision bloomed in his head. He knew the numbers, and how to balance the books. What she was talking about tilted them, turned them upside down, and shook the foundations of theology. The universe, even. Mary Ann Culpepper, saving the world through demons.

Or destroying it. She said it herself. The demons were coming here, and she encouraged them to destroy things. Did she really have the power to contain that destruction? He remembered the priest who had inducted him into the Order. His favorite line was “The Devil won’t come as a beast; he’ll come in a business suit.” Vincent was pretty sure the old man quoted it more often when he was around because he worked for the IRS. Perhaps Vincent had let himself believe the works of the Devil would be easier to spot, despite his mentor’s rather pointed warning.

He’d been silent too long. Mary Ann was frowning and tapping her foot on the carpet. He tried to backtrack to the conversation again. Beast in a business suit. “So are you paying them overtime in accordance with the employment laws?” It just burst out of him.

The smile came back to her face. “You’re sneaky. If I admit to paying them per hour, then you can argue they aren’t independent contractors.”

“Actually, no,” Vincent admitted. “Independent contractors can, in fact, get paid by the hour. Like a plumber or an electrician. The usual test is if you are providing their tools or workspaces, or if you dictate the hours they work to complete their contract. As an independent contractor, they have the right to set their own schedule. Technically. It can be a fine line sometimes.” He snapped his mouth closed. It shouldn’t be fun to talk shop with the Chosen One. IRS shop, not demon slaying shop. But he had the picture of Dipshit in his head, and suddenly the idea of slaying that demon didn’t sound so appealing, either. He’d been so courteous, until Vincent himself had ruined it.

Mary Ann chuckled. “It sure seems like there should be a different set of rules for demons. Totally off the record, I will admit it’s been challenging negotiating the right balance of motherhood, CEO, and demon rehabilitation. The paperwork is a nightmare. But I assure you, it’s all in order. I pay some very good accountants for that. We have proper 1099 forms for all of them, and shell

companies to disguise the fact that a demon doesn't have a social security number."

Vincent let the words run over him, staring blankly at her. All he could think to say was, "Aren't you scared?"

She leaned back in her chair, clasping her hands together in her lap and looking down at them. "I was, at first. They were intimidating, and I was alone, and I could barely keep the house from falling apart as Dipshit terrorized the neighborhood. But I realized something. Men save the world by destroying their enemies. Women save the world by making them not enemies anymore. I've given the demons a purpose and a common goal, and in turn they have made me a better person. Not to mention wealthier and more powerful than I ever imagined."

The phone beeped. "Ma'am, the Lord of hell has arrived," a deep voice said.

"Oh," Mary Ann said. "He's early."

"No, ma'am."

"Thank you, Dipshit."

"Yes, ma'am."

Almost as soon as she'd finished speaking, Dipshit opened the office door. Mary Ann looked up at the demon as he gently closed the door behind him. "Are you ready, Dipshit?" she said.

"I left the Lord of Hell waiting in the lobby until you completed your business with—" Dipshit cut himself off and gestured toward Vincent, still with shock in his chair.

"Thank you. Please escort Mr. Dunferline to HR so he can examine our vendor contracts." She brought her gaze back to Vincent. "I trust you'll find everything is in order."

Vincent took a steadying breath. "I—I suppose I will. Good Luck, Ms. Culpepper. If you ever need anything from the Order..."

"I doubt it," she said, her face softening into a smile. "But thank you, anyway. If my way doesn't work, maybe you can teach me karate or something."

Dipshit snickered, but quickly brought his face back under control. "This way, sir."

Mary Ann buzzed her intercom and asked another demon to escort the Lord of Hell to her office. Vincent stood and gathered his briefcase, full of papers and artifacts he never needed to use. He fumbled his legal pad when he realized the page was completely blank. He hadn't taken any notes at all. Feeling Dipshit's eyes on him, Vincent gripped it between his fingers and let the hand fall to his side. He'd take notes once he got out of the room that would shortly host the Lord of Hell. He followed Dipshit toward a door on the opposite end of the room from where he'd originally entered. As he went out, he felt a malevolent presence, almost a physical touch on the back of his body. He looked back.

The Lord of Hell stepped in. Vincent could feel it was him, even though the body standing there simulated a middle-aged white man with salt-and-pepper hair. A perfect seeming of a high-powered CEO or equally respected businessman. Dipshit tugged his arm, drawing him away from the scene. Vincent flinched and dropped his briefcase. As he bent to pick it up, he heard Mary Ann Culpepper address the Devil.

"Thank you for meeting with me. Are you interested in a franchise opportunity?"