

PROTECT THE CHILDREN
by Maria V. Snyder

“The money?” The man held out a clean, manicured hand. A startling contrast to his torn and grubby clothes.

“Don’t you want to see my credentials, Dr. Silver?” I asked, hoping this man was indeed the infamous Doctor Samuel Silver.

“Doctor.” His hoarse laughter turned into a thick coughing fit. Shoulders heaving with effort, he spit a blood-laced wad of phlegm onto the cracked sidewalk. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he said, “I’ve no interest in who you are or what your agenda is. All I want is your money.”

His pale blue eyes scanned the street for the fifth time since I had approached. I copied his gesture. It was neither the best neighborhood nor the worst. Run down and abandoned, it was a pocket of the city bypassed by technology, and was, to the casual observer, uninhabited.

I pulled out a bulging envelope, my payment for his exclusive interview. He snatched it out of my hands and thumbed through the money. Pulling my business card out of the bills, he shoved the envelope into a pocket. After a glance, he handed the card back to me.

“Okay, Ms. Glenda Darren, I’m not staying on the street any longer. If you want your story, come with me.”

He turned around and darted toward the doorway of a forsaken warehouse. Once inside, he wove his way through the rubble without pause, and without looking back to see if I followed.

In the murky light, I stumbled, tripped, and banged my shins. But I wasn’t about to let him out of my sight. He had my newspaper’s money, and the biggest story of my career.

It had taken me months to find him. He never stayed in one city more than two weeks. His loyal colleagues were adept at dropping false leads, having spent too much time with the maze rats in their laboratories, I thought sourly. Only when the big bucks were offered did I receive a nibble of information. And despite what Dr. Silver had said earlier, he cared very much about who I was. The personnel files at the newspaper had been hacked, and my personal security software had alerted me that someone had run my name through a background check.

I concentrated on keeping up with him as he switched buildings, changed floors multiple times, and doubled back. When he finally stopped, he was huffing with the effort, and I was lost. Smiling, he opened a massive steel door. Inside was a spot of sanity amidst the ruins. A neat, clean, well-decorated office. He gestured toward a chair in front of an antique desk.

As I sat, I scanned the room. My disorientation deepened. I felt I had been transported back thirty years to an obsolete doctor’s office. Medical texts filled the shelves, out-of-date magazines were scattered about, old-fashioned medical instruments like a stethoscope and thermometer hung like decorations on the wall. No computer, no scanning table and no injection machines.

The loud metallic clank of the door’s lock sent a repulsion rolling down my spine, as if a large insect had climbed up my back. I turned my head in time to see Dr. Silver pocket the key.

“Alright, Ms. Darren, you have one hour as promised.” He sank into the overstuffed chair across from me.

I placed my recorder on the scratched surface of the desk and turned it on. "Why did you begin Project Protection?" I asked. The question had burned inside me for years and tasted hot and acidic in my mouth. Life would be completely different if he hadn't meddled. Much had been written about his research and the wide spread effects of his discovery, but there hadn't been any articles on his motivations. And I wanted to know.

"Don't you know?" he countered.

"No." I wanted to shake him until the rest of his gray hair fell out, but instead I clenched my hands and pushed them into my lap.

"Why ever not? Haven't you read your own newspaper's headlines from forty years ago? They were screaming for help. Disease. Birth defects. Abuse. Accidents. Shootings. The children were dying. 'Protect the children' the public demanded." He slammed a fist on the desk. "My research into genetics discovered the answer. Instead of being banned by the government like all the other genetic breakthroughs, it was literally hailed as the messiah. It was implemented before anyone could properly imagine the consequences."

I shook my head. He had misunderstood my question. "But you had been working on the project for years before that. Why did you start on that particular line of research?"

"You're hoping for some heart-warming story? A child's death that propelled me on my mission of mercy." He clutched his hands to his heart, acting like a grieving father. Then his expression dropped from his face. "Sorry, no tears for your exclusive. I was after the elixir of life and all the fame and fortune that comes with it. The protection was a misfire, but it ended up being quite useful."

A sudden flush of fury shot through me. "What about the consequences? Didn't you think about them?" My fingernails bit into my hands. I had envisioned myself behaving professionally during this interview, remaining detached from the subject matter.

"Yes, I did." He stood abruptly and crossed to his bookcase. Hidden behind a wooden panel was a row of bottles. "Drink?" He waved a glass in my direction.

"No."

He poured himself some scotch, then made a circuit of the room. The ice in his glass clinked as he moved. "Each time I had mentioned a potential problem it was quickly dismissed as minor. I was accused of being difficult, of being greedy by holding back the technology. I decided the problems would be addressed as they arose, so..." He shrugged and took a long drink. "I gave society what they wanted."

Dr. Silver appeared calm, unconcerned about how he had ruined society. Not one bit remorseful over the anguish he had caused and was still causing. "But what about..." Unable to remain still, I stood up. "The overcrowded schools? The Kamikaze gangs? The Euthanasia gangs? The waning effect?"

"I warned them. Protect the children, they demanded, so I did. Overcrowded schools would be wonderful, society said, we'll just raise taxes. Kamikazes? Well, adolescent suicide rates actually dropped since success of suicide was rare. Only the mentally unbalanced got creative about it."

Dr. Silver drew closer to me. The sharp smell of alcohol sliced his breath. "Euthanasia gangs. Well, that's just a new twist on an old problem isn't it? The waning effect." His bushy gray eyebrows jumped as if he had just realized something. "How old are you?"

“I paid to ask questions, not answer them.”

He coughed out a laugh. “My guess would be twenty, maybe twenty-one.”

My face must have confirmed his conjecture because he choked some more. Taking a swallow of his drink, he backed away and sat in his chair. “Your protection is about to run out. That’s why you’re so interested in the project. You’ll soon be a normal girl, subjected to every cold and flu virus floating around.”

“This isn’t about me.” I tried to remain reasonable despite the feather of fear brushing my stomach. Not only would I be hosting every virus, but my body’s rapid healing would also be gone. Contemplating that a broken bone could take months to heal was like considering torture. Scientists had tried to extend the protection, but so far, they had failed. Once the body stopped growing, the extraordinary physical defenses ceased to work.

“I’m collecting information for an article.” A comment aimed at Dr. Silver, but also a reminder to myself.

“Do me a favor?” he asked.

I stared; unsure in which direction he was headed. I had no desire to help this man.

“Don’t whine,” he said anyway. “Just because you get the sniffles for the first time in your life is no reason to act like you’re dying. Do some research on the genetic diseases I’ve made extinct. Look at the symptoms and life spans of those horrid abnormalities while you’re blowing your nose. That should make you feel better.”

I sat down with as much dignity as I could muster. The urge to wrap my hands around his throat would have to wait until he had answered all my questions. “Dr. Silver, can we get back to the interview?”

“I didn’t know we had strayed.”

Ignoring his comment, I asked, “How long did it take for you to go from Nobel Prize winner to wanted criminal?”

“About thirteen years. Once the first generation of protected children reached adolescence all hell broke loose.” He smiled at the memory. “Teenagers setting up a youth government, bullying the adults. Not appreciating the priceless gift of the protection until after it wore off.” He laughed. “They were right on schedule. Enough time for me to set up this elaborate underground network. I disappeared six months before society could roast me as their scapegoat.”

“On schedule? You planned it?” I clutched the armrests. Maybe I could use the chair to knock him unconscious. This monster deserved to be arrested.

“Predicted it. Big difference.”

Dr. Silver stared at his empty glass for a moment. Then he shifted his gaze to me, examining. My level of discomfort grew until I felt like I was sitting naked in front of him.

“Ms. Darren, some of this information is available in the newspaper’s database. What do you really want to know?”

I leaned forward. “I want to know how you sleep at night?”

"I sleep fine. Thanks for asking."

Dr. Silver went back to the bar. When he finished pouring he spun around, his filled glass poised half way to his lips. "Let me ask you a question."

He threw me off. This wasn't how I had envisioned the interview. Despite what I had said earlier, I nodded.

"If society is so ruined and so awful, as you claim, then why doesn't the current breeding generation refuse the protection for their children?"

"They're scared," I said immediately. "A parent will not have an unprotected child in a classroom full of protected children. Only completely banning the treatment will work."

"Are you going to protect your children?"

He stepped close to me. His eyes were like twin needles, probing into the depths of my skull.

I stammered. "I'm not having children." It was lame. I should have declared it none of his business.

He bent over, his nose inches from mine. I pressed back into the seat.

"My remorse or lack of remorse is not the real reason you're here. Fear, strong and tasteable, surrounds you like a coffin. You're terrified of being unprotected."

Rational thoughts scattered. My breath locked. Before I could form a reply, a thunderous rumble shook the walls. A bookcase swung inward, and another man strode into the room.

"The youth government has us surrounded," he said.

Dr. Silver laughed. "Good for them."

"Aren't you worried?" I asked.

"No. The protection enhances the body, not the mind. They're still a bunch of kids, easily outmaneuvered," Dr. Silver said, finishing his drink. "Although, this ends the interview,"

I jumped up. "One last thing," I called.

"Make it quick."

"Do you know how to extend the protection?"

"Of course." Intent on leaving, he walked toward the bookcase door.

"Then why don't you help us?"

He paused and looked back. "You're no longer children."

Fiction by Maria V. Snyder

"Protect the Children" appeared in the Spring 2005 "Consequences" issue of Eye Contact.

Bio: Maria V. Snyder is a meteorologist turned writer whose adult fantasy novel, [Poison Study](#), will appear in October 2005 from Luna Fantasy.