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Evie (Evangeline Everton) is seventeen. Her mother has recently died, and she has never known her father. Evie is currently staying with her mother’s identical twin sister, Miriam, and is struggling to come to terms with her grief, and also with the strange changes happening to her body.

What Evie is going through is more than being ill at ease with her changing body, and more than having to come to terms with the death of her mother. She has experienced an unexpected major growth spurt, and has peculiar sensations similar to electrical currents, episodes of great physical strength and of extraordinarily fast reflexes, as well as a disturbing recurring dream in which she is desperate to protect someone in acute danger.

The assault on her long-time friend, Kitty Gallagher, sets off a synthetic gene in Evie’s DNA which turns her into a Shield, drawn to do all she can to defend Kitty, even to the point of contemplating murder. This gene gives Evie a range of enhanced abilities, including heightened reflexes, magnified senses, a higher pain threshold, and certain precognition abilities, such as the power both to project her own memories to people, and to access memories from others. But strong as Evie’s instinct is to protect, there is an unknown someone with an equally strong desire to destroy Kitty, and whom Evie must find before her friend is murdered.

To make this situation harder, she is the only person who can sense the threat to Kitty. Could this threat be Richard, beneath whose good looks and charming manner lies a capacity to be violent? Or is it even closer to home – Kitty’s brother Jamie, with whom Evie has had a relationship, but who humiliated Evie in front of his friends? And where does Jamie’s current girlfriend fit into the scenario?

The author sets up Evie firmly as a character, before introducing the reader to the background of what is happening. The inherited synthetic gene originally came from an experiment several generations previously, by an organisation called the Affinity Project, which continues to monitor and try to control the descendants of the original experiment.

This experiment was designed to create the perfect soldier: one who was immune to pain, fear and illness, who could recover in a superhuman time from injury, and who could sense the enemy’s move in advance. In the original trial, soldiers were given the synthetic gene, Optimal, and those who responded with the expected signs of ‘sensitivity’ were monitored. These respondents were either Shields, with the instinct to protect, or Strikers, who would attack. Strikers later mutated to become the Stray, and it is a Stray who now threatens Kitty.

Spark raises intriguing questions about choice, and how far we can override what our genes may predispose us to do. It also foregrounds issues about genetic engineering, including what happens when the engineering goes wrong and produces uncontrollable consequences. There is a terrific plot twist towards the end which adds a new dimension to Evie’s sense of self, her relationships, and to who might be the Stray determined to destroy Kitty.

Spark is intriguing and well-written. The present tense adds immediacy, and the narrative style immerses the reader into the excitement, confusion, and sensory nature of what Evie is experiencing, the enjoyable and the frightening. Evie’s recurring dream is especially powerful and plunges the reader immediately into Evie’s world.

Evie is a likeable and engaging heroine, although it is unconvincing for her to describe herself as ‘cosmically useless’, when she has been told that she has unusual abilities, and she has shown that she has some capacity to protect Kitty. I can accept the logic of why the ‘gene modifier’ that Evie has inherited should be drawn towards the ‘strongest candidates’, but I am not sure why conventional good looks should be included with intelligence and strength. The comment ‘Not very PC’ could have done with some more unpacking in my view, without doing any damage to the story. Spark presents a fascinating premise in a well-constructed world, with engaging characters and an enthralling plot. I look forward to seeing how the series develops.

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