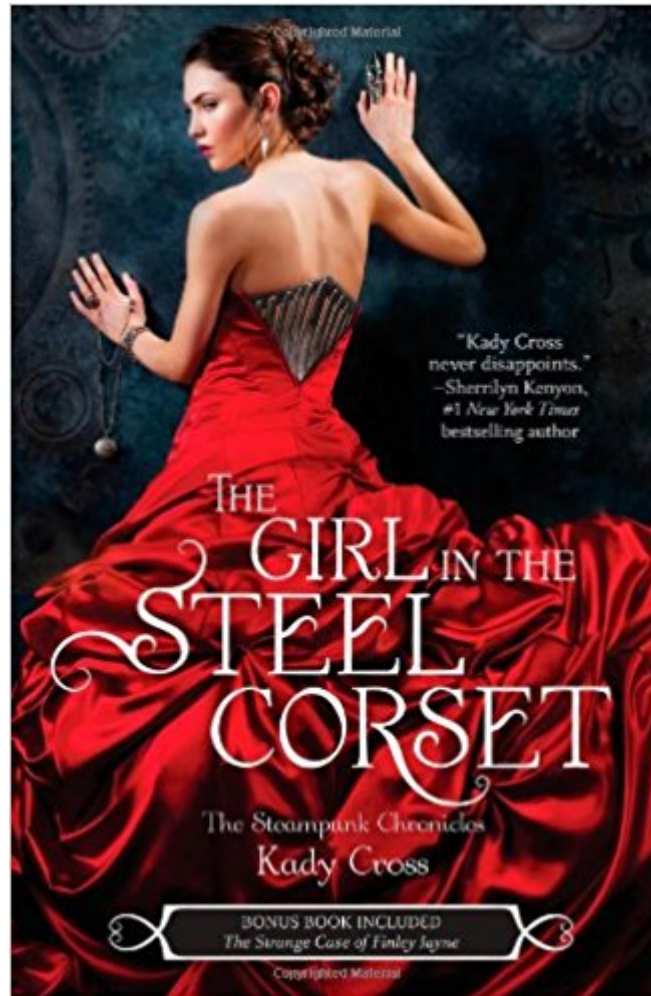




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The Girl In The Steel Corset



Synopsis

In 1897 England, sixteen-year-old Finley Jayne has no one—except the "thing" inside her. When a young lord tries to take advantage of Finley, she fights back. And wins. But no normal Victorian girl has a darker side that makes her capable of knocking out a full-grown man with one punch. Only Griffin King sees the magical darkness inside her that says she's special, says she's one of them. The orphaned duke takes her in from the gaslit streets, against the wishes of his band of misfits. And Finley thinks she might finally be a part of something, finally fit in—until a criminal mastermind known as the Machinist threatens to tear the group apart. Included for the first time in print, meet Finley in her first adventure *The Strange Case of Finley Jayne*, the novella prequel to *The Girl in the Steel Corset*!

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Customer Reviews

Kady Cross, publishing under various names, is a USA TODAY bestselling author of more than twenty books, including Harlequin TEEN's Steampunk Chronicles. She is lucky enough to have a husband who shares her love for the slightly twisted and all things geek, and a houseful of cats with whom she shares her darkest secrets. Her love of books and makeup borders on addiction—of which she never, ever wants to be cured. Visit her on the web at www.alterkate.com or on Twitter: @AlterKates.

London, 1897The moment she saw the young man walking down the darkened hall toward her,

twirling his walking stick, Finley Jayne knew she'd be unemployed before the sun rose. Her third dismissal in as many months. She tensed and slowed her steps, but she did not stop. She kept her head down, but was smart enough not to take her gaze off him. Perhaps he would walk right by her, as though she were as invisible as servants were supposed to be. Felix August-Raynes was the son of her employer. At one and twenty years of age, he was tall and lean with curly blond hair and bright blue eyes. Every woman who saw him called him an angel. Most who knew him thought him the very devil. The other maids in service had warned her about Lord Felix her first day in the house. A mere fortnight ago. He belonged to a gang of privileged ruffians known for their facial piercings and lack of respect for anyone else, especially females. She had been hired to replace the previous girl hurt by the young lord. Rumor had it that the maid had required serious medical attention. Finley didn't court trouble, but part of her—that part that was going to keep her safe, yet get her fired—hoped he'd try something. It was horribly delighted at the prospect of the violence to come. The rest of her was terrified. Were it not for the steel boning of her leather work-corset, she fancied her heart might slam through her ribs it was pounding so hard. Lord Felix smiled, teeth flashing in the dim light as he stopped just a few feet in front of her, blocking the only route to the servants' quarters where she slept. The tiny brass bar that bisected his left eyebrow—and proclaimed him a member of the Dandies—glinted. "Hello, my lovely. I had hoped to run into you." Finley hesitated. Maybe he'd move out of her way and let her pass. Or, a voice in her head whispered—her voice—you could kick his teeth in. She lowered her gaze, not wanting him to see the bloodlust there. Silently, she willed him to let her pass. For his own safety. Instead, he closed the scant distance between them. "You're new, aren't you?" he inquired, moving closer. He was already much too close for propriety and there was no one around to make sure he didn't overstep his bounds. The light on the wall above them flickered as though attuned to the fluttering in Finley's chest. This close, she could smell stale ale, cologne and the undeniable oily scent of mech-boxing on his fine suit. Lord Felix was a great patron of the sport. Though why anyone would want to watch automatons pound the gears out of each other was beyond her. "Please, my lord," she said softly, wincing at the pleading in her tone. Please don't make me hurt you. "I wish to retire. It's late." It was after three in the morning, to be exact. She would have been in bed hours ago were it not for the fact that the darling debutante of the house had demanded her pink riding habit be laundered for the morning. As Lady Alyss's maid, it was Finley's job to take the ensemble down to the laundry where the air was thick with hot steam and the smell of overheated gears. She had washed the clothing and set it to dry. Right now her blouse and short skirts were damp, and her feet were sweating inside her high, thick-soled boots.

She wanted nothing more than to unfasten the many buckles and take them off, along with her corset. She was going to be up early to collect the habit for Lady Alyss to wear. And now this annoying twit stood in her way. Finley didn't like it. The thing inside her truly didn't like it. She used to think of it as an imp on her shoulder, urging her to be naughty, but lately she'd come to think of it as less mischievous and more dangerous. Dangerous to whoever threatened her. Lord Felix propped a palm against the plaster by her head, turning so that he pinned her against the wall with his own body. "What's the hurry?" he asked, beer breath hot on her face. "Don't you like me?" Finley held her tongue. If she opened her mouth she'd tell him exactly what she thought of him, and she needed to keep this employment. She needed to get out of this situation without either of them getting hurt. He slid his other hand behind her, down her back to her backside and squeezed. "Don't you want to make me happy? Smart little girls want to make me happy." Finley turned her head as his face came down toward hers, and narrowly escaped being kissed. His wet mouth landed on her ear instead. She shuddered. "Please, my lord. Let me go." For your own sake. His lips fastened on her neck instead. Nausea rolled through her stomach and then suddenly stopped as she felt his palm against the striped stockings that covered her thigh. He wasn't going to cease. He wasn't going to let her go. He was going to take what he wanted, because that's what rich young men did to girls under their control. But she wasn't under anybody's control. Not even her own. She could feel it fracturing as something deep inside fought to get out. Finley brought both hands up and pushed hard against his chest. He flew backward, hitting the opposite wall with enough force to crack the plaster. Lord Felix stared at her, in both shock and outrage. "You nasty tart," he snarled as he brushed dust from his sleeves. "Like a bit of the rough, do you?" "You've no idea," Finley heard herself reply coolly. "But make no mistake, my lord, I do not like you, so keep those damn hands of yours to yourself." The young man's face reddened and his eyes shone with anger. "Bitch. No guttersnipe servant talks to me that way." He straightened and took a step toward her, shrugging out of his purple velvet frock-coat. "Someone needs to teach you a lesson." She didn't see the blow coming, but she certainly felt it when it hit. Her head jolted back under the force of his fist, striking the wall. Lights danced in the darkness of her eyes as pain shot through her skull. But she did not pass out. It would have been so much better for Lord Felix if she had. She could feel blood trickling from her mouth and she wiped at it with the back of her hand. Vision finally clear, she saw that Lord Felix had also removed his waistcoat and was now rolling up his sleeves. The excited glint in his eye told Finley exactly what kind of lesson he intended her to "learn." Something inside her stretched and pulled; still fighting to get out. There was no point in denying it anymore. She

had been raised in a loving home with her mother and stepfather; a kind and honest man who doted on them both. He would never dream of such violence; no good man would. But Lord Felix August-Raynes was not a good man. And it was time someone taught him a lesson. The warm rush of familiar power brought a slight smile to her battered lips. She gave up all attempts to keep it reined in. It was the only way she'd survive this night with her virtue and bones intact. It was as though she was watching herself from a perch on the ceiling; all she could do was observe as her other self took over. Her boots shifted on the bare floor, right foot forward, left foot back and pointed out. She raised her fists. "Coming back for more, eh?" Felix grinned at her. "I like a little fight in my girls." She grinned at him, causing blood to dribble down her chin. "Then you're going to love me." The voice was hers, but deeper and throatier than she'd ever heard before. It was a dangerous voice, and even Felix paused at the sound of it. Finley, however, did not pause. She drove her fist right into her attacker's throat. He staggered backward, eyes wide with shock as he coughed and choked and struggled for breath. She bounced on her feet, waiting for him to recover. She should run and hide. She should be gasping in fear, lungs constrained by the tight lacing of her corset. But she wasn't afraid anymore and she wasn't about to run. She was going to; But first, a little fun. She hadn't hit the bully as hard as she could have. She was going to let him think he stood a chance first. When Felix recovered enough to come at her again, she was ready for him. He swung and she ducked, landing another punch to his kidneys. When he doubled over, she grabbed his head and brought her knee up fast. Unfortunately, the layers of skirts she wore softened the blow. He struck her in the stomach, knocking the breath from her, and then hit her in the face again. She fell to the floor, rolling just in time to avoid being kicked by one of his boots. She'd never been struck before; not like this. She'd never felt as though someone meant to kill her; or didn't care if they did. She gasped for breath against the polished wood floor, rolling again when he struck out with his foot once more. She moved faster than she should have, the pain from his blows already easing. He called her all kinds of horrible names; guttural and nasty sounding. But instead of making her feel awful or frightening her, they only made her want to hit him all the harder. She pulled herself to her feet. Her stomach and face ached, but not like it should have. It never hurt like it should. Her hands grabbed Lord Felix by the front of his shirt. She pulled him toward her, hard, and smashed her forehead against the bridge of his nose. There was a snapping sound just before he screamed. Finley thrust him backward, satisfaction tickling her when she saw the blood coursing down his face. He was good and mad now. He raised a hand to his nose, and when he saw the blood on his fingers, he made a growling sound in his throat. She'd ruined his pretty face and now he was going to

make her pay for it. She smiled. Or rather, he was going to try to make her pay for it. He came at her again, like a bull. Finley didn't think, she simply reacted and took two quick steps forward. With that slight momentum, she lifted her right boot to the wall and pushed up, grabbing the scrolled brass of the wall sconce for support and whipped her left leg out. She kicked him in the face. He keeled over like a milk bottle knocked off a step, hitting the floor with a solid thump. He lay there, motionless, an imprint of the heel of her boot smack in the middle of his forehead, blood trickling from his already swelling nose. She hopped down from the wall and went to stand over him, victorious and self-satisfied. Adrenaline rushed through her veins, making her practically dance in her boots. Lord Felix had promised to teach her a lesson, but he was the one who had been schooled. He'd think twice before laying a hand on another girl. But Finley's satisfaction was short-lived. In fact, it was over at almost the precise moment when she looked at Lord Felix's face. He was so still, so pale except for the blood. What if he was dead? All the fight whooshed out of her, leaving her trembling and cold in its wake. "What have I done?" she whispered. What you had to. She felt his neck for a pulse, relief engulfing her as she found it. She hadn't killed him. At least she wouldn't hang. But she had still attacked the son of a peer of the realm and there would be consequences. Three jobs in three months and they'd all ended with an experience like this one, although this was by far the worst. She'd been let go from each position because of her behavior, something that had released this thing inside her. Urges to act in a way that was far from civilized, far beyond what she as a young woman should be capable of. They'd bring the law down on her for this. They'd lock her up. Or worse, use her for scientific experiments in New Bethlehem Asylum; Bedlam. And they would experiment on her once they realized she was abnormal. Run, the voice inside her whispered. Run away. Listening to the voice had gotten her into this mess, perhaps this time it would get her out. There was no way Lord Felix wouldn't exact retribution upon her for harming him; either by finishing what he'd started or by bringing the authorities down upon her. There was no way she was going to let him do what he wanted to her. No way she'd risk having her brain dissected for giving him less than what he really deserved. So Finley listened to the voice and ran.

On the run after defending herself, rather forcefully, from a case of attempted rape by her employer's son, Finley Jayne finds herself sheltered by a most unusual group of young people. Griffin King, Duke of Greythorne, had taken over his murdered parents' job of protecting the realm. Together with his friends and allies, Griffin is searching for the Machinist, a man who has the ability to change the programming of automatons. Overall, this was an interesting introduction to the group

who will, I assume become our series' regulars. I thought this was a steampunk X-Men, only to read that the author herself had in mind League of Extraordinary Men plus teen X-Men, so I nailed it! There is an occasional hiccup in the writing, but I think that will be solved with time and experience. Cross' ideas are thrilling and her enthusiasm for the story is obvious. If the reader is ready, willing, and able to throw themselves into the story, I think they will enjoy the trip. I know I did, enough that I've already purchased the next installment in the series. 4.5 out of 5.

I started reading steampunk because of a shift in interests in my life. I cringed when I opened the box and saw it was a Harlequin Teen book... ah well, if I paid attention before I ordered it I would have seen that.... carveat emptor. It's readable, but:

1. "Twilight-esque" love triangle doesn't really develop very much. There's really no question which guy the girl is going to pick.
2. The mysterious Machinist is almost immediately, transparently apparent.
3. The outcome of the sinister plot is also transparent; Machinist with robots, missing wax figure... hmmm.
4. Foiling of the plot? Not a lot of tension, and the outcome is never in doubt.
5. The resolution of the character battling her two halves is pretty "well, that was easy-ish".

Is Staples® aware of this? Serious? The strongest guy in the world (Thor), the smartest girl in the world (probably Henry Pym, maybe Tony Stark), the fastest and accurate gun slinger in the world (Hawkeye), a woman with an uncontrollable dark side that becomes controllable without much effort (the Hulk), lead by the most powerful mystic in the world (oh... and he's rich, handsome, well connected, and high nobility to boot) (okay... a cross between Dr. Strange and Iron Man) secretly save the world?

This was a book club choice for a challenge to read a steampunk novel. This book was interesting because it was a genre I had never read before. I really loved the short story (100 pg.) that came with the book. The book itself was good but I felt like I would have liked it more if it was about half the length. I don't think anything would have been lost from the story if it had been edited down more. I would recommend to anyone that likes steampunk novels.

Excellent plot line and character development. Just enough love triangle to not be annoying, yet the tension is quite realistic. Strong female leads, but the gents are a tad "soft" for my liking. I'm looking forward to book two.

Due to copy and paste, formatting has been lost. I think that my feelings for *The Girl in the Steel Corset* could pretty accurately be described as STEAMPUNK=AWESOME. I'm a huge fan of

STEAMPUNK, but it's just one of those genres that never quite made onto the YA group for whatever reason. But there should be more, because they've found a fan in me. I liked Kady's rich descriptions of society, and the steampowered carriages, as well as the automatons and the lovely steampunk garb. I liked that when the points of view switched; I was never confused. Each of the characters has their own unique personality. You'd think that there would be confusion, but no, I always knew exactly who was speaking, and I loved that. I also loved the Jekyll and Hyde element, as well as the mystery of the machinist and the various other things that were going on. Finley was my favourite character, but I also really liked Emily, Sam, Jasper, and Griffin. I love that none of the characters personalities were skimmed on in favor of action. There was plenty of that too, but all of the characters were very fleshed out in spite of that. Now, because I have to, I'll say something about the quasi-love triangle. I like both sides, but Griffin totally comes out on top for me. He's so much sweeter, and I like the way that he thinks about Finley. They're both swoony, though, so there is that. All in all, my only problem with *The Girl in the Steel Corset* was that it was a tad predictable. Everything else about it was amazing.

Finley Jayne has a dark side. It comes out whenever she feels particularly threatened and has cost her quite a few jobs. When one employer's son goes too far she beats him up and runs away out of fear for what he wanted to do to her and what she did do to him. Then she runs into Griffin King. Literally. Straight into his velocycle. This strange encounter starts off a strange adventure for Finley, Griffin, and Griffin's friends in which an elusive man called The Machinist has been using automatons to commit crimes. Griffin and his 'gang' for want of a better word fear he will do worse than that. I quite enjoyed this book. It felt like a nice leisurely read but was intriguing and kept me reading. It had action and a mystery. I liked that the romance was slow to develop, making it feel all the more real. I particularly liked Jack Dandy, a criminal who comes to Finley's aid on more than one occasion. I also liked that the book was told from 3 different perspectives, giving us readers more insight into the characters and their actions. I am definitely looking forward to reading the next book in this series.

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