

Summer is busy for Susan and Terry, with trying to make new friends, and starting a dog-walking business. One day Susan discovers a mystery: a friend is missing. In an attempt to achieve justice, Susan explores revenge and atonement.

I Was A Teen Avenger

By Kate Warpeha

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I WAS A
TEEN

Avenger

Kate Warpeha



Young Adult Fiction; age 12+

Key descriptors: teens, jobs, friendship, #metoo, alternative family, secrets, revenge, neighbors, Chicago, veterans, justice, self-esteem, assault

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The next morning, a sun-ray barged through the yellowing tree canopy outside to tumble end-over-end into my bedroom, waking me up with a punch. I pulled the green cellophane over the white lights of my make-up mirror so I could do my Goth foundation and eyeliner. Most importantly, I fixed up my tiny ('tasteful' according to my Ma) stitches scar on my forehead. It was only six A.M., but there was so much to do—a gargantuan day. I bared my 'teef' and snarled at the mirror for extra courage. It was time to put the rest of the Frankenstein face on and do some planning.

I experienced bad-vibe feelings on the roof yesterday, with all that open sky dropping so many ideas onto my head. Fears were hard to share, or shake, when you thought something negative happened to a friend. I didn't actually know what had transpired. Few people in our neighborhood knew Annelise, because she kept much to herself. Today I would start my new job as a dog walker, and, I also would try to find out where she had disappeared to. To address both issues, it would require careful study and problem-solving. Adults always seemed to have a list of difficult things to do, and that's all they think about is 'the list'. They can't enjoy cool stuff like bats or aliens, or even wonder 'what on earth is a bee thinking about when it is crawling around inside of a flower?' because they just don't notice things, preoccupied with these task lists. I didn't want to immediately be an adult, so I attempted to keep my own lists short. 1) Job. I did not have any idea what to expect. I was my own boss, but still, I was nervous about keeping dogs happy, safe and the humans being happy with my service. I made an outline of 'to-do' in my notebook. Team Ghoul Dogwalkers. Throughout the day, my work would entail going to the neighbors that Mrs. Daniels had scoped out for me. Each neighbor wanted me to stop by at different times, as written down on the sheet, diligently reported by Mrs. Daniels. I was to walk each dog and take notes on their needs. 2) Terry was to meet me on the roof, and we would have ice cream, then watch bats—a first-day-of-work debriefing. Then, 3) If Terry knew nothing, I would find out myself what happened to Annelise. The Frankenstein doll agreed. I would bring up the subject of Annelise to Terry; maybe, just maybe, he had heard something.

Terry didn't know Annelise, except through me. She didn't like sports or bats (including the mammal kind), which would limit extended discussion with Terry. She, her mom, dad and older sister Isabel arrived two years ago in a family friend's Volvo station wagon, with rolled up carpets and various colored wicker baskets packed like you would pack a box or suitcase. They were dropped in front of a small wooden house with vines growing over the shutters, a back garden long abandoned, and a garage on the alley, even though they didn't own a car. I met her when I was passing out flyers for our neighborhood library branch; I stopped at her house. Her wide, green eyes peered through the diamond-shaped window in the front door after I knocked, and she opened it slowly with a worried stare at my ghostly pale face and fake stitches on my forehead. Then she saw *Canticle for Leibowitz* on my flyer, and the drawing I did of Brother Francis. Before I could introduce myself, she started talking about the book. The fact she had read (and loved) my favorite Sci-Fi story of all time was amazing, and reason enough to be friends! She was one grade behind us in school, but the same age as me and Terry. Not being in the same grade often impedes friendship opportunities in big schools, but I got to know her because she joined my Science Fiction Book Club. Her house was two blocks away, so we had to make extra effort to hang out.

On our block, I could hear many neighbors, and other kids playing in the periphery. Then once I set foot on Annelise's block, the noise died away instantly, extinguished into a silent airy breeze. There weren't kids sitting on their front porches. I didn't hear beats or synth music blasting from the radio. It was a street of retired folks, and no apartment buildings, just narrow, mostly old, early 1900s two-bedroom bungalows, except Annelise's house which was exceptionally narrow and tall, with a spiked roof, and four gingerbread stories, not the usual two or three stories. She told me their own house was so quiet, she couldn't tell the difference between their family gatherings, and when all in the family were asleep in the middle of the night. That made me laugh. No matter what events or crises happened, no one in her family ever yelled or spoke loudly, or even ate with his or her mouth open. Sometimes she felt ignored in this persistent silence (even though both her parents were alive and present). We had that in common too, for a time. It was how I felt, being ignored in the past year by my Ma. I was glad that wasn't the case now.

One time, I ate a formal meal with Annelise and her parents in their

dining room. It was fish and small round potatoes with no skin on them in a white sauce that wasn't even cheese. There were also some raw vegetables on a little side dish. We ate from bone china plates with blue decorations. We had three sets of cutlery, and I snuck side-eye looks at Annelise to figure out which fork I was supposed to use at what time. Next to our plates were shiny linen napkins. It was hard to eat neatly (sauce!), and even harder to fit in with the silence. Her parents were deep in barely-audible discussion in Dutch, all through the meal. They didn't speak to me or Annelise, or even glance our way. It was like me and Annelise were an impressionist art painting on the wall called Teen Gals at a Summer Luncheon. At one point, her mom abruptly picked up her glass of wine, then walked to the kitchen; the dad followed, after sighing heavily. Annelise looked stricken, hissing quietly,

“Now they're really fighting.”

I thought it was funny that I couldn't tell, like they weren't even a decibel above a whisper! I didn't think they liked me, from the looks they gave me. I felt coarse, and wild, and scruffy. But that was likely my own insecurity for being darker-skinned (some people were judgmental about color unfortunately), and a Goth (with cosmetic scar stitches). Annelise's parents were silent ducks in a villa pond, and I felt like a squawking loon, especially if I was with friends, I was even louder. Annelise liked my loony-ness, and we stayed friends. She liked me no matter what I looked like, and I liked her no matter what she looked like too. Books were our initial glue, then we built a friendship.

Being the younger sister who never got to go anywhere did not appeal to Annelise. It created a yearning in her to be older and do things that older kids did. Her nineteen-year-old sister was always on voyages, and had a job giving tours in Western Europe for a travel agency. This past year, because Annelise felt left out, her parents sent her on a four-month exchange visit to a school in Amsterdam, where she lived with an Auntie. We wrote letters back and forth. She returned days before her birthday a little over two weeks ago, and we had ice cream to celebrate being that lucky number thirteen. I thought like last year she would want to go swimming. But she wanted to go to a party instead. Not a party where they have cake and play board games with kids your own age, but like a bash that teenagers and older offspring have in a house without parents or responsible adults around. I didn't want to go to that kind of gathering because I never heard good stories

about them, just gross stories about drinking and drugs, and incidents of girls getting harassed. That was the first time we ever had an argument. I didn't want to go. Strangely enough, that was the last night I saw her. My imagination started lifting off. I drew under my eyes in inky black with my cosmetic crayon.

"Susie!"

I dropped my eyeliner stick, startled by Margie's voice. It sounded urgent, but tired... she had to go to work today. Well, I knew that warning tone in my Ma's voice. She was calling me no doubt to advise me about the dangers of walking other people's dogs, and to remind me to not go inside anyone's place (who she didn't know well). She never lost that fear from her own childhood bad experiences. It was times like these I missed my Pop most, who was the tempering voice of calm. But, before I started brooding about it, I remembered I had a new Grandma, my neighbor Mrs. Sosa. She could throw her beefy arms around me and squeeze the worries out. Then, I could 'reset', and be unstoppable again. I was determined to be a great dog walker *and* get paid! Anyone who bugged me, Mrs. Sosa would curse their bones to ash! My self pep-talk was now over.

"Coming!" I shouted.

I checked that my pencil was still on the embroidery thread around my neck, turned off the light, and dropped my pad of paper into my daypack. The Frankenstein doll smiled pleasantly, wishing me a fine day. On the top of my pack was a small pile that Margie must have left: bags of trail mix and three apples, as if I were going away camping. I put those in a zip pocket with a smirk. Many hours later in this long dog-walking first day, it turned out that having survival food was a good thing.

Mrs. Chow was so lucky. She was surrounded by food that smelled so good, all day. At any time, there were cubes of vegetables or meats being chased around a wok, or boiling up in a pan, or being pulled from the deep fat fryer. Her home kitchen was her Test Kitchen, and the heavenly vapors floated outside, then penetrated growling bellies, yearning to have food with fat and salt in it. Mrs. Chow and her husband Mr. Chow had a family chow-mein house in the suburbs that was aptly named CHOW. Mrs. Chow

ate so much in the process of food testing, that she was significantly bigger than Mr. Chow, who did more of the marketing and taxes, and stayed out of kitchen and day-to-day business. Their cousins and aunties worked at the restaurant, but Mr. and Mrs. Chow being the owners, one of them always had to be there, which meant they took turns stopping in at home. Lee-Lee was left alone a lot; it was hard for them to walk Lee-Lee more than once in a day on the always-busy weekends. Lee-Lee couldn't go outside by herself because they didn't have a sturdy fence, and sadly, being a pedigreed dog, Lee-Lee was likely to get stolen. That morning, before most were awake, I sat down on a small painted stool on the Chow's porch. Lee-Lee followed Mrs. Chow to her tall chair, a wicker throne, and primly folded up her legs, lying at Mrs. Chow's feet. While Mrs. Chow described the characteristics of Lee-Lee, I nodded my head and took notes. Lee-Lee tilted her sandy face and her wrinkles flopped all to one side as she considered me with scorn. I could not stare too long at Lee-Lee, as Mrs. Chow informed me that Lee-Lee didn't like prolonged eye contact. Avoiding Lee-Lee's face, I spent the next two minutes looking at her gargoyle-like paws instead, and her fascinating wrinkles, and fine suede-like skin.

"When we are done talking about things, I want to hide. To see if she trusts you," Mrs. Chow glanced at Lee-Lee, who was pensively looking from me to Mrs. Chow.

"Uhm, okay."

"I just want to make sure. I don't want to have to come back from the restaurant."

"Uh huh."

"And instead of long walks, do two short ones, one early and one in the evening before sundown. I leave her on the inside porch. See the dog door? Instead of long walk, I show you what we do for her skin. It blisters. Gets irritated."

I nodded over and over again at each phrase, and wrote instructions. Mrs. Chow hopped up like a wrestler, with arms pumping, walked quickly to the kitchen where the kettle was whistling out its steam. She poured the bubbling water into a glass bowl and dropped in a fluffy hand towel. After she donned rubber cleaning gloves, she reached into the steamy water, lifting up the soaking towel to twist out the water with a rapid squeeze.

"Lee-Lee come! Come!"

Lee-Lee trotted up, excited.

“Okay. I shake this towel around,” and Mrs. Chow did, “For a minute. We want Lee-Lee to not burn,” I agreed that was a good plan not to scald Lee-Lee!

“...and then!”

Mrs. Chow folded up the towel with a flourish. She knelt and wiped Lee-Lee’s back, sort of stretching out wrinkled skin, then folded the towel over, inside out, pulling the towel slowly around, clearing Lee-Lee’s ears, eyes and face.

“There is so much pollen. The ragweed! The goldenrod! All bad for Lee-Lee.”

Puzzled, I couldn’t remember where in our neighborhood those plants would be (and I was pretty good with flowers), but maybe Mrs. Chow saw them someplace, or they blew in from an abandoned lot, as there were a few around here.

“So that’s it. I leave a full kettle for you on Saturday on porch. You plug in.”

She handed me the towel.

“Here. Still searing water. Show me.”

I was a little shaky. Gulp. I pulled on the gloves, and prepared the towel.

“Hi, Lee-Lee.”

I slowly curled my arm around her, and she didn’t bite or growl. I spread out a few wrinkles on her back with the hot towel, so far, so good. She whined a little. I hoped it was a satisfied and cheerful whine, and not a, you suck at this, whine. I finished.

“Okay. Now. Please. Come with me.” Mrs. Chow ordered.

So, I followed Mrs. Chow to the outside porch. She motioned me to go down the stairs. She hid behind a shed at the end of the porch, and whispered hoarsely back to me.

“Call her out. See if she okay if you come up stairs.”

Whew, I didn’t want Lee-Lee to think I was breaking in. I was a little scared and timorously spoke.

“Lee-Lee.”

Nothing. Mrs. Chow motioned her hand quickly from her mouth to the heavens. I supposed that meant I should shout.

“LEE-LEE!”

“Urrrr?” Lee-Lee answered from inside the house.

She trotted out to the doorway, as puzzled as a Shar Pei can look.

“Lee-Lee! Hi, Lee-Lee!” I made it up two stairs. I picked up the leash hanging on the rail. Still, she did not attempt to shark attack me, yet eyed me warily.

“Hi, Lee-Lee sweetie! Wanna go for a walk?!”

Well, Lee-Lee agreed with that much. She bounded up to me wiggling her curly stump tail. Mrs. Chow came out from behind her shed, beaming as the proud mom, and clasping her hands to the heavens in gratitude.

My appointment with Mrs. Marek was nine A.M. *sharp*, she said. Mrs. Marek was almost eighty, yet she was nimble, and had all her marbles, literally and physically—she had the most amazing marble collection. She and her husband had collected them for decades, placing them in large, pale blue vases filling their picture window. They had been social workers in Chicago Public Schools before they retired. Her husband, unfortunately, had died two years ago. The Mareks owned a three-flat in our street. They had always lived on the main floor, but after Mr. Marek died, Mrs. Marek wanted to move because she couldn't bear to be in their flat without him. But, she didn't want to leave the entire place either, because it was home. So, she swapped places with her upstairs renter, who was thrilled to be living in a bigger space for the same price. Mrs. Marek was generous like that. People liked her, helped her, and her house was well taken care of, inside and out. It was beautiful. Hardwood floors, parquet in the kitchen, tiny mosaic tiles in the bathroom, and ceramic-laid fountains in the backyard. The Mareks fixed broken things for renters immediately, and, they treated the tenants like the relatives that they liked. The Mareks gave tenants a specific patch in the back garden to grow whatever they wished, which most flat owners did not do for their renters. Well, anyway, moving upstairs meant that instead of two steps, Ms. Marek had two steps plus two flights of stairs to walk up and down. She was limber enough to do it twice a day, but going out often with Pickles, her Pekingese dog, was a challenge. Her tenants kindly agreed to take Pickles out on a weeknight for her, so she never had to go out late, in the dark, but they were busy on the weekends. Enter Susanstein (that's me), the ghoul dog walker. I knew Mrs. Marek

was troubled by my white-makeup face and stitches, but she liked me and always smiled with pity when she saw my jagged visage. She was on her porch when I entered the gate to her place, and she waved a hanky at me, as if she were on a cruise ship deck, when it pulled away from the dock.

“Sooooooo-san!”

I set my head back as far as I could to see her, and flapped both my arms. Pickles’ shrill mini-yelps tumbled over the stairs, and as I walked up to the second floor, I saw her underbite on the top step before I saw the rest of her body in the shady light.

“Come in! I was just cooking Pickles her breakfast.”

What? I was used to feeding dogs hard kibble or wet food from a can. My surprised face saw Mrs. Marek making scrambled eggs, and peeling flesh from a boiled chicken leg.

“Oh, Pickles loves eggs and chicken!” She called out to me gaily.

And true enough, Pickles jumped up and down as much as a tiny dog can, clearing the floor by three inches at least. She was trembling and licking her own nose and panting. Mrs. Marek pulled and cut the chicken to small shreds, then set a full plate down on the kitchen floor. She wrapped up the chicken remainder in a piece of foil, then put it into the fridge on the bottom shelf. There was nothing else in the fridge it seemed. Looking around the room, there didn’t seem to be many signs of food. There were two piles of envelopes on the counter. One had a square of paper on top that said ‘paid’, the other much larger pile, the note said ‘unpaid’. Mrs. Marek stepped into the lamplight of the main room, pointing me to a comfy green velvet wing chair. This seat is exactly what Frankenstein’s Monster would want to sit in, so I was pleased, settling down into the spongy cushion. Mrs. Marek panted, and fanned herself, sitting sideways on the green-with-pink striped love seat, also velvet.

“So, Susan! When can you come on Saturdays and Sundays?”

“Uhm, well, any time it is light out, I’m allowed. Or soon after sunset, but not real dark or real late, my Ma says.”

Mrs. Marek pondered my hours.

“Well, first thing in the morning would be best, then at sunset.”

“Okay, it’s a deal.”

Pickles snorted, snuffled, and chewed excitedly in the kitchen. Mrs. Marek got up and grabbed a bright green clutch purse and began looking through it, with a worried look on her face. I didn’t like that. After

seeing her fridge, and her pile of bills, I would rather have her buy herself some food.

I blurted out, "Mrs. Marek isn't it your birthday soon?"

She looked up. Her drawn-in eyebrows rose upwards like window roll-up shades.

"Well, another couple weeks, yes, in September."

"Oh. That's why."

"Why what, honey?"

Here's the thing. Mrs. Marek's 'unpaid' bills pile made it seem like she didn't have much money, so I was thinking to tell a lie. I mean a lie for a good reason, but I sure didn't like lying. I felt desperate though, and dug up a big one.

"Well. Mrs. Daniels said she wanted to pay for... for Pickles' walks for your birthday, so that means you don't have to pay until the end of September!"

"Oh!" She exhaled in relief.

Mrs. Marek was shocked but happy, and in shuffling back to her love seat, was struck with a bright idea.

"Why, I'll call her right now. That's so nice of Geri!"

"Uh, wait!" I blurted out in a tumble. "Mrs. Marek. Uhm, she mentioned this morning she had a real bad headache. Maybe, can you wait to call her in the evening?"

"Why sure sweetie, and if you see her, let her know she's a real peach."

"Yeah sure. And because I have a lot of walks, do you mind if me and Terry trade off?"

"Not at all. It will be so nice to see you both."

Mrs. Marek leaned back on her love seat smiling, huffing and puffing, and fanning herself, now with a magazine, so pleased that she got an early present. A far away look settled in, her eyes closed for a few seconds. I took that as a cue to leave.

"Great... uhm. Hafta go. Bye, Mrs. Marek. Bye, Pickles!"

Pickles jumped up onto the love seat to park herself in Mrs. Marek's lap, licking her chops. A relieved Mrs. Marek picked up Pickles' foreleg, waving 'Bye-Bye' at me.

I smiled, then turned, hopping out of the house so fast that I fell forward over half of the flight of stairs. The wall rail burned my palm, while my feet grazed two and three stairs at each stride. Now I know what the

expression, 'hit the ground running' means. My feet barely touched the pavement and the trees and fences bent toward me as I passed, a streak of kinky hair, black clothing, and combat boots.

"Hey!" I heard behind me, but I didn't stop bolting. My goal was to get to my building and Mrs. Daniels before my lie exploded in front of me, by Mrs. Marek calling. I had just reached the entryway when someone else slid right up behind me. It was Terry, panting mightily, colliding into the doorframe. Terry and I had been the same height for years, until this last month I realized it wasn't just that his afro was growing up and out, he was almost the same height as his Pop. He towered over me, accusingly.

"Su! I was calling you the whole block!"

I couldn't answer, but pointed into the building, and motioned for him to follow me. Up two-by-two on the stairs, we nearly crashed into Mrs. Daniels' door, me knocking frantically, as if hungry zombie aliens were right behind me. I heard Mrs. Daniels' feet pad up to the door, entrenched in her shag carpet. The peep-hole darkened, and I turned to Terry and said in a tiny whisper with my mouth like a tiny round dome,

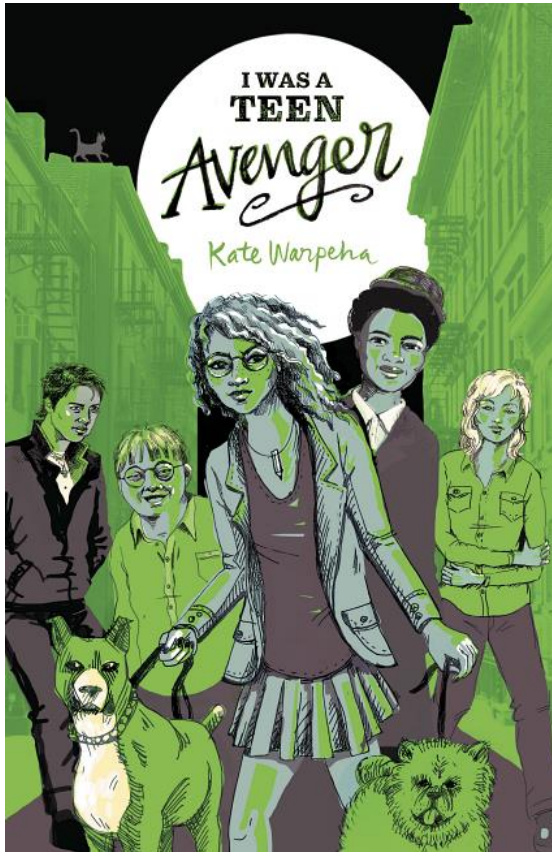
"I'll tell you more on the roof. You are officially my dog walker co-owner. And it won't interfere with baseball."

Terry launched a big toothy grin in response. Mrs. Daniels let us tumble in, ragged from racing at top speed. She dragged on her cigarette, exhaling with her eyebrows raised high.

"Hey kids, what's going on?"

We couldn't answer, completely winded.

"Well come on in. I want to hear all about it."



Summer is busy for Susan and Terry, with trying to make new friends, and starting a dog-walking business. One day Susan discovers a mystery: a friend is missing. In an attempt to achieve justice, Susan explores revenge and atonement.

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