"Aviva vs The Dybbuk has an appealing heroine, suspense, drama, and an authentic picture of a Jewish community. But what I loved most is Mari Lowe's palpable compassion for all her characters, even the ones making Aviva's life difficult. If you've been wanting more good fiction about Orthodox Jewish girls' lives—and let's face it, there's a scarcity—hurry and read Mari Lowe's novel."

Barry Deutsch,

author of How Mirka Got Her Sword (Hereville)

Aviva vs. the Dybbuk

Mari Lowe

LQ
LEVINE QUERIDO
Montclair | Amsterdam | Hoboken

For Abba and Ema

יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך

This is an Arthur A. Levine book
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Before

When I was nine years old, I slipped out of our little apartment and hid in the woods, just to see if anyone would notice I was gone. Only the dybbuk saw me leave. I didn't tell my mother, and I didn't leave a note. I still don't really understand why I did it in the first place, except that it was an idea that I wasn't able to shake for a few weeks. At first, it was only a passing thought that I shrugged off. Then, it was suddenly all I could think about.

We didn't really have a *woods* in Beacon, but we did have a ragged overgrown area with a ramshackle sign in front that said *BEACON PARK*. There were high trees and weeds taller than I was, and I ran through them, my heart racing and my fists clenched with righteous fury.

I was angry that day. I don't remember why. I know I'd had an argument with my mother, but I can't remember what it was about, and I've never been brave enough to ask Ema if she remembers. She shuts down if I push too hard, and I hate seeing her eyes close off from me when she goes to her secret place.

My secret place was the woods that day, the sunset over the weeds and the trees and my rising certainty that I'd be found. Ema was going to be *furious*, I knew it, and I was ready for a real

fight—the kind I had read about in books, the kind I saw my classmates have with their parents. I imagined yelling at Ema. I imagined *being* yelled at, and it filled me with new determination.

I wanted to be yelled at. I wanted to see Ema's eyes light up, just once, even if it was with rage. So I stumbled through the weeds and hunkered down in a scratchy clearing, and I waited for Ema to come for me.

But Ema didn't come. It was the end of fall, that biting time right before winter when the weather went from breezy to frigid as day turned to night, and I had forgotten my jacket at home. I shivered in the cold, rubbing my hands together and huddling against a tree, and I finally realized there was no point to waiting out in the woods. No one was coming for me.

I wanted to go back home then—I really did, more than anything—but the messy, boring little woods I'd wandered through in the daylight had become a sprawling, twisty forest at night. I walked in one direction, then another, but I couldn't find the fence that surrounded the park.

To my eyes, every movement was a wolf or a cougar—or worse, an ax murderer just waiting for little girls to stumble into the woods with him. I was afraid to shout for help and attract something worse. Instead, I picked through the weeds, walking in circles, my fists clenching harder and harder whenever I thought about crying.

I wasn't going to *cry*. I was angry, and I was going to stay angry, and when I would finally find my way home, I was going to tell Ema exactly what I thought of her. It was just the two of us in the

apartment. How could she not notice I was gone? How could she not come after me?

I was a different kind of kid back then.

Eventually, though, I saw lights shining through the night, and someone calling my name. "*Aviva!*" came the shout, and I breathed a sigh of relief. "*Aviva!*"

"I'm here!" I called back, and I wiped away the tears that had leaked on to my face and ran in the direction of the light. "I'm here!"

It wasn't Ema who found me. It was Kayla Eisenberger's mother, flashlight in hand and her face wreathed in relief. She was tall, taller than I'd remembered, and she wore a smart kind of sweater with a straight skirt, all of it somehow untouched by the brambles in the woods. She ran to me, crouching to inspect my face for any bruises, and she demanded in a sharp voice, "What were you *doing* out here? What did you think—"

"Nurit," said the woman beside her. It was Mrs. Leibowitz from the school, who I only knew from the mikvah back then. She was older, round where Mrs. Eisenberger was narrow and with stray brown and gray hairs flying out from under her hat, and her eyes were gentled by crow's feet, and a surprising warmth lingering within them. Mrs. Eisenberger frowned at her, outrage still on the tip of her tongue, but she took a breath and said, "Let's bring her back to the cars. Let the others know that she was found."

There were a few cars all parked outside of the fence, and a bunch of men and women scattered around them. Most had flashlights and were coming from the woods, same as me. People had noticed I was gone, after all, but I didn't care about any of them.

I looked around, squinting at adult face after adult face, searching only for one person.

Mrs. Eisenberger saw me looking and gave me a tight smile. "She's back at your house," she said, and my heart sank. "She called Mrs. Leibowitz when she couldn't find you, but the community patrol thought she should stay at home in case you came back." Her voice was still disapproving, but she must have seen something in my eyes because her voice softened. "No injuries?" I shook my head. I had a few scrapes, but I didn't want half the community clustered around to inspect them, to see my tearstained face or to ask me why I'd done it.

I thought that Mrs. Eisenberger might push me for an explanation or maybe even snap at me for being so stupid. But instead, she inhaled, a long and tired breath, and then she put a hand on my shoulder. "Come on. I'll take you home."

Kayla was sitting in the back seat of the Eisenberger van when her mother opened the door, hands pressed to the window as she squinted out at the dim light and people flooding the area. She turned around when the car door slid open, her green-brown eyes wide as she caught sight of me, and then she looked away, twisting a lock of amber-red hair around her finger. "I guess you found her," she said, her voice flat.

Mrs. Eisenberger's phone rang. "Just a minute," Mrs. Eisenberger said, distracted, and she took out her phone and stepped away from the car. "Avishai? We'll be there soon." Avishai. That was Kayla's father.

I sat as far away from Kayla as I could, squirming against the closed door, and Kayla said abruptly, "Where were you?"

I shrugged. "I went out to the woods." I tried to sound strong and confident, like I'd imagined myself being when I'd went out to the woods in the first place, but instead, I just sounded small. Kayla glanced at me and pressed her lips together, her feet tapping against the back of the driver's seat, and she said, "I didn't come to look for you, you know. I was going somewhere with my mother."

"Where?" I said, and then I remembered that Kayla and I weren't friends anymore. I didn't know why she was talking to me in the first place, though the part of me that wasn't dull with anger was suddenly very curious.

Kayla took a breath, and she looked at me for a moment like she wanted to say something else. In that instant, I wanted to hear whatever it was that she wasn't explaining. But she didn't even answer my question. "None of your business," she said abruptly, and she kicked the back of the seat again and stared straight ahead until Mrs. Eisenberger returned to the car.

And I got my answer then, though I didn't know why it had been a secret in the first place. "Abba is waiting for us," Mrs. Eisenberger said as she started the car, and she sounded tired but happy. "He's ready to go."

Kayla only nodded, avoiding my eyes.

No one spoke for the whole drive back. Kayla glanced at me a few times, but she looked away quickly whenever I caught her staring. She opened her mouth once, as though she were about to speak, but then she snapped it shut again. I kept my eyes trained on the ripped gray vinyl of the seat in front of me most of the time. I didn't want to talk to Kayla. I wanted to hold on to my anger until I got home.

When we got to my shabby little apartment next to the shul, Mrs. Eisenberger walked me to the door, her keen eyes fixed on me as though I might run away again. I didn't know what she knew about why I'd gone missing, but I was afraid to ask. Instead, I pushed the door open and said quickly, "You don't need to come in."

I shut the door before she could follow me, and I stalked into the mikvah waiting room. It was bigger than any of the rooms upstairs in our cramped living space, darkly carpeted with a couch against the entry wall and chairs dotted around the clear-bottomed coffee table opposite it. The lights were on, and the dybbuk was watching me with solemn eyes. He was hovering over the peeling wood-brown desk that Abba had gotten from his grandfather when he'd married Ema and moved out to Beacon. I didn't see Ema anywhere.

The lights were off upstairs in the apartment, but I could hear Ema's cell phone ringing. I clenched my fists and started upstairs, ready for a fight.

The phone kept ringing. I saw it on the kitchen table when I made it upstairs, the only light glowing in the dark apartment. I snatched it up. "Hello?"

It was Mrs. Leibowitz. "Aviva," she said, and her kind voice sounded relieved. "I haven't been able to get a hold of your mother."

"She's here," I said automatically, glancing around the room. I saw Ema at last—not in the kitchen but sitting on my bed, silhouetted in the window that overlooked the front of the building. "We're fine. Thank you."

"Aviva—" Mrs. Leibowitz began, but I hung up. My rage was boiling over then, desperate for an escape. I was *so* angry, and it

wasn't about the argument we'd had earlier that day. I was lost in the woods, and Ema hadn't come for me. I was *missing*, and Ema hadn't cared enough to—

I stalked through the kitchen to my room, ready for the fight I'd been itching for all day, and I said, my voice too loud in our silent apartment, "Did you even notice I was gone?"

Ema didn't respond. I took another step toward her. For a moment, I thought she was dead, that she was sitting still for so long she just froze that way. But she was breathing, light and barely audible, and I marched around to face her.

I recoiled. Ema's face was almost white, her eyes blank, and she looked right through me as though she couldn't see me. I wanted to rage at her, to let out all my frustrations and my nine-year-old fury, but it seemed like my words would only pass through her, would make her fade away more and more until I'd be shouting through air.

I must have aged a few years in those seconds alone, staring at Ema and trying to find words that wouldn't come. My anger was gone, replaced with fear and bitter regret. I shouldn't have run away, I knew. It wouldn't change anything. Nothing was going to change for us.

Finally, I said the only thing I could. "Ema," I whispered. "Isn't someone coming to the mikvah tonight?"

Ema jolted. "Aviva," she said, her voice raspy and raw. She lifted a hand to my cheek, her fingers brushing against my dried tears, and I wanted to cry again. Ema said my name with such tenderness that—for the first time all night—I wondered how I ever could have doubted her love for me.

I looked away from her, watching the lawn through the window. Behind me, I heard the bed creak as my mother got up, and a light flicked on in the kitchen. Within a few minutes, Ema was downstairs at the mikvah, and I was alone again.

I sat at the top of the stairs as I listened to a knock at the door, to Ema's low voice as she ushered the mikvah visitor in. I didn't want to see who it was or to help Ema today. I wanted to crumple under my blanket and cry for hours.

Instead, I waited until the dybbuk came to sit beside me. He smiled at me, an impish look that showed no sign of reproach or disappointment, and I exhaled and reached for him. I couldn't touch him, of course, but my hand settled just over where his hand would have been, and I kept it there and didn't cry.

The apartment was fully heated, but I was colder at that moment than I'd been in the woods, surrounded by weeds and trees and my own fury.

Chapter 1

"Kosher!" Ema's voice rings out through the room, and I poke my head against the closed door of the spare bathroom, trying to peek through to see what's happening in the mikvah. Mrs. Blumstein is in there with Ema, and I can hear a splash and then another "Kosher!"

I can't see, of course, and I know I'm not allowed to open the door, so I don't. "Kosher!" Ema calls for the third time, and I bite my lip and realize, suddenly, that the dybbuk has gotten into Mrs. Blumstein's room.

I hear more splashing and then low murmurs as Mrs. Blumstein and Ema talk. "Do you have Shabbos meals this week?" Mrs. Blumstein wants to know.

I hurry out of the spare bathroom and seize a wire hanger from the laundry room, jamming it into the lock of the main bathroom. Ema is talking, her voice muffled through the wall. "We're all set for Shabbos," she says, and I can imagine the pained smile on her face. She always gets that smile when she thinks people are trying to offer us charity. "I think we'll stay in this week."

The lock pops open. I dash into Mrs. Blumstein's room, peering around.

It doesn't take long to see what the dybbuk has done. Mrs. Blumstein's purse has been opened, and there are little candies strewn across the floor. They're all open, the wrappers lying beside them, and I hiss, "Dybbuk, *why*?" as I stare at them in consternation.

Mrs. Blumstein is chatting with Ema again. "You know, I have an eleven-year-old niece," she says, and I make a face. I know Shira Blumstein—she of the weirdly pinched nose that makes her always look like she's annoyed, who is in my class in school and doesn't talk to me. Kind of like . . . everyone in my class. Mrs. Blumstein has the same pinched nose, and when she's wearing a snug blue beanie to cover her hair, her whole face slopes back alarmingly. Somehow, it suits her like it doesn't Shira. "She'll be over at my house this weekend. Maybe we can arrange a playdate with your daughter."

Talk more, I plead frantically, glaring at the dybbuk. He's lurking against the rough, pale wall of the hallway, grinning at me with that smile he gets when he knows he's done something particularly naughty. *Typical*. I drop to the floor, picking up the candies and wrapping them as neatly as I can.

To my relief, Ema responds. "You'll have to convince Aviva, not me," she says wryly. "You know that Aviva can be . . . a little much for the other girls." I take that as a compliment. The dybbuk makes a face, and I don't waste any more time glowering at him. I have too many candies to wrap.

"Oh, Shira loves her, though," Mrs. Blumstein says, which is a

lie. Shira is Kayla's best friend, and Kayla is never quiet about how much she hates me. "She's always talking about Aviva. Why don't you send Aviva over in the afternoon?"

Ema says, "I'll try," but there's finality in her voice, the conversation over. I panic, staring in alarm at the wrappers and candy still left on the floor, and I seize them all as the door begins to open and throw them into the toilet. I flush the toilet, the sound too loud, and Ema says suddenly, "Though, speaking of Shabbos, I have been meaning to ask you about your spinach gefilte fish."

"Oh?" Mrs. Blumstein is distracted again, and she begins to rattle off a recipe as Ema makes interested humming noises. I scramble out of the room, shoving right past the dybbuk, and clamber onto one of the ugly flowered chairs in the waiting room.

The dybbuk perches beside me on the next chair, a lazy finger hovering over the fabric of the seat. He doesn't go into the rooms when the women are inside, of course. He's a boy, if dybbuks can be boys at all. I pull a book off the coffee table and read in silence, pretending to be absorbed in it.

Ema emerges from the mikvah a few minutes later. With Mrs. Blumstein back in her room, Ema's movements are slower, and she sits heavily behind the desk before frowning at me. "What were you doing in Mrs. Blumstein's room?" she asks.

"It was the dybbuk," I say helplessly, gesturing to him. "He unwrapped all of Mrs. Blumstein's candies. I had to fix it."

Ema sighs, but she doesn't say anything more. She knows the dybbuk can't be stopped.

No one can stop the dybbuk. He's been haunting the mikvah for years, and I'm the only one who can keep track of him. Maybe

it's because I grew up with him, or maybe it's because I have a little bit of Abba's magic in me. Abba used to tell stories about dybbuks and gilgulim, their souls lingering in this world or reborn into a new life. He'd share the legend of the Golem of Prague, brought to life from river clay to lumber around and defend the Jews of the city and the stories of the sheidim who would test King Solomon. I don't remember Abba very well anymore—Ema doesn't like to keep his picture around, and it's been five years since the accident—but I still remember his stories.

We'd sit together in the big chair in our old apartment, and he'd tell me all about them. "Do you know the story of the gilgul of Shalom the shammas?" he'd ask me, and I'd bounce on his lap and demand to hear it. "Shalom the shammas's job was to look after the shul and all its holy books—"

"Like you do!" I'd say every time.

"Exactly," Abba would say. "And one day, there was a great storm and Shalom the shammas was swept out to sea. No one ever saw him again." He would sound grave, and I would laugh because the idea of losing someone forever still seemed impossible to me.

Abba would brighten. "But something happened to brave little Yerachmiel, the rabbi's son. He was a little boy just about your age. For years, he had helped Shalom the shammas put away all the siddurim after davening, even when all of his friends would run off to eat at the kiddush first. He mourned Shalom the most of anyone in the town."

Abba would lean forward, his voice rising and falling, and I would snuggle in close, enchanted by the story. "One day, Yerachmiel was out near the sea when a group of Cossacks came up to