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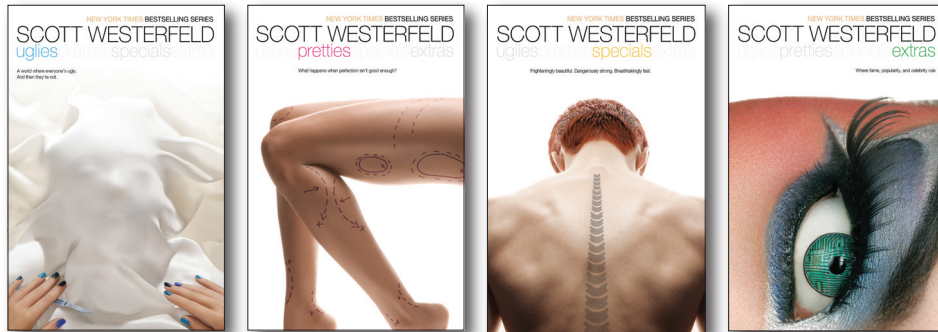
AFTERWORLDS

CHAPTER
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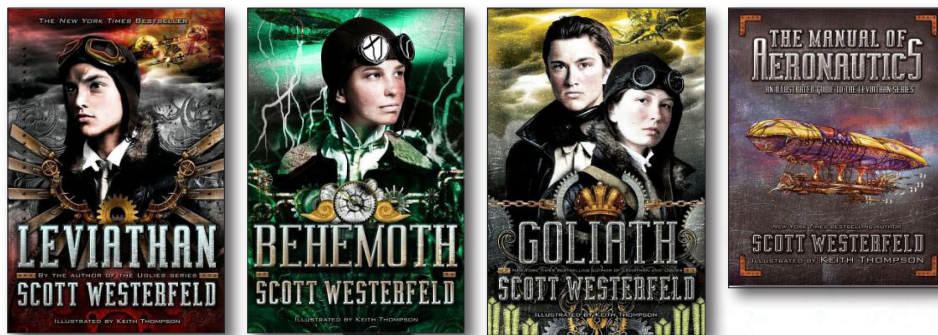
Darcy writes the words.
Lizzie lives them.

ALSO BY SCOTT WESTERFELD

THE UGLIES SERIES



THE LEVIATHAN SERIES



AFTERWORLDS

SCOTT WESTERFELD

SIMON PULSE New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

PRAISE FOR *AFTERWORLDS*

"I've never read anything quite like this, it's new and it's novel...and isn't that the whole point and purpose of a novel?

I have what can only be the infinitely sprawling imagination of Scott Westerfeld to thank for that experience."

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"Afterworlds... is a gift, a book certain of its place on my favorites shelf in the library of YA heaven...I will admit that every book I now read, every author

I host takes me back to *Afterworlds*. **Color me obsessed."**

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"Fresh and clever and oh-so-well written...I'm not sure which is more bizarre—the world of death gods or publishing."

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"Genius idea. While it's an amazing book just to read for the sake of reading, it's going to be especially fun to sell it to teens who want to become authors themselves. *Afterworlds* is the tangible answer to

'What advice would you give to a new author?'"

—Brandi Stewart, Changing Hands Bookstore

★ **"Westerfeld masterfully creates two divergent reading experiences (YA romance and fantasy/horror) with two distinct yet believable voices in Darcy and Lizzie—and, somehow, makes them mesh into one cohesive novel."**

—*Booklist*, (starred review)

"Watching Darcy's story play off Darcy's novel will fascinate readers as well as writers."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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TO ALL YOU WORDSMITHS, YOU SCRIBBLERS,
YOU WRIMOS IN YOUR VAST NUMBERS,
FOR MAKING WRITING A PART OF YOUR READING

*We tell ourselves stories
in order to live.*

—Joan Didion

*Education is the path from
cocky ignorance to miserable uncertainty.*

—Mark Twain

CHAPTER 1

THE MOST IMPORTANT EMAIL THAT DARCY PATEL EVER WROTE was three paragraphs long.

The first was about Darcy herself. It skipped the trifling details, her dyed blue-black hair and the slim gold ring in her left nostril, and began instead with a grim secret that her parents had never told her. When Darcy's mother was eleven years old, her best friend was murdered by a stranger. This discovery, chanced upon during an idle web search, both shocked Darcy and made certain things about her mother clearer. It also inspired her to write.

The second paragraph of the email was about the novel Darcy had just finished. She didn't mention, of course, that all sixty thousand words of *Afterworlds* had been written in thirty days. The Underbridge Literary Agency hardly needed to know *that*. Instead, this paragraph described a terrorist attack, a girl who wills herself to die, and the bewitching boy she meets in the afterworld. It

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promised skulking ghosts and the traumas that haunt families, and little sisters who are more clever than they appear. Using the present tense and short sentences, Darcy set the scene, thumbnailed the characters and their motivations, and teased the conclusion. This was the best of the three paragraphs, she was later told.

The third paragraph was pure flattery, because Darcy wanted very much for the Underbridge Literary Agency to say yes to her. She praised the breadth of their vision and paid tribute to their clients' genius, even while daring to compare herself to those illustrious names. She explained how her novel was different from the other paranormals of the last few years (none of which had a smoldering Vedic psychopomp as its love interest).

This email was not a perfect query letter. But it did its job. Seventeen days after pressing Send, Darcy was signed to Underbridge, a flourishing and respected literary agency, and not long after that she had a two-book deal for an astonishing amount of money.

Only a handful of challenges remained—high school graduation, a perilous decision, and parental approval—before Darcy Patel would be packing her bags for New York City.

CHAPTER 2

I MET THE MAN OF MY DREAMS IN AN AIRPORT, JUST BEFORE midnight a few days into the New Year. I was changing planes in Dallas, and I almost died.

What saved me was texting my mother.

I text her a lot when I'm traveling—when I get to the airport, when the flight's called, and when they make us put our phones away. I know, it sounds like something you'd do with your boyfriend, not your mom. But traveling alone made me nervous even before I could see ghosts.

And trust me, my mother needs to hear from me. A lot. She's always been kind of clingy, but even more so since my father ran off to New York.

So I was walking alone through the mostly vacant airport, looking for better reception. This late at night most of the shops were shuttered and dark, and I'd wandered until reaching another

wing of the airport, which was closed off by a metal gate that hung from the ceiling. Through the steel mesh I could see a pair of moving walkways gliding past, empty.

I didn't see the attack begin. My eyes were focused on my phone, watching as autocorrect made war on my spelling. Mom was asking about my dad's new girlfriend, whom I'd just met during my winter break visit. Rachel was lovely, always well dressed, and had the same size feet as me, but I couldn't tell Mom all that. *She has awesome shoes and I get to borrow them* wasn't the right place to start.

My father's new apartment was also amazing, twenty stories up, with floor-to-ceiling windows looking down on Astor Place. His walk-in closet was as big as my bedroom back home, and full of drawers that slid open with a sound like spinning skateboard wheels. I wouldn't want to live there. All that chrome and white leather furniture was cool to the touch and didn't feel like home. But Mom had been right—my father had made a metric fuck-ton of money since leaving us. He was wealthy now, with a doorman building and his own driver and a glittery black credit card that made shop assistants straighten up. (Calling people who worked in stores “shop assistants” was a thing I'd learned from Rachel.)

I was wearing jeans and a hoodie, like always when I fly, but my suitcase was full of shiny new clothes that I'd have to hide when I got back to California. Dad's wealth pissed Mom off for good reason: she supported him through law school and then he bailed on us. I got worked up about it sometimes, but then he'd send some of that wealth my way and I'd get over it.

Sounds pretty shallow, right? Being bought off with money that should've been my mother's? Trust me, I know. Almost dying makes you realize how shallow you are.

Mom had just texted me: *Tell me she's older than the last one. And not a Libra again!*

Didn't ask her bitch day.

Um, what?

BIRTHDAY. Autocorrect fail.

Mom was mostly desensitized to my bad typing. The night before, she hadn't even noticed when I'd texted that my father and I were eating raw cock dough for dessert. But when it came to Rachel, no typo went unremarked.

Ha! Wish you'd asked her THAT!

I decided to ignore that, and answered: *She says hi, by the way.*

How sweet.

If you're being ironing, I can't tell. We are TEXTING, mom.

I'm too old for irony. That was sarcasm.

I heard shouts behind me now, back by the security checkpoint. I turned around and headed back toward my gate, but didn't look up from the phone.

I think my planet's about to leave.

OK. See you in three hours, kiddo! Miss you.

You too, I began to type, but then the world fell into sharp little pieces.

I'd never heard an automatic weapon in real life before. It was somehow too loud for my ears to register, not so much a sound as the air ripping around me, a shudder I could feel in my bones and in the liquid of my eyes. I looked up from my phone and stared.

The gunmen didn't look human. They wore horror movie masks, and smoke flowered around them as they swung their aim across the crowd. At first everyone was frozen with shock. No one ran or tried to hide behind the rows of plastic chairs, and the terrorists seemed in no hurry.

I didn't hear the screams until the terrorists paused to reload.

Then everyone was running, some in my direction, some the other way. A guy my age in a football jersey—Travis Brinkman, as everyone learned later—tackled two gunmen, wrapping his arms around them and spinning with them across the blood-slick floor. If there had only been two terrorists he might have won that fight and spent his life a hero, telling his grandkids the story till they got bored of it. But there were four gunmen in all, and the others still had plenty of bullets.

As Travis Brinkman fell, the first running people reached me. Smoke roiled in their wake, bringing a smell like burning plastic. I'd been just standing there, but the acrid scent snapped my panic and I turned and started running with the crowd.

My phone lit up in my hand, and I stared stupidly at it. There was something I was supposed to do with this glowing, buzzing object, but I'd forgotten what. I still hadn't grasped what was happening, but I knew that to stop running was to die.

But then death was right in front of me—that steel gate stretched across the entire hallway, floor to ceiling, side to side. The closed section of the airport stood behind it, the walkways still flowing. The terrorists had waited for midnight, when we were all trapped in the smallest possible space.

A tall man in a leather biker jacket threw his shoulder against

the gate, and the metal rippled. He knelt to claw at the bottom, lifting it a few inches. Others joined him.

I stared at my phone. A text from my mother:

Try to sleep on the plane.

I stabbed at the screen to bring up a number pad. Some part of my brain realized that I'd never called 911 before. As it rang, I turned around to face the gunfire.

People were scattered on the floor, a trail of them. The terrorists had been gunning us down as we ran.

One of them was walking toward me, still a hundred feet away. He looked at the floor, stepping carefully among the fallen bodies, as if he couldn't see well through the mask.

There was a tiny voice in my hand, dulled by my battered ears. "What is the location of your emergency?"

"Airport."

"We're aware of that situation. Security is responding from on-site and they will be there soon. Are you in a safe location?"

The woman was so calm. Looking back, it always makes me cry to think how calm she was, how brave. I might've been screaming if I were her, knowing what was happening at the other end of the line. But I wasn't screaming. I was watching the gunman walk slowly toward us.

He was shooting the wounded people with a pistol, one by one.

"I'm not safe."

"Can you get to a safe location?"

I turned back to the gate. A dozen of us were pulling at it now, trying to lift it up. The metal rattled and swayed, but was catching

against some kind of lock. The gate wouldn't rise more than a few inches.

I looked for a door, a hallway, a drink machine to hide behind. But the walls stretched away bare and flat.

"I can't, and he's shooting everyone." We were so calm, just talking to each other.

"Well, honey, maybe you should pretend to be dead."

"What?"

The gunman looked up from the wounded on the floor, and I could see the glitter of eyes through the two holes in the mask. He was staring straight at me.

"If there's no way to get to safety," she said carefully, "maybe you should lie down and not move."

He holstered his pistol and raised the automatic rifle again.

"Thank you," I said, and let myself fall as the gun roared smoke and noise.

My knees struck the floor with a burst of pain, but I let every muscle go, flopping over onto my face, a dropped rag doll. My forehead hit the tiles so hard that light flashed across my vision, and I felt a sticky warmth on my brow.

My eyelids fluttered once—blood was running into my eyes.

In a stunned heap I lay there, the gun firing again and again, the bullets hissing over me. The screams made me want to curl into a ball, but I forced myself to stay still. I tried to squeeze my own breathing to a halt.

I'm dead. I'm dead.

My body shuddered once, fighting me, demanding deeper breaths.

I don't need to breathe—I'm dead.

The shooting finally stopped again, but worse sounds filled the ringing silence. A woman crying for mercy, someone trying to breathe with torn lungs. In the distance, I heard the pop and crack of pistols.

Then the worst noise of all: tennis shoes squeaking on wet tiles, taking slow, careful steps. I remembered him shooting the wounded, making sure that no one would escape this nightmare.

Don't look at me. I'm dead.

My heartbeat thudded, hard enough to shake the whole airport. But somehow I kept myself from breathing.

The squeak of tennis shoes began to fade, crowded out by a soft roar in my head. My lungs were still now, not fighting anymore, and I felt myself falling softly away from my body, straight through the floor and down toward someplace dark and silent and cold.

It didn't matter if the world was crumbling. I couldn't breathe or move or think, except to remind myself . . .

I'm dead.

Behind my eyelids, vision went from red to black, like spilled ink spreading across my mind. Cold filled me, and my dizziness became a slow swaying, a feeling of stillness.

A long time seemed to pass with nothing happening.

And then I woke up somewhere else.

CHAPTER 3

THE MANILA ENVELOPE FROM THE UNDERBRIDGE LITERARY Agency was as thick as a college acceptance package. But instead of forms, booklets, and brochures, it contained four copies of the same document—a publishing contract—and a return envelope that was already addressed and stamped.

Darcy Patel had learned all this from an email a week ago, and had read the contract at various stages of its drafting. There was no mystery about the envelope's contents at all. But the act of slicing it open still seemed momentous. She had appropriated her father's Princeton letter opener for the occasion.

"It's here," she said at her sister's door. Nisha threw her book aside, sprang out of bed, and followed Darcy to her room.

They were quiet going down the hall. Darcy didn't want her father reading through the contract again and offering more legal advice. (For one thing, he was an engineer, not a lawyer. For

another, Darcy had an agent already.) But Nisha had to be here. She'd read *Afterworlds* last November, as it was being written, sometimes aloud over Darcy's shoulder.

"Close the door." Darcy sat at her desk. Her hands trembled a little.

Nisha obeyed and padded in. "Took long enough. When did Paradox say they wanted to buy it? Three months ago?"

"My agent says some contracts take a year."

"That's seven today, and it's not even noon!"

By mutual agreement, Darcy was allowed to use the phrase "my agent" no more than ten times a day in front of her little sister; any overages cost a dollar each. This seemed generous to everyone concerned.

Darcy faced the envelope, hefting the letter opener in one hand.

"Okay. Here we go."

The blade cut smoothly at first, but halfway through it caught on something inside, a staple or a butterfly clip perhaps. It began to stutter, tearing instead of slicing.

Then it was stuck.

"Crap." Darcy pushed a little harder.

The opener moved again, but in its wake a ragged little filigree of white paper emerged from the slit.

"Smooth, Patel," Nisha said, now standing directly behind her.

Darcy slid the contracts out. She had torn the top of the first page.

"Great. My agent's going to think I'm a dipshit."

"That's eight," Nisha said. "Why do they need all those copies, anyway?"

"I guess it's more official that way." Darcy checked the rest of

the envelope's contents. She hadn't destroyed anything else. "Do you think this one counts, now that it's ripped?"

"With a massive tear like that? Frankly, Patel, I think your whole career is canceled."

Something sharp levered itself between two of Darcy's ribs, as if the errant letter opener had slipped again. "Don't even say that. And stop calling me by my last name. *Our* last name. It's weird."

"Pfft," Nisha said to this. She developed new verbal tics about once a week, which was often useful. The protagonist of *Afterworlds* had borrowed a lot of her eccentric cursing. "Just put some tape on it."

Darcy sighed, sliding open her desk drawer. A moment later, the contract was taped together, but somehow it looked even more pathetic now. Like a fifth grader's art project: My PubLisHing ContRact.

"It doesn't even seem real anymore."

"It's a disaster!" Nisha fell backward on Darcy's bed, bouncing in her death throes and pulling the blankets askew. People were always saying how much older Nisha seemed than her fourteen years. If only they knew the truth.

"*None* of this seems real," Darcy said softly, staring at the torn contract.

Nisha sat up. "You know why that is, Patel? Because you haven't told them yet."

"I will. After graduation next week." Or maybe later, whenever Oberlin's deferral deadline was.

"No, *now*. Right after you drop those contracts in the mail."

"Today?" The thought of her parents' reaction sent a cold trickle down Darcy's spine.

"Yes. Telling them is what makes all of this real. Until then, you're just some little kid daydreaming about being a famous writer."

Darcy stared at her sister. "You remember I'm older than you, right?"

"So act like it."

"But they might say no."

"They can't. You're eighteen. That's, like, an adult."

A laugh erupted out of Darcy, and Nisha joined in. The idea of the elder Patels recognizing their children's independence at eighteen—or any age—was hilarious.

"Don't worry about them," Nisha said once they'd recovered. "I have a plan."

"Which is?"

"Secret." A crafty smile settled onto Nisha's face, which was about as reassuring as the shredded contract.

It wasn't only her parents' reaction that was making Darcy nervous. There was something terrifying about her plans, something absurd, as if she'd decided to become an astronaut or a rock star.

"Do you think I'm crazy, wanting to do this?"

Nisha shrugged. "If you want to be a writer, you should do it now. Like you keep saying, *Afterworlds* could tank and no one will ever publish you again."

"I only said that once." Darcy sighed. "But thanks for reminding me."

"You're welcome, Patel. But look—that's a binding legal contract. Until your book officially bombs, you're a real novelist! So would you rather blow all that money as a writer in New York City? Or as some freshman churning out essays about dead white guys?"

Darcy dropped her gaze to the torn contract. Maybe it had ripped because she wanted this too much. Maybe her hand would always slip at the last moment, tearing what she desired most. But somehow the contract was beautiful, even in its damaged state. Right there on the first page, it defined her, Darcy Patel, as "The Author." You couldn't get much realer than that.

"I'd rather be a writer than a freshman," she said.

"Then you have to tell the elder Patels—*after* those are in the mailbox."

Darcy looked at the return envelope and wondered if the Underbridge Literary Agency provided stamps for all its authors, or only the teenage ones. But at least it made sending off the contract as easy as walking to the corner, which took less effort than resisting Nisha. If her little sister had a plan, there would be no respite without compliance.

"Okay. At lunch."

Darcy lifted her favorite pen, and signed her name four times.

"I've got something to tell you guys," she said. "But don't get upset."

The expressions around the table—including Nisha's—made Darcy wonder if she should have started differently. Her father had paused in midbite, and Annika Patel was staring wide-eyed.

Lunch was leftovers from takeout the night before—fried red peppers, chickpeas cooked with tamarind, all of it swimming in garam masala and served straight from the styrofoam containers. Not an auspicious setting for important announcements.

"The thing is, I want to defer college for a year."

"What?" her mother asked. "Why on earth?"

"Because I have responsibilities." This line had sounded better in her head. "I need to do the rewrites for *Afterworlds*, and write a sequel."

"But . . ." Her mother paused, and the elder Patels shared a look.

"Working on books isn't going to take *all* your time," her father said. "You wrote your first one in a month, didn't you? And that didn't interfere with your studies."

"It almost killed me!" Darcy said. She'd dreaded coming home some days last November, because she knew that two thousand words of novel awaited her, on top of homework, college application essays, and studying for the SATs. "Besides, I didn't write a book in a month. I wrote a *draft*."

Her parents just stared at her.

"There's no good writing, only good *rewriting*," she quoted, not quite certain who'd said it first. "Everyone says *this* is the hard part, turning my draft into a real novel. According to the contract, I have until September to turn in a final draft. That's four whole months, so they must think revisions are pretty important."

"I'm sure they are. But September is when college starts," Annika Patel said, all smiles. "So there's no conflict, is there?"

"Right," Darcy sighed. "Except once I finish *Afterworlds*, I have to write the sequel, and then revise that. And my agent says that I should be promoting myself already!"

Nisha held up both hands, her fingers silently indicating nine "my agents."

"Darcy," her father said. "You know we've always supported your creativity. But wasn't the main reason for writing the novel so you could put it on your college applications?"

"No!" Darcy cried. "Where did you get that idea?"

Annika Patel placed her palms together, as if praying for quiet. When she had everyone's attention, her look of long suffering softened into a sly smile.

"Is this because you're afraid of leaving home? I know that Ohio seems a long way away, but you can call us anytime."

"Oh," Darcy said, realizing that her announcement was incomplete. "I'm not staying *here*. I'm moving to New York."

In the silence that followed, all Darcy could hear was Nisha chewing on a samosa. She wished that her little sister would at least *try* not to look so amused.

"New York *City*?" their mother finally asked.

"I want to be a writer, and that's where publishing is."

Annika Patel let out a slow, exasperated sigh. "You haven't even let us read this book, Darcy. And now you want to give up college for this . . . *dream*."

"I'm not giving it up, Mom, just deferring it for a year." The right words finally came to her. "A year of studying the publishing industry. Learning all about it from the inside! Can you imagine what *that* would look like on a college application?" Darcy waved her hands. "I mean, except I won't need to apply again, because I'm only deferring."

Her voice took on a guilty quaver at the end. According to the Oberlin student manual, deferment was allowed only under "exceptional circumstances," and the definition of "exceptional" was up to the school. They could say no, and then she'd have to start all over.

But being under contract to write a novel was pretty exceptional, wasn't it?

"I don't know about this, Darcy." Her father shook his head. "First you don't apply to any universities in India, and then—"

"I'd never get into a good school in India! Even Sagan couldn't, and he's a math genius." Darcy turned to her mother, who actually read novels. "You guys thought it was awesome when my book sold."

"Of course it's wonderful." Annika Patel shook her head. "Even if you won't let us read it."

"Just until I do the rewrites."

"That's up to you," her mother said. "But you can't expect every novel you write to make this tremendous amount of money. You have to be practical. You've never lived alone, or paid your own bills, or made your own food. . . ."

Darcy didn't trust herself to speak. Her eyes stung, and her throat was tight. Nisha had been right—now that she'd uttered her dream aloud to her parents, it had become real. Too real to lose.

But at the same time countless other things had become real, all the nuts and bolts of food and shelter. Darcy had never even done her own laundry.

She looked pleadingly at her little sister. Nisha placed her fork down with a little tap, just loud enough.

"I was thinking," she said as everyone turned to her. "Moneywise, it might be better if Darcy takes a year off."

No one said anything, and Nisha played the silence for a moment.

"I was looking at Oberlin's financial aid forms. And of course the main thing they ask is what the parents earn. But there's another place where they ask for *the student's* income. Turns out, whatever Darcy makes comes straight off the top of any aid they offer."

Still no one spoke, and Nisha nodded slowly to herself, as if she were realizing all this just now.

"Darcy's going to make more than a hundred grand this year, just by signing that contract. So if she starts college now, she won't get any financial aid at all."

"Oh," Darcy said. Her two-book advance was about the size of a four-year education. By the time she'd finished college, every penny would be gone.

"Well, *that* doesn't seem fair," her father said. "I mean, maybe there's a way to change the contract and delay the—"

"Too late," Darcy said, marveling at her little sister's deviousness. "Already signed and mailed it."

Her parents were staring at each other now, communing in some unspoken parental way, which meant that they would discuss the matter in private, later. Which meant that Nisha had opened the door a tiny crack.

Now was the time to seal the deal.

"New York's a lot closer than Oberlin," Darcy said. "I'll only be a train ride away, and Aunt Lalana lives there, and there's a much bigger Gujarati community than in—"

Annika Patel raised her hand, and Darcy stammered to a halt on the word "Ohio." Maybe it was best to save a few arguments for later, in case this battle went to round two.

But already something momentous had happened here at this table. Darcy could feel her course in life, which had been set so determinedly since she was a little girl, bending toward a new trajectory. She had changed the arc of her own story, merely by typing a couple of thousand words each day for thirty days.

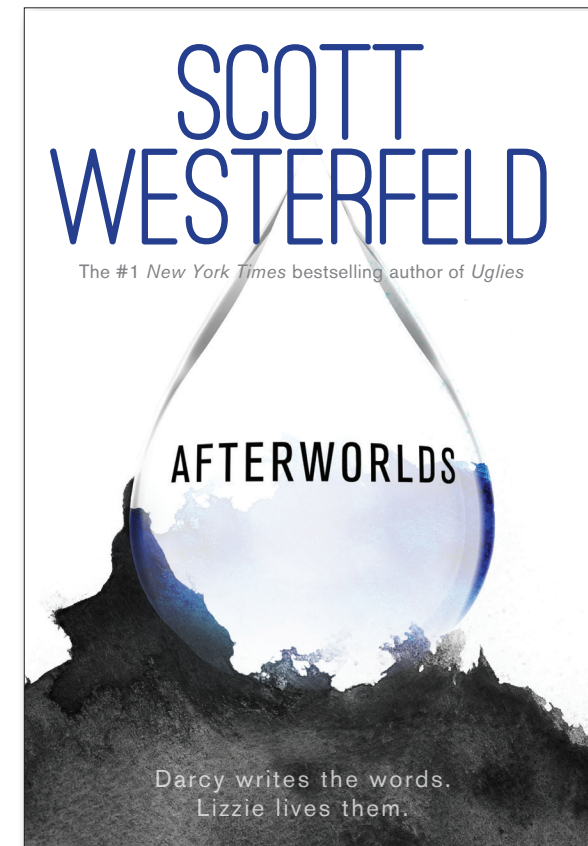
AFTERWORLDS

And the taste of that power, the power of her own words, made her hungrier.

Darcy didn't want this interruption to last only a year. She wanted to see how long she could stretch this feeling out. To be dizzy with words again, like in that glorious week at the end of last November when everything had fallen into place. Darcy wanted that feeling not just for a year.

She wanted it forever.

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