



Everything We Ever Wanted

By Sara Shepard
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Introduction

A recently widowed mother of two, Sylvie Bates-McAllister finds her life upended by a late-night phone call from the headmaster of the prestigious private school founded by her grandfather where her adopted son Scott teaches. Allegations of Scott's involvement in a hazing scandal cause a ripple effect, throwing the entire family into chaos. For Charles, Sylvie's biological son, it dredges up a ghost from the past who is suddenly painfully present. For his wife Joanna, it forces her to reevaluate everything she's hoped for in the golden Bates-McAllisters. And for Scott, it illuminates harsh truths about a world he has never truly felt himself a part of.

But for all the Bates-McAllisters, the call exposes a tangled web of secrets that ties the family together: the mystery of the school hazing, the event that tore Charles and Scott apart the night of their high school awards ceremony, and the intended recipient of a certain bracelet. The quest to unravel the truth takes the family on individual journeys across state lines, into hospitals, through the Pennsylvania woods, and face-to-face with the long-dormant question: *what if the life you always planned for and dreamed of isn't what you want after all?*

Questions for Discussion

1. Throughout *Everything We Ever Wanted*, Sylvie's house, Roderick, is as much a character in the novel as it is a setting. How do other homes in this story play a role? What is the significance of the empty houses on Spirit Street? Of Catherine's house in Maryland? Is it significant that Bronwyn and the members of Back to the Land don't have houses?
2. Both Sylvie and Joanna have complex relationships with their mothers. In what ways do these relationships affect the two women's choices throughout the novel? Are they seeking approval from their mothers, or are their decisions a form of rebellion?
3. Early on in the novel, we learn that Scott is not only adopted, but also black in a white family. How do these realities affect Scott's relationship with his family and his community? Do you see race as a factor that separates Scott?
4. Many of the tensions in the book are caused by what is left unsaid. Charles doesn't tell Joanna about Bronwyn, James never told Sylvie the details of the bracelet, and Scott doesn't volunteer any information about the wrestling team. How do you think this story might have turned out differently if the characters had been more open? What other instances in the novel can you think of where events are propelled by characters' withholding the truth?
5. James, Joanna, and Scott all feel disconnected from the looming shadow of the Bates family. How do their choices reflect this discomfort? Do you see this lack of acceptance by the Bates family as real, or are these three characters' insecurities largely of their own making?
6. This novel often seems built on the conflicts that arise from oppositions: wealthy versus middle class, the suburbs versus the city, adopted versus biological. What other oppositions can you think of? How are they significant to the story?
7. Much of the central drama revolves around Swithin, the elite school that Sylvie's grandfather rebuilt, even though all of the Bates-McAllisters have long since graduated. Why do you think the school still plays such a big role in the characters' lives? What is the significance of Sylvie's final decision regarding the Swithin board?
8. Sylvie's grandfather, Charlie Roderick Bates, is one of the most important figures in the Bates-McAllister family's life, yet no central character besides Sylvie ever knew him. In what ways does Charlie continue to influence the Bates-McAllister family?
9. On pages 208-209, Joanna tells Scott about her childhood excitement and eventual disappointment regarding the arrival of the Kimberton Fair. Why do you think Joanna shares this story? How would you relate this story to the rest of the novel?

About the Author

Sara Shepard graduated from New York University and has an MFA in Creative Writing from Brooklyn College. The author of the bestselling young adult series, *Pretty Little Liars* and *The Lying Game*, as well as the adult novel, *The Visible*, she currently lives outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with her husband and dogs.