



She's Not There: A Novel

By Joy Fielding

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A vanished child, a family in turmoil, and a fateful phone call that brings the torments of the past into the harrowing present . . . the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Someone Is Watching* weaves these spellbinding elements into a gripping novel of psychological suspense—a must-read for fans of Laura Lippman and Mary Higgins Clark.

“I think my real name is Samantha. I think I’m your daughter.”

Caroline Shipley’s heart nearly stops when she hears those words from the voice on the other end of the phone. Instantly, she’s thrust fifteen years into the past, to a posh resort in Baja, Mexico—and the fateful night her world collapsed.

The trip is supposed to be a celebration. Caroline’s husband, Hunter, convinces her to leave their two young daughters, Michelle and Samantha, alone in their hotel suite while the couple enjoys an anniversary dinner in the restaurant downstairs. But returning afterward, Caroline and Hunter make a horrifying discovery: Two-year-old Samantha has vanished without a trace.

What follows are days, weeks, and years of anguish for Caroline. She’s tormented by media attention that has branded her a cold, incompetent mother, while she struggles to save her marriage. Caroline also has to deal with the demands of her needy elder daughter, Michelle, who is driven to cope in dangerous ways. Through it all, Caroline desperately clings to the hope that Samantha will someday be found—only to be stung again and again by cruel reality.

Plunged back into the still-raw heartbreak of her daughter’s disappearance, and the suspicions and inconsistencies surrounding a case long gone cold, Caroline doesn’t know whom or what to believe. The only thing she can be sure of is that someone is fiercely determined to hide the truth of what happened to Samantha.

Praise for Joy Fielding’s *Someone Is Watching*

“Someone Is Watching gripped me from the first to the very last page. Bailey Carpenter is a heroine who’s both victim and warrior woman, a fascinating sleuth who will linger with you long after you’ve finished this thrilling read.”—Tess

Gerritsen

“Fielding pens a spiraling tale of paranoia and suspense, as sultry as a Miami night.”—**Jenny Milchman**

“An edge-of-your-seat read . . . With Fielding’s patented blend of complex characters and escalating suspense, she is in top form here.”—**Karen Robards**

“Engrossing . . . The characters pulsate with life.”—***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

“A gripping, fast-paced psychological thriller . . . Fielding’s story of one woman’s search for justice, understanding, and internal peace is nothing short of arresting.”—***Booklist* (starred review)**

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Joy Fielding is the "New York Times" bestselling "author of "Someone Is Watching, Charley's Web," "Heartstopper," "Mad River Road," "See Jane Run," and other acclaimed novels. She divides her time between Toronto and Palm Beach, Florida."

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One

The Present

It was barely eight a.m. and the phone was already ringing. Caroline could make out the distinctive three-ring chime that signaled a long-distance call even with the bathroom door closed and the shower running. She chose to ignore it, deciding it was probably a telemarketer or the press. Either alternative was odious, but given a choice between the two, Caroline would have opted for the telemarketer. Telemarketers were only after your money. The press wanted your blood.

Even after all this time.

Fifteen years tomorrow.

She buried her head under the shower's hot spray, the lather of her shampoo oozing across her closed eyes and down her cheeks. That couldn't be right. How could fifteen years of seemingly endless days and sleepless nights have passed by so quickly? At the very least, she would have thought public curiosity in her would have waned by now. But if anything, such interest had actually increased with each successive anniversary. Reporters had been calling for weeks, some from as far away as Australia and Japan: What was her life like now? Were there any new leads? Any new men? Another suicide, perhaps? Did she still harbor hopes of seeing her daughter again? Did the police still consider her a suspect in the child's disappearance?

Except Samantha would no longer be a child. Barely two when she'd vanished without a trace from her crib at an upscale Mexican resort while, according to the press, her parents cavorted with friends at a nearby restaurant, her daughter would be seventeen now.

Assuming she was still alive.

So, in answer to some of their questions: there were no new leads; she would never give up hope; she no longer gave a hoot what the police thought about her; and her life would be a lot better if the vultures of the press would leave her the hell alone.

Her head bowed, water dripping from her nose and chin, Caroline reached up to turn off the shower taps, satisfied that the phone's intrusive ringing had finally stopped. She understood it was just a temporary respite. Whoever had called would call again. They always did.

Stepping onto the heated white-and-gray marble floor of her bathroom, she wrapped herself in her white terry-cloth bathrobe and swiped at the layer of steam that coated the large mirror above the double sink with the palm of her hand. A forty-six-year-old woman with wet brown hair and tired green eyes stared back at her, a far cry from the "beautiful" and "reserved" young woman "with haunted eyes" that the newspapers had described at the time of Samantha's disappearance, somehow managing to make the words "beautiful" and "reserved" ugly and accusatory. Around the ten-year mark, "beautiful" became "striking" and "reserved" morphed into "remote." And last year, a reporter had demoted her further, referring to her as "a still attractive middle-aged woman." Damning her with faint praise, but damning her nonetheless.

Whatever. She was used to it.

Caroline rubbed her scalp vigorously with a thick white towel, watching her new haircut fall limply around her chin. The hairdresser had promised the bob would result in a more youthful appearance, but he hadn't reckoned on the stubborn fineness of Caroline's hair, which refused to do anything other than just lie there. Caroline took a deep breath, deciding that tomorrow's press clippings would probably describe her as "the once attractive mother of missing child Samantha Shipley."

Did it even matter what she looked like? Would she be any less guilty—of neglect, of bad parenting, of murder—in the court of public opinion because she was less attractive than she'd been at the time of her daughter's disappearance? Then, she'd been excoriated in the press for everything from the cut of her cheekbones to the shortness of her skirts, from the shine of her shoulder-length hair to the sheen of her lipstick. Even the sincerity of her tears had been called into question, one tabloid commenting that at one press conference, her mascara had remained "curiously undisturbed."

Her husband had received only a tiny fraction of the vitriol that had come Caroline's way. As handsome as Hunter was, there was a blandness about his good looks that made him less of a target. While Caroline's natural shyness had the unfortunate tendency to come across as aloof, Hunter's more outgoing personality had made him seem both accessible and open. He was portrayed as a father "barely holding himself together" while "clinging tight to his older daughter, Michelle, a cherub-cheeked child of five," his wife standing "ramrod straight beside them, separate and apart."

No mention of the fact that it had been at Hunter's insistence that they went out that night, even after the babysitter they'd hired failed to show. No mention of the fact that he'd left Mexico to return to his law practice in San Diego barely a week after Samantha's disappearance. No mention of the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back," the final betrayal that had doomed their marriage once and for all.

Except that had been her fault, too.

"Everything, my fault," Caroline said to her reflection, withdrawing her hair dryer from the drawer underneath the sink and pointing it at her head like a gun. She flicked the "on" switch, shooting a blast of hot air directly into her ear.

The ringing started almost immediately. It took a second for Caroline to realize it was the phone. One long ring, followed by two shorter ones, indicating another long-distance call. “Go away,” she shouted toward her bedroom. Then, “Oh, hell.” She turned off the hair dryer and marched into the bedroom, grabbing the phone from the nightstand beside her king-size bed, careful not to so much as glance at the morning newspaper lying atop the crumpled sheets. “Hello.”

Silence, followed by a busy signal.

“Great.” She returned the phone to its charger, her eyes pulled inexorably toward the newspaper’s front page. There, next to the yearly rehashing of every awful fact and sordid innuendo that had been printed over the last fifteen years, the rewording of every salacious detail—“Adultery!” “Suicide!” “True Confessions!”—was a large photograph of two-year-old Samantha, smiling up at her from beside an artist’s sketch of what her daughter might look like today. Similar sketches had been plastered all over the Internet for the past two weeks. Caroline sank to the bed, her legs too weak to sustain her. The phone rang again and she lunged for it, picking it up before it could complete its first ring. “Please. Just leave me alone,” she said.

“I take it you’ve seen the morning paper,” the familiar voice said. The voice belonged to Peggy Banack, director of the Marigold Hospice, a twelve-bed facility for the terminally ill in the heart of San Diego. Peggy had been Caroline’s best friend for the last thirty years and her only friend for the last fifteen.

“Hard to miss.” Again Caroline struggled not to look at the front page.

“Asshole writes the same thing every year. Are you all right?”

Caroline shrugged. “I guess. Where are you?”

“At work.”

Of course, Caroline thought. Where else would Peggy be at eight o’clock on a Monday morning?

“Listen, I hate to bother you with this,” Peggy said, “especially now .??.?”

“What is it?”

“I was just wondering .??. Has Michelle left yet?”

“Michelle’s at her father’s. She’s been staying there a lot since the baby .??.” Caroline took a deep breath to keep from gagging. “Was she supposed to work this morning?”

“She’s probably on her way.”

Caroline nodded, punching in the numbers for Michelle’s cell as soon as she said goodbye to Peggy. Surely even someone as headstrong and self-destructive as her daughter wouldn’t be foolish enough to skip out on her court-mandated community service.

“Hi, it’s Micki,” her daughter’s voice announced in tones so breathy that Caroline barely recognized her. “Leave a message.”

Not even a “please,” Caroline thought, bristling at the nickname “Micki” and wondering if that was the

reason her daughter had taken to using it. “Michelle,” she said pointedly, “Peggy just called. Apparently you’re late for your shift. Where are you?” She hung up the phone, took a deep breath, then called Hunter’s landline, determined not to be negative. Maybe her daughter’s alarm clock had failed to go off. Maybe her bus was running late. Maybe she was, right this minute, walking through the doors of the hospice.

Or maybe she’s sleeping off another late night of partying, intruded the uninvited voice of reality. Maybe she’d had another few too many before getting behind the wheel of her car, ignoring both her recent arrest for driving under the influence and the suspension of her license. Maybe the police had pulled her over, effectively scuttling the deal her father had worked out with the assistant district attorney, a deal that allowed her to avoid jail time in exchange for several hundred hours of community service. “Damn it, Michelle. Can you really be that irresponsible?” Caroline realized only as she spoke that someone was already on the other end of the line.

“Caroline?” her ex-husband asked.

“Hunter,” Caroline said in return, his name teetering uncomfortably on her tongue. “How are you?”

“Okay. You?”

“Hanging in.”

“Have you seen the morning paper?”

“Yes.”

“Not an easy time of year,” he said, always good at stating the obvious.

“No.” Although you seem to be managing rather well, she thought. A young wife, a two-year-old son, a new baby girl to replace the one he’d lost. “Is Michelle there?”

“I believe she’s helping Diana with the baby.”

As if on cue, an infant’s frantic wails raced toward the receiver. Caroline closed her eyes, trying not to picture this latest addition to Hunter’s family. “Peggy called. Michelle’s supposed to be at the hospice.”

“Really? I thought she was going in this afternoon. Hold on a minute. Micki,” Hunter called loudly. “It’s probably just a misunderstanding.”

“Probably,” Caroline repeated without conviction.

“What did you think of the sketch?” Hunter surprised her by asking.

Caroline felt her breath freeze in her lungs, amazed that her former husband could manage to sound so matter-of-fact, as if he was referring to an abstract work of art and not a picture of their missing child. “I—I— It’s—” she stammered, her eyes darting between the photograph and the drawing. “They’ve given her your jaw.”

Hunter made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh. “That’s funny. Diana said the same thing.”

Oh, God, Caroline thought.

“What’s up?” Caroline heard Michelle ask her father.

“It’s your mother,” Hunter said, his voice retreating as he handed Michelle the phone. “Apparently you’re supposed to be at the hospice.”

“I’m going in this afternoon,” Michelle told her mother, the breathy whisper of her voice mail nowhere in evidence.

“You can’t just go in whenever you feel like it,” Caroline said.

“Really? That’s not how it works?”

“Michelle .??.?”

“Relax, Mother. I switched shifts with another girl.”

“Well, she hasn’t shown up.”

“She will. Don’t worry. Anything else?”

“You should probably call Peggy, let her know .??.?”

“Thanks. I’ll do that.”

“Michelle .??.?”

“Yeah?”

“I was thinking, maybe we could go out for dinner tonight .??.?”

“Can’t. Have plans with my friend Emma.”

“Emma?” Caroline repeated, trying to disguise her disappointment. “Have I met her?”

“Only half a dozen times.”

“Really? I don’t remember .??.?”

“That’s because you never remember any of my friends.”

“That’s not true.”

“Sure it is. Anyway, gotta go. Talk to you later.”

The line went dead in Caroline’s hand. She dropped the phone to the bed, watching it disappear amid the rumpled white sheets. “Damn it.” Was Michelle right? Her daughter had always had a lot of friends, although none of them seemed to stick around for very long, making it hard to keep track. Something else to

feel guilty about.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sonya Wright:

Have you spare time to get a day? What do you do when you have a lot more or little spare time? Sure, you can choose the suitable activity with regard to spend your time. Any person spent their particular spare time to take a go walking, shopping, or went to typically the Mall. How about open as well as read a book entitled She's Not There: A Novel? Maybe it is to be best activity for you. You understand beside you can spend your time along with your favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with the opinion or you have some other opinion?

Brett Munoz:

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