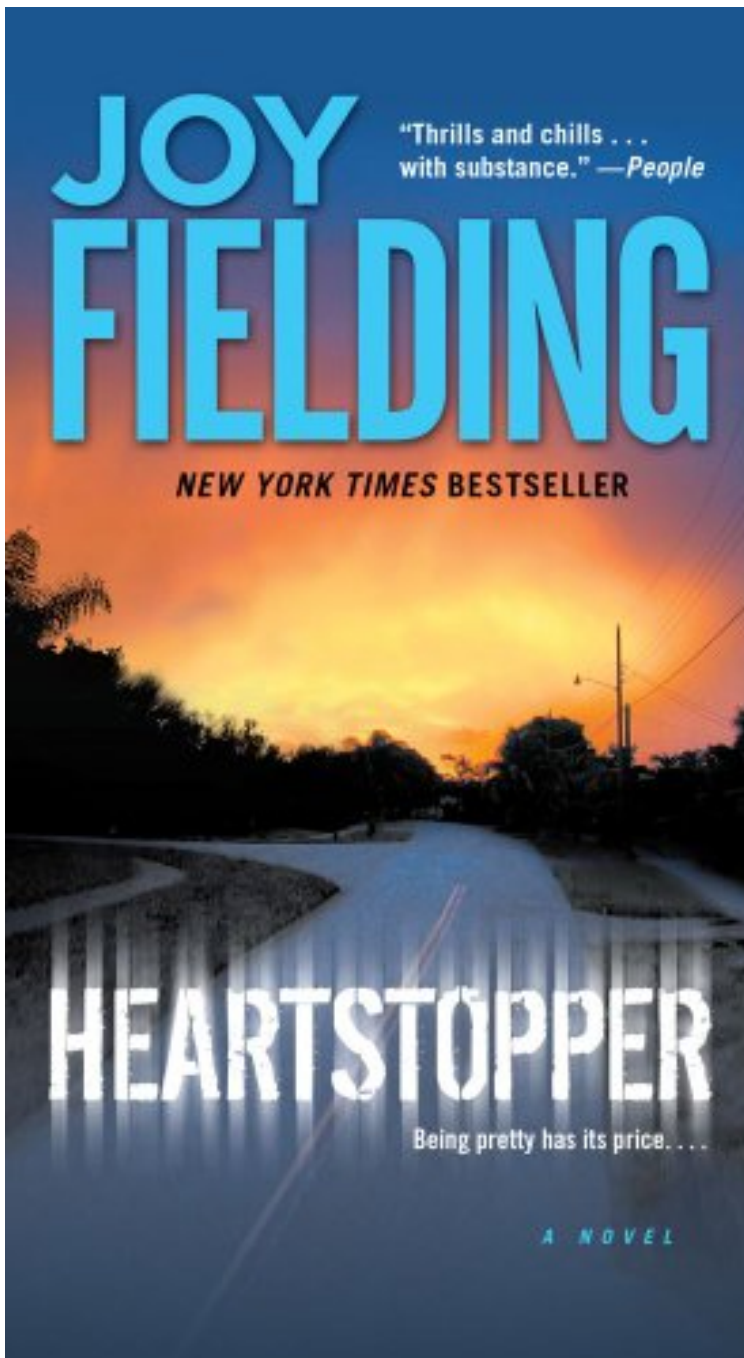


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Heartstopper: A Novel (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom the New York Times and internationally bestselling author of Mad River Road comes a spine-tingling thriller about a picturesque Florida town -- and the killer determined to prey on its teenage girls. Welcome to Torrance, Florida. Population: 4,160. As Sheriff John Weber would attest, the

deadliest predators to date in his tiny hamlet were the alligators lurking in the nearby swamps. But that was before someone abducted and murdered a runaway teenage girl...and before the disappearance of popular and pretty Liana Martin. The pattern is chilling to Sandy Crosbie, the town's new high school English teacher. With a marriage on the rocks, thanks to her husband's online affairs, and a beautiful teenage daughter to protect, Sandy wishes she'd never come to the seemingly quiet town with shocking depths of scandal, sex, and brutality roiling beneath its surface. And as Sheriff Weber digs up more questions than answers in a dead-end investigation, one truth emerges: the prettiest ones are being targeted, the heartstoppers. And this killer intends to give them their due.... Alternating between the chilling journal entries of a cold-blooded murderer and the sizzling scandals of small-town life, Heartstopper is Joy Fielding's most exciting novel of suspense yet.

Chapter 1 KILLERS JOURNAL

The girl is waking up. She stirs, mascara-coated eyelashes fluttering seductively, large blue eyes opening, then closing again, then reopening, staying open longer this time, casually absorbing the unfamiliarity of her surroundings. That she is in a strange place, with no memory of how she got here, will take several seconds to sink in fully. That her life is in danger will hit her all at once, with the sudden force of a giant, renegade wave, knocking her back on the small cot I've so thoughtfully provided, even as she struggles gamely to her feet. This is my favorite part. Even more than what comes later. I've never been a huge fan of blood and guts. Those shows you see on TV today, the ones that are so popular, the ones filled with crack forensic experts in skintight pants and push-up bras, they've never held much appeal for me. All those dead bodies hapless victims dispatched in an increasingly gory variety of exotic ways lying on cold steel slabs in ultramodern morgues, waiting to be cracked open and invaded by dispassionate, gloved fingers they just don't do it for me. Even if the bodies weren't so obviously fake although even the most obvious of rubber torsos look more real than the ubiquitous breast implants held in check by those heroic, push-up bras it wouldn't turn me on. Violence, per se, has never been my thing. I've always preferred the buildup to an event over the actual event itself. Just as I've always preferred the flawed, natural contour of real breasts to the perfectly inflated and perfectly awful monstrosities so popular today. And not just on TV. You see them everywhere. Even here in the middle of Alligator Alley, in the middle of south-central Florida. The middle of nowhere. I think it was Alfred Hitchcock who best summed up the difference between shock and suspense. Shock, he said, is quick, a jolt to the senses that lasts but a second, whereas suspense is more of a slow tease. Rather like the difference between prolonged foreplay and premature ejaculation, I would add, and I like to think old Alfred would chuckle and agree. He always preferred suspense to shock, the payoff being greater, ultimately more fulfilling. I'm with him on this, although, like Hitch, I'm not adverse to the occasional shock along the way. You have to keep things interesting. As this girl will soon find out. She's sitting up now, hands forming anxious fists at her sides as she scans her dimly lit surroundings. I can tell by the puzzled look on her pretty face she's a real heartstopper, as my grandfather used to say that she's trying to stay calm, to figure things out, to make sense of what's happening, while clinging to the hope this is all a dream. After all, this can't really be happening. She can't actually be sitting on the edge of a tiny cot in what appears to be a room in somebody's basement, if houses in Florida had basements, which, of course, most of them don't, Florida being a state built almost entirely on swampland. The panic won't be long in coming. As soon as she realizes she isn't dreaming, that her situation is real and, in fact, quite dire, that she is trapped in a locked room whose only light comes from a strategically placed lamplight on a ledge high above her head, once she has no way of reaching, even were she to turn the cot on its end and somehow manage to climb up its side. The last girl tried that and fell, crying and clutching her broken wrist, to the dirt floor. That's when she started screaming. That was fun for a while. She's just noticed the door, although unlike the last girl, she makes no move toward it. Instead, she just sits there, chewing on her bottom lip, frightened eyes darting back and forth. She's breathing loudly and visibly, her heart threatening to burst from between large, pendulous breasts to her credit, at least they're real like one of those hyperventilating contestants on *The Price Is Right*. Should she choose door number one, door number two, or door number three? Except there is only one door, and should she open it, what will she find? The Lady or the Tiger? Safety or destruction? I feel my lips curl into a smile. In fact, she will find nothing. At least not yet. Not until I'm ready. She's pushing herself off the cot, curiosity finally forcing one foot in front of the other, propelling her toward the door, even as a gnawing voice whispers in her ear, reminding her it was curiosity that killed the cat. Is she counting on the old wives tale about cats having nine lives? Does she think a bunch of useless, old wives can save her? Her trembling hand stretches toward the doorknob. Hello? she calls out, softly at first, her voice as wobbly as her fingers, then more forcefully. Hello? Is anybody there? I'm tempted to answer, but I know this isn't a good idea. First of all, it would tip her

to the fact I'm watching. Right now, the idea she's being observed has yet to occur to her, and when it does, maybe a minute or two from now, her eyes will begin their frantic, fruitless search of the premises. No matter. She won't be able to see me. The peephole I've carved into the wall is too small and too elevated for her to discover, especially in this meager light. Besides, hearing my voice would not only tip her to my presence and approximate location, it might help her identify me, thereby giving her an unnecessary edge in the battle of wits to come. No, I will present myself soon enough. No point in getting ahead of the game. The timing simply isn't right. And timing, as they say, is everything. Hello? Somebody? Her voice is growing more urgent, losing its girlish timbre, becoming shrill, almost hostile. That's one of the interesting things I've noticed about female voices: how quickly they jump from warm to harsh, from soothing to grating, how shameless they are in their eagerness to reveal all, how boldly they hurl their insecurities into the unsuspecting air. The gentle flute is overwhelmed by the raucous bagpipe; the chamber orchestra is trampled by the marching band. Hello? The girl grabs hold of the doorknob, tries pulling the door toward her. It doesn't budge. Quickly, her movements degenerate into a series of ungainly poses, becoming less measured, more frantic. She pulls on the door, then pushes it, then bangs her shoulder against it, repeating the process several more times before finally giving up and bursting into tears. That's the other thing I've learned about women: they always cry. It's the one thing about them that never disappoints, the one thing you can count on. Where am I? What's going on here? The girl bangs her fists against the door in growing frustration. She's angry now, as well as scared. She may not know where she is, but she knows she didn't get here by her own accord. Her mind is rapidly filling with increasingly terrifying images: recent newspaper headlines about missing girls, TV coverage of bodies being pulled from shallow graves, catalog displays of knives and other instruments of torture, film clips of helpless women being raped and strangled, before being dumped into slime-covered swamps. Help! she starts screaming. Somebody help me. But even as her plaintive cries hit the stale air, I suspect she knows such pleas are useless, that nobody can hear her. Nobody but me. Her head snaps up; her eyes shoot toward me, like a searchlight, and I jerk away from the wall, almost tripping over my feet as I stagger back. By the time I regroup, regain my breath and equilibrium, she is circling the small room, her eyes darting up and down, this way and that, the palms of her hands pushing against the unpainted, concrete walls, feeling for any signs of weakness. Where am I? Is anybody out there? Why have you brought me here? she is crying, as if the correct question will trigger a reassuring response. Finally, she gives up, collapses on the cot, cries some more. When she raises her head again for the second time, she looks right at me: her large blue eyes are bloated with tears and ringed in unflattering red. Or maybe that's just my imagination at work. A bit of wishful thinking on my part. She pushes herself back into a sitting position, takes a series of long, deep breaths. Clearly, she is trying to calm herself, while she takes stock of her situation. She glances at what she's wearing: a pale yellow T-shirt that shouts, MOVE, BITCH, in bright lime-green lettering across its stretched front, low-slung jeans pulled tight across her slender hips. The same outfit she was wearing . . . when? Yesterday? Last night? This morning? How long has she been here? She runs her fingers through long, strawberry-blond hair, then scratches at her right ankle, before leaning back against the wall. Some madman has kidnapped her and is holding her hostage, she is thinking, perhaps already wondering how she can tell this story to maximum effect after she escapes. Perhaps People magazine will come calling. Maybe even Hollywood. Who will they get to play her? The girl from Spider-Man, or maybe that other one, the one who's all over the tabloids these days. Lindsay Lohan? Is that her name? Or is it Tara Reid? Cameron Diaz would be good, even though Cameron's more than a decade older than she is. It doesn't really matter. They're all more or less interchangeable. Heartstoppers all. As am I. A heartstopper of a very different kind. The girl's face darkens. Once again, reality intrudes. What am I doing here? she is wondering. How did I get here? Why can't I remember? What she probably remembers is being in . . . *Revue de presse* NATIONAL BESTSELLER "I begged for Heartstopper to no avail, until it was formally submitted to me, and tore through it, then reread it. . . . It delivers the goods. . . . Heartstopper is Fielding's best book to date. . . . Stylistically assured." Lynn Crosbie, *The Globe and Mail*