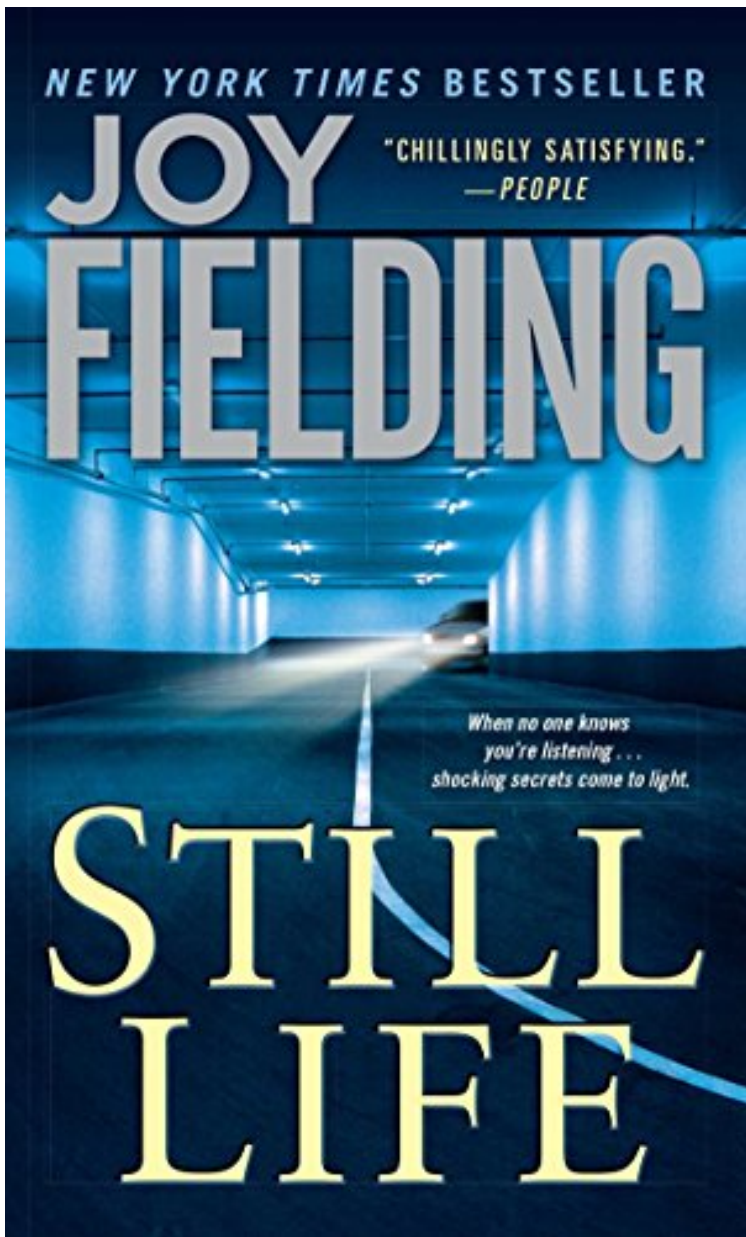


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Still Life: A Novel (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNew York Times bestselling author Joy Fielding delivers a riveting tale of suspense about a young woman caught in a nightmare somewhere between life and death. Beautiful, happily married, and the owner of a successful interior design business, Casey Marshall couldn't be more content with her life, until a car slams into her at almost fifty miles an hour, breaking nearly every bone in her body and plunging her into a coma. Lying in her hospital bed, Casey realizes that although she is unable to see or communicate, she can hear everything. She quickly discovers that her friends aren't necessarily the people

she thought them to be -- and that her accident might not have been an accident at all. As she struggles to break free from her living death, she begins to wonder if what lies ahead could be even worse. "It is Fielding's ability to get under the skin of her characters -- and her readers -- that has made her such a dependably bestselling author," says the Calgary Herald. Smart, suspenseful, and overwhelmingly addictive, *Still Life* is a novel her fans won't soon forget.

Chapter One

Less than an hour before the car slammed into her at a speed of almost fifty miles an hour, throwing her ten feet into the air, breaking nearly every bone in her body and cracking her head against the hard concrete, Casey Marshall was sitting in the elegant, narrow dining room of Southwark, one of South Philadelphia's more popular white-tablecloth restaurants, finishing lunch with her two closest friends and stealing glances at the beautiful, secluded courtyard behind their heads. She was wondering how long the unnaturally warm March weather was going to last, whether she had time to go for a run before her next appointment, and whether she should tell Janine the truth about what she really thought of her latest haircut. She had already lied and said she liked it. Casey smiled at the thought of an early spring and allowed her gaze to drift over her right shoulder, past the luminous still-life painting of a bouquet of enormous pink peonies by Tony Scherman, and toward the magnificent mahogany bar that was the centerpiece of the restaurant's front room. You hate it, don't you? she heard Janine say. The painting? Casey asked, although she doubted Janine had even noticed it. Janine regularly boasted she was oblivious to her surroundings. Having said that, she always seemed to select only the finest, most expensive places for them to have lunch. I think it's fabulous. My hair. You think it's awful. I don't think it's awful. You think it's too severe. Casey looked directly into Janine's intense blue eyes, several shades darker than her own. A little, yes, she agreed, thinking that the sharp, geometric angles of the blunt cut that hugged Janine's long, thin face put too much emphasis on the already exaggerated point of her chin, especially when combined with the almost blue-black tint of her hair. I was just so tired of the same old thing all the time, Janine explained, looking to their mutual friend, Gail, for confirmation. Gail, sitting beside Janine and across from Casey at the small, square table, nodded obligingly. A change is as good as a rest, she said half a beat behind Janine, so their sentences overlapped, like a song being sung in rounds. I mean, we were not in college anymore, Janine continued. Were over thirty. It's important to keep current. . . . Always good to keep current, Gail echoed. It was just time to do away with the Alice in Wonderland hairdo. Janine's eyes settled pointedly on the naturally blond hair that fell softly across Casey's shoulders. I liked your hair long, Casey demurred. So did I, Gail agreed, tucking a few frizzy brown curls behind her right ear. Gail never had a problem with her hair. It always looked as if she had just stepped on an electrical current. Although I like it this way, too, she added. Yeah, well, it was time to move on. That's what you always say, isn't it? The question was accompanied by such a sweet smile that it was difficult to know whether or not to take offense. What wasn't difficult for Casey to figure out was that they were no longer talking about hair. Time for more coffee, Gail announced, signaling the waiter. Casey decided to ignore the deeper implications of Janine's remark. What was the point in reopening old wounds? Instead, she offered up her gold-rimmed white china cup to the handsome, dark-haired waiter, watching as the hot brown liquid cascaded artfully from the spout of the silver coffeepot. While Casey knew Janine had never quite gotten over Casey's decision to leave the legal placement service they had co-founded fresh out of college to start her own business in the totally unrelated field of interior design, she had talked herself into believing that after almost a year, Janine had at least made peace with it. What complicated thing was the fact that Casey's new business had taken off running, while Janine's had ground to a halt. And who wouldn't resent that? It's amazing how everything you touch turns to gold, Janine regularly observed, always with the dazzling smile that accompanied the vaguely unpleasant undertone in her voice, making Casey question the validity of her instincts. It's probably just my guilty conscience, Casey thought now, not sure what she should feel guilty for. She took a long sip of her black coffee, feeling it burn the back of her throat. She and Janine had been friends since their sophomore year at Brown. Janine had just made the switch from prelaw to honors English; Casey was double-majoring in English and psychology. Despite the obvious differences in their personalities -- Casey generally the softer, more flexible of the two, Janine the more brittle and outgoing; Casey the more conciliatory, Janine the more confrontational -- they had clicked immediately. Perhaps it was a case of opposites attracting, of one woman sensing something in the other that was lacking in herself. Casey had never tried too hard to analyze the forces that had brought them together, or why their friendship had endured a decade past graduation, despite the myriad changes those ten years had brought, changes that included the dissolution of their business partnership and Casey's recent marriage to a man Janine described completely with a dazzling smile as fucking perfect, of course. Casey chose to be grateful instead. Just as she was grateful for her other close friend, Gail,

a young woman much less complicated than either Casey or Janine in virtually every respect. Casey had known Gail since grade school, and although more than twenty years had passed, Gail was essentially the same guileless, open-faced girl she'd always been. With Gail, what you saw was what you got. And what you got was a thirty-two-year-old woman who, despite much hardship, still ended almost every sentence with a giggle, like a shy teenage girl, eager to be liked. Sometimes she even giggled in the middle of a sentence, or even while she was speaking, a habit that was as disconcerting as it was endearing. Casey considered it the auditory equivalent of a puppy offering up its stomach to be stroked. Unlike Janine, there were no pretenses where Gail was concerned, no hidden agendas, no particularly deep thoughts. She generally waited until she knew how you felt about something before offering up an opinion of her own. Occasionally Janine grumbled about Gail's naiveté and unrelenting optimism, but even she'd been forced to agree that Gail was such a pleasant person, it made you feel good just to be around her. And Casey admired the skill involved in being able to listen to both sides of an argument and make each party believe you were on her side. It was probably what made her such a good saleswoman. Everything okay? Casey asked, turning her attention back to Janine and praying for a simple yes in response. Everything's fine. Why? I don't know. You just seem a little . . . I don't know. Of course you do. You know everything. You see that's exactly what I mean. What do you mean? What do you mean? Am I missing something here? Gail asked, large brown eyes darting nervously between the two women. Are you angry at me? Casey asked Janine directly. Why would I be angry at you? I don't know. I honestly don't know what you're talking about. Janine touched the gold locket at her throat and adjusted the collar of her crisp white Valentino blouse. Casey knew it was Valentino because she'd seen it on a recent cover of Vogue. She also knew that Janine couldn't afford to pay almost two thousand dollars for a blouse, but then, Janine had been dressing beyond her means for as long as Casey could remember. It's very important to wear nice clothes, Janine had said when Casey questioned one of her more exorbitant purchases. Followed by: I may not have been born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but I know the importance of dressing well. Okay, Casey said now, picking up the silver spoon next to her coffee cup and turning it over in her hand before letting it drop. That's good. So maybe I am a little irritated, Janine conceded with a shake of her newly geometrically cut hair. Several straight black strands caught the side of her generous mouth, and she impatiently brushed them aside. Not at you, she added quickly. What's the problem? Casey pressed the instant-replay button in her mind, quickly reviewing the last sixty minutes. The women had enjoyed their various salads and glasses of white wine; they'd gossiped and caught up on everything that had happened in the two weeks since their last meeting. Everything had seemed fine. Unless Janine was still obsessing about her hair. . . . It's just that little twerp, Richard Mooney you remember him? Janine asked Casey. The guy we set up at Haskins, Farber? The one and only. Jerk finishes in the bottom third of his graduating class, she explained to Gail. Has zero social skills. Can't get a job to save his life. Nobody, but nobody wants to hire him. He comes to us. I tell Casey he's a loser, we shouldn't take him on, but she feels sorry for him, says we should give him a shot. Sure. Why not? She's leaving soon anyway, as it turns out. Whoa, Casey exclaimed, raising her palms in protest. Janine dismissed Casey's objection with a megawatt smile and a wave of her long, French-manicured fingernails. I'm just teasing you. Besides, we did take him on, and a few months later you were gone. Isn't that true? Well, yes, but . . . So that's all I'm saying. Casey was having a hard time figuring out exactly what Janine was saying. She would have made a great lawyer, Casey was thinking, wondering why they were talking about Richard Mooney at all. So back to Richard Mooney, Janine said, as if Casey had voiced her confusion out loud. She returned her attention to Gail. Sure enough, we were actually able to do something for that little twerp. Turned out one of the partners at Haskins had a soft spot for Casey. She batted her eyelashes at him a few extra times and he agreed to give Mooney a try. That was hardly the reason, Casey interjected. Anyway, Mooney goes to work at Haskins, lasts barely a year, then gets canned. Of course, by now, Casey's in her new role as decorator to the stars. And who's left to deal with the fallout? What fallout? Gail asked. What stars? asked Casey. Well, I can't imagine Haskins, Farber is too happy, Janine said. I can't see them beating down my door in the near future, looking for a replacement. But guess who does show up at my door first thing this morning? The little twerp himself! He wants a job, says we screwed up the first time in sending him to Haskins, we should have known it would be a bad fit, and that it's up to me to find him a more suitable position. When I suggested he go elsewhere, he got quite upset, demanded to know where the person in charge was. That person, I assume, being you. Janine nodded toward Casey. An oblong chunk of blue-black hair fell across her left eye. He raised quite a ruckus. I almost had to call security. That's awful, Gail said. I'm so sorry, Casey apologized. Janine was right it had been her idea to take Richard Mooney on; she had felt sorry for him; maybe she had batted her eyelashes at Sid

Haskins a few extra times. Im sorry, she said again, although she knew this wasnt the only time a lawyer theyd recommended to a particular firm hadnt worked out. Janine herself had been responsible for at least two pairings that had proved less than ideal. It was like Internet dating: People who seemed well suited on paper often proved anything but. You could never predict chemistry. Casey understood as did Janine that these things happened. However, she didnt think this was the appropriate time to point that out. Its not your fault, Janine conceded. I dont know why I let him get to me. I must be PMS-ing. Speaking of which . . . well, no, not exactly, Casey said, stopping to debate with herself whether or not to continue, then plunging ahead. Warren and I have been talking about having a baby. Youre kidding, said Janine, thin lips opening, long chin dropping toward the table. I cant believe you waited until the end of the meal to tell us such exciting news, said Gail, punctuating her sentence with a laugh. Well, its just been talk up until now. And now it isnt? Janine asked. Im going to stop taking the pill at the end of the month. Thats fantastic! Gail said. Are you sure this is the best timing? Janine questioned. I mean, you havent been married all that long, and youve just started a new business. The business is doing great, my marriage couldnt be better, and as you pointed out earlier, were not in college anymore. Im going to be thirty-three on my next birthday. Which should be just about when the baby would be born. If things go according to plan, that is. And when havent they? Janine asked with a smile. Good for you. Gail reached across the table to pat the back of Caseys hand. I think its great. Youll be a terrific mom. You really think so? I didnt have a very good example. You practically raised your sister, Gail pointed out. Yeah, and look how well that turned out. Casey glanced back at the still-life painting over her shoulder and took a deep breath, as if trying to inhale the scent of the blush-pink peonies. How is Drew anyway? Janine asked, although the tone of her voice indicated she already knew the answer. Havent heard from her in weeks. She doesnt phone, doesnt return my messages. Typical. Shell call, Gail said. This time no soft giggle accompanied her words. Janine signaled the waiter for the bill by wiggling her fingers in the air, as if she was already signing the check. Sure you want to give up that perfect body? she asked Casey as the young man brought the bill to the table. Itll never be the same, you know. Thats all right. Its time to move on? Janine quipped. Your boobs will get bigger, Gail said. Thatll be nice, Casey said as Janine divided the amount. Fifty-five apiece, including tip, Janine announced after several seconds. Why dont you give me the money and Ill put it on my credit card to speed things up? Casey knew Janines request had nothing to do with saving time and everything to do with writing off todays lunch as a business expense. So, what are you up to this weekend? she asked, handing Janine the appropriate amount of cash. I have a date with that banker I went out with last week. Janines blue eyes were already growing opaque with boredom. Thats nice, Gail said. Isnt it? Not really. But he has tickets for Jersey Boys, and you know how hard it is to get tickets, so how could I refuse? Oh, youll love it, Casey said. Its fabulous. I saw the original on Broadway a few years ago. Of course you did. Janine smiled as she pushed herself off her chair and to her feet. And this week youll be with your fabulous husband, making fabulous babies together. Im sorry, she said in the same breath. Im being a real bitch. For sure Im PMS-ing. Where are you off to now? Gail asked Casey as they retrieved their coats from the matre d. Think Ill just stick around here. I was debating going for a run, but I dont think I have enough time before my next appointment. Casey checked her watch. It was a gold Cartier, a gift from her husband on their second anniversary last month. Save your energy for tonight, Janine advised now, leaning forward to kiss Casey on the cheek. Come on, Gail, Ill give you a ride back to work. Casey watched her two friends walk down South Street arm in arm, thinking them an interesting study in contrasts: Janine tall and contained, Gail shorter and spilling out in all directions at once; Janine an expensive glass of champagne, Gail a mug of draft beer. Which made her what? Casey wondered. Maybe she should try a more current hairstyle. Although when had long blond hair ever really gone out of fashion? And it suited the soft oval of her face, her fair complexion and delicate features. Dont even try to tell me you werent prom queen, Janine had said shortly after they met, and Casey had laughed and kept silent. What could she say, after all? She had been prom queen. Shed also been captain of the debating and swim teams, and scored near perfect on her SATs, but people were always less interested in that than in how she looked and how much she was worth. Someone just told me your old man is worth gazillions, Janine had remarked on another occasion. Again Casey had remained silent. Yes, it was true her family was almost obscenely wealthy. It was also true that her father had been a notorious ladies man, her mother a self-absorbed alcoholic, and her younger sister a drug-fueled party girl on her way to becoming a total screwup. Four years after Casey graduated college, her parents were killed when their private jet crashed into Chesapeake Bay during inclement weather, officially making her sister a total screwup. It was these thoughts that were absorbing Caseys attention as she walked along South Street, Philadelphias answer to Greenwich Village,

with its collection of pungent smells, seedy tattoo parlors, funky leather shops, and avant-garde galleries. Truly a world unto itself, she was thinking as she crossed into South Philly and headed toward the large indoor parking garage on Washington Avenue. That was the problem with having lunch in this area it was almost impossible to find a place to park, and once you got away from South Street, the dividing line between Center City and South Philadelphia, you were pretty much in Rocky territory. Casey entered the parking garage and took the elevator up to the fifth floor, retrieving her car keys from her oversize black leather bag as she walked toward her white Lexus sports car at the far end of the platform. She heard the gunning of an engine in the distance and looked over her shoulder, but she saw nothing. Aside from the rows of multicolored automobiles, the place was deserted. She didn't hear the car until it was almost on top of her. She was approaching her Lexus, right arm extended, thumb on the button of the remote to unlock the driver's door, when a silver-colored SUV came careening around the corner toward her. She didn't have time to register the driver's face, to ascertain whether a man or woman was behind the wheel. She had no time to get out of the way. One minute she was walking toward her car, the next she was being propelled through the air, her arms and legs shooting into four different directions at once. Seconds later, she came crashing down, a limp repository of broken bones, her head slamming against the hard pavement. Shortly after that, the SUV disappeared into the streets of South Philadelphia, and Casey Marshall slipped into oblivion.

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