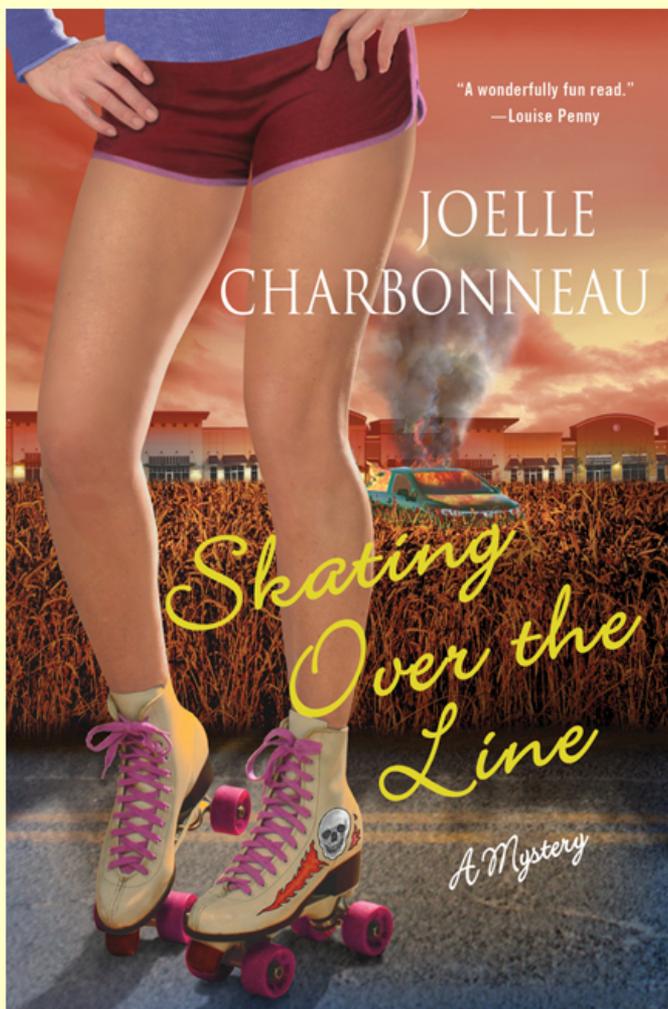


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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Charbonneau, Joelle.

Skating over the line : a mystery / Joelle Charbonneau.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-312-60662-6 (hardback)

1. Roller-skating rinks—Fiction. 2. Automobile thieves—Fiction. 3. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3603.H3763S55 2010

813'.6—dc22

2011018784

First Edition: October 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# One

*I hate men. Okay, maybe hate is an overstatement.* There are perfectly nice men in the world who brake for squirrels, are loyal like Lassie, and didn't drop unwanted surprises in a girl's lap. Too bad I didn't know many of them.

Brushing a wayward red curl out of my face, I stared down at the letter in my hands. A combination of terror, outrage, and a weird kind of hope coursed through my body.

"Hey, Rebecca?"

I jumped at the sound of my name. Tearing my eyes away from the paper, I gave what I hoped was a welcoming smile to the teenage girl peering through my office doorway. "Do you need something, Brittany?"

If my voice sounded a bit breathy and strained, Brittany didn't seem to notice. She just shook her Goth black mane and said, "Nope, but Deputy Sean is looking for you." Her accompanying eye roll spoke volumes on her opinions of the local law department. "He's in the parking lot."

Great. A normal visit from Deputy Sean involved being chastised once again for the time I'd poked my overcurious nose into police business. On a typical day, I went to great lengths to avoid Sean Holmes. However, today was anything but typical.

I let the letter fall from my fingers onto the desk, ignoring the temptation to read the message one more time. "Great," I said, giving a hundred-watt smile. "Let's go see what he wants."

I headed out of the office, away from the unwanted letter, and into the roller rink my mother had adored.

Lights flashed. The Village People blared over the loudspeaker as people young and old skated in a counterclockwise circle. The smell of popcorn mixed with wood polish and sweat created an aroma that was distinctly the Toe Stop Roller Rink. This was my livelihood. At least it was until I could sell it and get back to the life I'd left in Chicago.

Dodging a teenage boy on Rollerblades, I pushed open the front doors and stepped into a heat wave. I squinted into the August sunshine in a search for Indian Falls's finest. *Aha!* The former Indian Falls High football hero was lounging on his squad car, eating an ice-cream cone. A perfect example of our tax dollars at work.

I trotted across the parking lot to him. He did a once-over of me in my black shorts and fitted white tank top.

I shook my head. "I can't believe I'm actually coming outside in this heat to talk to you. Couldn't you be obnoxious in the air conditioning?"

Sean leered over his sugar cone. "What can I say? I like seeing you sweat."

I fought the urge to stick out my tongue. Sean brought out the juvenile in me. Unhurried, Sean finished the last bite of his cone.

He crumpled the paper wrapping and tucked it neatly in the front pocket of his jeans. No littering. He placed his hands on his hips, and his eyes narrowed. “Have you seen Jimmy Bakersfield’s car?”

“You mean the magenta Volkswagen with the big orange rust spots and the ‘Nixon ’72’ bumper sticker?” I laughed. Jimmy went everywhere in it. He’d bought the thing when it was new, decades ago. He even boasted the car still had the original paint—or what was left of it. “Sean, everyone has seen that car.”

Sean frowned. “Have you seen the car today?”

Sean was serious. He wasn’t poking fun at me or saying something sarcastic. All of a sudden, I didn’t feel like laughing. “Why?” I asked. “Did something happen to Jimmy? Is he . . . you know . . . okay?”

I swallowed hard, waiting for the answer. Two months ago, I’d come back to my hometown to sell my inherited rink and stumbled across the body of the town’s handyman—in the girls bathroom. Murdered. Two weeks after that, I’d ended up at the wrong end of a gun while tracking down the killer. Whoever said small-town life was peaceful hadn’t visited Indian Falls.

Sean gave me a superior look. “Of course he’s okay. I can’t say the same for his car. Jimmy says it’s gone missing.”

“Missing?” I blinked. “As in stolen?” Whoever had stolen that car had to be hard up. The car was a train wreck.

“More likely, he left the keys in the car and some kids took it for a joyride. Either that or Jimmy got tanked and forgot where he parked it.” Sean pulled a notebook from his back pocket. “So you didn’t see the car parked in your lot today? He told me that’s where he last saw it.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t even know Jimmy was at the rink.”

“He wasn’t.”

Sean and I turned at the sound of my grandfather's voice. Smiling, Pop shuffled slowly down the sidewalk toward us.

I shook my head, wishing it was arthritis or old age inhibiting my grandfather's movements. Pop's black jeans were skintight. They made his white satin shirt look almost normal. It was unbuttoned to mid-chest, allowing tufts of steel gray hair to peep at unsuspecting passersby. These days, Pop moonlighted as an Elvis impersonator. Much to my dismay, he believed in living the job.

"Jimmy was at the Senior Center all morning." Pop wiped a wrinkled hand over his sweaty brow. "He went back there to call the cops when he saw his car was missing."

Sean was flipping through his notebook, doing his thorough cop thing, so I forged ahead. "What was he doing parked here? The Senior Center is two blocks away."

"Which is why he parked here." Pop gave me a Polygrip ad-worthy smile. "Jimmy is kind of a ladies' man. He needs exercise to stay in shape. Walking to the center helps him stay fit, and it keeps the car out of sight. Both score dates."

Sean read from his notebook. "Jimmy said he parked his car at that end of the lot this morning."

Sean pointed toward the narrow parking area directly beside the rink, next to an empty gravel-filled lot. Two dark green Dumpsters were the only things sitting there now. Most people, including me, tend to park in the front. No wonder I hadn't spotted Jimmy's Technicolor ride.

Continuing in his best policeman's voice, Sean said, "Jimmy walked to the center at nine o'clock this morning, where he played cards and watched *The Price Is Right*. After lunch, he came back to collect his car and discovered it was gone."

"Lunch was later than normal," Pop offered. "The center usu-

ally serves it at noon, but Eleanor and Marjorie got into an argument about a guy on one of those daytime dramas. Nobody wanted to go to lunch before the fight was over, in case there was bloodshed. Marjorie lunging for her knitting needles was the most exciting thing to happen at the center in ages.”

Sean and I gaped at Pop.

Sean recovered first. He turned to me. “Are you sure you didn’t see anything, Rebecca? His car was in your lot.”

So were twenty other cars. Including my own. Still, I didn’t think it was smart to point out that detail. Sean wasn’t in the mood. Not a surprise. When it came to needing information from me, Sean was never in the mood.

Instead, I said, “I was inside the office most of the day, but I can ask around the rink to see if anyone else did.”

“That’s a good idea.” Pop bobbed his head up and down. “Rebecca here is great at getting people to talk. People think of her as part cop anyway after solving— Ouch!”

I’d elbowed Pop in time to stop him from finishing the sentence. Too bad Sean had heard enough. His eyes bugged out, then narrowed as he turned two shades of red.

“Rebecca is not a member of the Indian Falls Sheriff’s Department.” Sean’s voice sounded as if he’d taken a hit of helium. “I’ll talk to the witnesses, and the two of you will stay out of it. Otherwise, I’ll arrest you myself.”

With that announcement, Deputy Sean hitched up his gun belt and stalked across the parking lot toward my roller rink.

The minute he disappeared inside, I turned to my grandfather and demanded, “Why did you have to say that? Now Sean’s going to start giving me jaywalking tickets while I’m standing on the sidewalk.”

Pop shrugged while struggling to pull a handkerchief out of his front pocket. “I wouldn’t worry. The sheriff will rip up the tickets. He likes you. Besides, I wasn’t saying anything that wasn’t true. People think of you as a local private detective. That’s why I walked down here. Jimmy wants to hire you.”

“For what?”

The handkerchief came free from Pop’s pants pocket. The momentum sent him staggering back against Sean’s squad car. I moved to help him, but Pop waved me off.

“Jimmy wants you to find his car,” he explained while lounging on Sean’s cruiser. “He doesn’t trust the sheriff or Deputy Sean to track it down. I can’t say I blame him. The cops couldn’t catch a killer. What chance do they have of finding Jimmy’s car?”

“A better chance than I do, since they’re looking and I’m not.”

“You can’t turn Jimmy down.” Pop wagged his finger at me. “I promised him you’d find his car. Everyone at the Senior Center is expecting it. If you don’t help find it, I’ll never be able to hold my head up at the center. Then what will I do?”

My foray into criminal investigation had been a fluke, and a self-serving one at that. Solving the last crime had been the only way I could sell the rink and get my life back on track. Too bad the rink hadn’t sold right away. If it had, I wouldn’t have been having this conversation. I wouldn’t have had to disappoint my grandfather, whose shoulders had just slumped in a dejected manner. And was that sweat running down Pop’s cheek, or was it a tear?

Damn!

“Okay.”

Pop almost gave himself a hernia doing a victory dance in his painted-on pants.

“But,” I added, “I’m not promising anything. I’ll just ask a couple of questions and see what I can learn.”

Besides, Sean was probably right about kids taking the thing for a joyride. With any luck, the car would turn up later today, abandoned in a cornfield. Pop would be able to strut around the center, and I’d be off the hook. What was the harm?

“I’m going back to the center to tell Jimmy. He’ll be relieved.” Pop patted my cheek.

I nodded while walking with Pop to the sidewalk, but in my mind I was back in my office, holding the letter. “Hey, Pop,” I said. “I got a note today from my father.”

“What’s that sorry excuse for a man want?” Pop asked.

I took a deep breath and said, “Stan is coming back here, to Indian Falls.”

I don’t know what reaction I expected, but it wasn’t my grandfather fainting.



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