

# Who by Water

Voices of the Dead: Book One

Victoria Raschke

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*for A.*

## **A note on Slovenian pronunciation**

Slovenian uses a few extra characters.

č is pronounced like the ch in church

š is pronounced like the sh in shirt

ž is pronounced like the second g in garage

Familiar letters are pronounced differently.

e is most often pronounced like a in bay

i is most often pronounced like the e in be

j is pronounced like a y

r without a paired vowel is pronounced like the ir in skirt

*“In time and with water, everything changes.”*  
Leonardo DaVinci



## CHAPTER 1

Gustaf had only himself to blame. When he told Bettine she needed to assign an Observer to Slovenia, he hadn't anticipated her retaliation: for telling her how she should do her job, she sent him back to the place he'd hated.

Hated, past tense. Ljubljana had grown on him in a decade's time. Much of its architecture was the work of Jože Plečnik, and reminded him of his beloved home of Vienna. Begrudgingly at first, and largely for the sake of his sanity, he had embraced the change. A decade later, his appreciation was real. The jewel box capital city belonged to him, or he to it.

The walls of Gustaf's garret flat were lined with shelves and covered in maps. A battered door divided his living and sleeping area from his closet-sized bathroom. He stood in the larger room, in a sea of dust motes electrified by the early morning light that burst through the wavy panes of the dormer window.

His focus for the past hour had been the cup of coffee cooling in his hand and a large map of the city stuck with color-coded pins. The green ones marked historic sites of supernatural interest: Plečnik's church in the marshes, Prešeren's statue and the bust of his love Julija across the square, the Trnovo church, Roman sites known and unknown to the general public, and various spots along the river. The red pins, each with a flag and a date, were the incidents that had threatened the Veil. The flagged blue pins noted the names and the addresses, or lairs, of people and beings of supernatural origin or ability.

On the map, the lines of the city looked sinuous, as if it were molten, trying to ooze between two green boulders and carry all his carefully placed flags with it along the path of the river. The old part of the city, the part the Romans named Emona

and the modern residents call *Staro Mesto*, sat between the castle hill and the city's lungs, orderly Tivoli Park and the wilder Rožnik hill beyond it. On either end of this pinch, modern Ljubljana spread into the river valley and the marshes, a mix of sparkling glass and marble and somber Brutalist architecture.

On the Tivoli side of the river, the pedestrian-only streets of the old town ran largely perpendicular to the water. Buildings huddled together along the streets, differentiated by the colors of the new or peeling paint on the façades. Each building had its own arched wooden door that opened into a cobblestone courtyard. Shops and restaurants occupied the ground floors, and *Ljubljančans*, the flats above.

The address on the map for his building had four blue pins. One for him. One for Vesna Kos, the scion of a family of Witchfinders. One for Goran, a university professor and antique dealer who was more than he seemed. And one for Jolene Wiley.

The flag on Jolene's pin had an asterisk. Her mother and her aunt were both *vox de mortuis*, Voices of the Dead, but Jolene had been skipped by her family's gift. He probably didn't need to keep an eye on her, but she seemed to have a knack for associating with supernatural beings, or they for seeking her out.

The blue flags spiraled out from the center of the city, but their galaxy-like distribution wasn't the focus of his scrutiny. He was looking at the dates on the red pin's flags, noting in particular that none of them were dated within the last year.

He'd been an Observer long enough to know how rare it was for what was concealed behind the Veil to keep quiet that long. The hidden never seemed to want to remain so.

The subtle signs were simple to explain. It wasn't hard to convince witnesses they hadn't seen things they didn't really

want to believe. Ljubljana had long been witness to larger breaches of the membrane between the unknown and the everyday. Even the earthquake that transformed the city at the end of the 19th century was explained as a microseismic rupture. It had proven to the Board the old, forgotten Slavic gods were not as powerless as believed.

Smaller incidents of violent trespass could be easier to conceal, but harder to forget. In his darker moments, Gustaf was haunted by the eyes of a murdered young woman and the image of her neck ravaged by a monster, and he wished to walk away. But he couldn't un-know what was known. He could only protect others from their fantasies fed by a popular culture that celebrated old dark magicks as broodingly romantic.

He stepped closer to the map and ran his index finger along the river through the old town, stopping at the location of the City Museum. Over the summer he'd watched the Emona celebrations throughout the city, and tried to dismiss the idea that so much focus on the past, even in celebration, had a way of waking up things best left to sleep. In anticipation of the bimillenary festivities, there had been a flurry of excavating and cataloging. Archeology had its lessons, but it also had its dangers. Gustaf wasn't empowered to prevent digging, but he could speak to the dangers of digging in this particular earth better than most.



## CHAPTER 2

Jo untangled herself from Milo and the sheets. She sat up and squinted at the phone display to see two messages from Vesna. The first message was, “Where are you?” The second was, “No. Really. Where are you?”

“Dammit.” Reaching for Milo’s shoulder to wake him, she shook off the remnants of a dream. Something about home. It was probably best not to remember.

She texted Vesna back. “Sorry. Thought he was coming later. Clear the bed, clothes on, and I’ll be down.”

Vesna replied immediately, “Milo or Rok?”

She wouldn’t dignify that question with a reply. She snorted and shook Milo’s shoulder again. This time he at least grunted.

“Em, you really need to get going. I’ve got to meet Vesna. Now.”

Milo mumbled something uncharitable toward Vesna and Christ’s balls. “You’re just going downstairs and it’s Saturday morning. Can’t I sleep for a bit?” He rolled over and put his hand on her thigh.

“No.” She moved his hand. “You know the rule.” She gave his shoulder another push for good measure.

“If you’re not here, I’m not here.” He followed that with a disgusted grunt and sat up, reaching for his glasses on the white drum table on his side of the bed.

“What if one of my many paramours came by to find you curled up in my bed? Think of the awkwardness.” She was only half kidding.

He wasn’t under any delusion about being the only person sharing her bed, but she really didn’t want any of them meeting

and comparing notes over her crockery. Ljubljana was small, and keeping things quiet, let alone secret, was hard enough. And it weirded her out to think of Milo in her place alone. That would be more intimate than anything they'd done in her bed.

He waved his hand at her dismissively and stood to dress. She watched him; it was like watching a particularly lanky cat putting on pants. He looked at her as he buttoned the wrinkled shirt he'd worn the day before.

“Are you enjoying the show this morning?” He wasn't being sarcastic. His baritone had an invitation in it.

If she hadn't already been in the doghouse with Vesna she would have greedily pulled him back into bed. “Don't test me, you tempter.” She shook the duvet out in his direction for punctuation.

He laughed as he wound an elastic around his dark hair, making a ponytail at the nape of his neck. It was deeply unfair that a 40-year-old man should look that good after rolling unwillingly out of bed.

He patted his pockets for his wallet and keys. “Can I at least get a coffee? You can't be in that much of a hurry.”

“Not this morning, I need to run.” She pulled an ancient Nick Cave t-shirt over her head. Why was he dragging this out?

Milo plopped on the futon in the main room while she finished getting dressed. His gaze followed her. She moved through the flat, putting in small silver hoop earrings. She checked her messenger bag for the sketches she'd made for the graffiti artist. She went back to the wardrobe in the bedroom for a black cardigan and pulled it on over the t-shirt. All the while she was humming, though she couldn't place the tune. Something from a television show?

When she stayed at his place, there was none of the weirdness that came with booting him out so she could go to work, but he preferred to stay at her place now that he was seeing someone else. She'd asked several times if his new friend knew about their arrangement. He assured her everything was above board. She believed him, for the most part.

They left together, bumping into each other as they tried to put their shoes on in the small closet that passed for the entryway to her flat.

He stood from tying his shoes, then wrapped his arms around her waist, burying his face in her neck. "When do I get to see you again?" His hand slipped down and cupped her ass.

"Right now I have no idea. Call me tonight. Or text." She kissed him on the mouth and shooed him down the steps. She bounded down behind him with the laces of one boot trailing.

Vesna opened the door to the shop before Jo could get her key in the lock. Her friend was dressed for a business meeting in a black skater skirt and tights and a red cowl-neck sweater. She'd even put on makeup. Her eyeliner was perfect.

Jo hadn't even remembered to brush her teeth. "I'm sorry. I really thought he was coming at noon." She closed the door behind her and breathed into her hand to make sure she didn't have dragon breath.

"He was. Then he texted us both last night, could we do 8 instead. Didn't you see it?" Vesna looked at her with equal parts concern and frustration.

"No. Milo came over and we went at it like minks until the wee hours of the morning."

Vesna snorted at her and threw a napkin from one of the tables at her head.

She fainted left to avoid the napkin. “Hey. You’re the one who was asking me about my sex life at the crack of dawn.”

“8 o’clock is hardly the crack of dawn. And I was testy because you were late.”

“Still. I don’t get all up in your sex life business.”

“That’s because I don’t have any sex life business. I’m too busy keeping this place together.”

Vesna had a fair point. Jo was the creative partner. She handled the décor, music, and menus. Vesna handled anything that involved money or the government. And for that, Jo was truly grateful.

“Anyway. At least he’s a little late, so I don’t look totally flighty.” She ran her hands through her hair trying to at least smooth it to one side. It tended to have a mind of its own, especially the gray ones.

There was a determined knock on the glass of the front door. They both looked to the door, where Igor, Ljubljana’s premiere graffiti artist, announced his arrival with a single wave. Vesna tucked her dark hair behind one ear and walked over to let him in, the heels of her ankle boots clicking on the wooden floor. Just before she turned the lock, she looked back over her shoulder at Jo and gave her the please-don’t-sleep-with-vendors face. Jo pointed to herself and mouthed, “Who, me?”

She had expected a whippet-nervous, behoodied twentysomething. Igor was instead tall and wiry, probably in his mid-forties, with longish dirty blond hair going gray. He also had those piercing, glacial blue eyes Slovenes so often had and was dressed more cafe-poet than parkour-graffiti artist, in black from head to hi-tech hiking boots. She liked the unexpectedness of him, and Vesna seemed to have warmed up to the idea of working with “another flaky artist.”

“I’m going to make us some tea and then we can get down to business.” Jo excused herself and headed toward the kitchen. She paused and turned to ask how Igor preferred his tea.

“Strong and sweet.” A fleeting bolt of energy flew between them. Jo smiled even though she could almost hear Vesna rolling her eyes.

Vesna called after her. “Hey, Jo, if you’re making black, may I have some milk? Warmed. Please.”

Jo futzed at the tea station and grabbed a few things from the tiny restaurant kitchen. She filled an infuser with an English breakfast style tea and put some of the teahouse’s signature mismatched china cups and saucers on a tray with a small earthenware bowl of irregular brown sugar cubes and a creamer filled with warmed milk. She added a plate with a few sandwiches left over from yesterday’s service and a cookie or two. When the tea was ready, she deftly balanced the tray and turned to carry it out to the table. A glint of metal from the kitchen caught her eye. One of the plate racks they used for a full tea was lying in the middle of the floor.

That was weird. It hadn’t been there a minute ago.

She set the tray back on the tea counter and turned back to the kitchen. The rack was gone.

She looked around, but it definitely wasn’t there. She counted the racks on the shelf over the dish sink. Maybe she just needed some caffeine. She scooped the tray up and headed back out to Vesna and Igor.

They were seated at a four-top near the empty bakery case that separated the seating from the service area at the back of the shop, and were deep in conversation about which wall was best for the mural. Jo was set on the back wall behind the service area, where it would be the first thing customers see

when they walked in. Igor seemed to prefer the right-hand wall that separated the teahouse from the new age shop next door. Vesna agreed with him. And she was flirting. It was very subtle, but it was definitely flirting.

Vesna still knew how to flirt. Happily surprised, Jo poured tea for everyone and sat back quietly in her chair without interrupting their conversation. The plate rack still puzzled her. Things didn't just move or disappear.

Vesna looked up at her a little sheepishly. "Thanks. Oh, Jo, did you bring the sketches?"

"What? Yes." She popped up from her chair to grab the messenger bag she'd flung onto the first table inside the door when she'd arrived. After a short rummage on her way back to the table, she produced three tea- and possibly wine-stained sketches she'd done sitting at her dining-table desk upstairs while Vesna had paced and talked brand-speak at her. Jo's main concern was that the mural look cool and fit in with the teahouse's vibe.

Jo handed the sketches to Igor, who made a bit of a show flattening them out on the table with his forearm. He laughed softly. "At least they aren't on napkins."

Vesna was indignant. "We don't use paper napkins. It's wasteful."

"No disrespect to your Greenpeace membership." He smiled at her.

"It was a joke. I'm sorry." She looked like she'd just told the coolest girl in ninth grade about her extensive Barbie collection.

"Vesna's a little concerned about the money we're spending. As you can imagine, it's more than we usually spend on décor." Jo waved her arm around in a sweep to indicate the walls surrounding them. She slid Igor a plate with two sandwiches

and a shortbread cookie.

“I can imagine. I think it’s smart though. Not to brag – well, maybe a bit – but it might bring in more tourists interested in street art.” Igor took a bite of the cookie and then looked at it, surprised.

“It’s pink peppercorn shortbread.” Jo continued, “And that was kind of what we were thinking. Plus the place needs a facelift.”

She looked around at the aging punk and metal gig posters they’d hung when they’d first opened the shop almost a decade earlier. The wear and tear of restaurant traffic and kitchen heat had battered them. The place had its own aesthetic, but it was time to evolve.

Igor held up her sketch of a clipper ship rendered like an old-fashioned sailor’s tattoo, and looked at the wall. “Just out of curiosity, why aren’t you all in Metalkova? It seems more suited to what you’re going for here.”

Vesna answered, “Our silent partner owns the building.”

Gregor, their other partner, was one of the friends Jo met when she’d first arrived in Ljubljana. She’d hit on him at a club, not realizing it was Pink Night. He was kind to the lost American, and they became friends and then business partners. His family owned the building that housed Renegade Tea and therefore all of the flats upstairs, where both she and Vesna lived. There were other tenants as well, a university professor, and a guy in the tiny flat on the top floor whom Jo saw maybe once or twice a year.

“That would be reason enough.” He looked at the second sketch of waves mimicking the style of Hokusai’s *The Great Wave of Kanagawa*, but filled with burning crates of tea. “Boston Tea Party?” Igor looked to Jo.

Vesna nodded. “Jo said the Boston Tea Party was punk as fuck.”

Igor laughed. “I can see that.”

Jo poured more tea in his cup. “Is that your favorite? I mean, can you work with it?”

“Yeah. I think I can work with that.”

“Okay. So we’re closed tomorrow. We can move everything away from that wall after we close tonight. I’ll come help after this thing with Gregor.” Jo tied her long French waiter-style apron over her clothes to get started on the day’s setup with Maja and Frédéric, who’d arrived soon after Igor left.

Someone had flipped on the sound system and Roky Erickson’s “I Have Always Been Here Before” was loud enough to block out the words Maja and Fred were chattering at each other. Jo heard Maja laugh. That was a rare thing, but Fred seemed to be the one to bring it out. She wondered if he knew their baker had it bad for him.

Vesna gathered up the stack of bills and paperwork she’d been leafing through to return them to her esoteric filing system in the desk drawer. “Can you let Igor in tomorrow morning?”

“Hot date?”

Vesna looked up at Jo, her brown eyes glinting with a bit of murder. “No. I promised my mother I’d have lunch at home. I have to catch the early bus.”

“Special occasion?”

“Miha is engaged.” Vesna’s face fell as she said it.

Miha was her younger brother, and Jo knew that tomorrow’s lunch was less a celebration of Miha’s engagement than a prime opportunity for Mother to remind Vesna that she’d neglected

to marry and produce grandkids.

“I don’t know whether to say ‘congratulations’ or ‘I’m sorry.’” Jo slid against the wall to get behind the desk with Vesna as she stood. Towering over her pixie friend, she put her hands on Vesna’s shoulders and looked her in the face.

Vesna glanced down at the desk and then back up at Jo. “I think it’s time to tell her enough is enough. I’m a successful business owner. The whole marriage and kids thing . . . That’s not me.”

It was a good speech, but it was only half true: Vesna didn’t want children, but Jo’s unattached life didn’t appeal to her in the least. And even if she did treat them like her children, Antony and Cleopatra, her cats, weren’t all the companionship she ever wanted.

“Go for it honey,” Jo said. “Just remember, she guilts because she loves.”

“I know.”

“If she listens, she might even stop trying to fix you up with 50-year-old bachelor accountants.”

A rueful smile turned up the corner of Vesna’s mouth. She finally laughed. “Jo, you really are the best.”

Jo gave the tiny woman an extra squeeze and slipped out from behind the desk and into the kitchen to join her brigade prepping for service.

The three shifted into overdrive to pump out the day’s menu. Frédéric made curried chicken salad sandwiches for the tea special.

Maja was efficient, as always. Vanilla bean shortbread cookies were already cooling on a speed rack jammed in the corner of the kitchen as she worked on their signature

decadent brownies. That left Jo to get on with the verrines and tartlets. She filled shot glasses with yogurt while Frédéric threw together some odds and ends to make an eggy torta as the hot dish. They'd serve it with some Tuscan kale for a side salad.

Despite the eclectic punk ambiance of the teahouse, it was important to Jo that food be high quality, sustainable, and seasonal. She hated the idea that kids, the teenagers and students who were the bulk of their clientele, just wanted pizza and crap food. The Renegade Tea menu was a mashup of English teatime tradition, Jo's American roots, and Frédéric's Algerian background, all interpreted in local produce.

The shop opened at 3:30. Frédéric ran the kitchen. Maja had a second job bartending at a trendy place on the river, so Vesna did table service and made tea along with Damijan, a philosophy student at the university. Jo floated between the front of house and kitchen, doing whatever needed to be done to keep them out of the weeds. That night, though, she was on tap to be Gregor's date at a schmooze-fest at the City Museum, so Vesna and Damijan would be running the show without her.

Frédéric was taking their sidewalk menu board out onto a table to write the day's specials. He poked his head back into the kitchen.

"Jo, did you do a soup?"

"Fuck. No."

Maja stepped out of the kitchen. "In the freezer there's a gallon of that minestrone base Fred made for the catering last week. We can boil some orecchietti and add some of the kale and maybe throw in a couple herb bombs to freshen it up."

"Sounds like a plan. Good thinking." Frédéric nodded his

approval and went back to his task.

Maja took the three steps back into the kitchen and pulled a gallon Lexan and a bag of herb bombs out of the little reach-in freezer jammed between the speed rack and the door to Vesna's broom closet of an office.

Herb bombs had been Maja's idea. At the end of service, any fresh herbs that looked the worse for wear got chucked in the food processor with some olive oil to produce a green gunge. The gunge was frozen in ice cube trays for adding to soups or sauces. They were also good for masking the lawn-clipping flavor of Maja's wheatgrass hangover smoothies, a concoction Jo needed less frequently these days, noticing as she had that 40-something couldn't drink like 20-something.

Soup handled and everything else prepped and ready for service, Jo de-aproned. Vesna joined them, standing in the door of the office: four people in that kitchen at the same time was an impossibility.

"All ready?" Vesna tried to peer over Jo's shoulder to the counter where Frédéric was cutting the crusts off the last batch of smoked salmon sandwiches. He handed her one of the sandwiches over Jo's shoulder. "Mmmm. These are my favorite."

"You guys should get a plate and have staff meal. I need to head upstairs and ponder what I'm wearing tonight." Jo rolled her apron into a ball and threw it for a goal toward the hamper next to the desk in the office. She missed, and took the six steps to pick it up and place it in the hamper. "And that, ladies and gent, is why I never played basketball."

Frédéric went into the dining room to add the soup to the menu board. He had, by far, the best handwriting of any of them. He'd come to Ljubljana to study architecture in the mid 1980s. His half-French, half-Algerian background had made

him stand out in Slovenia's largely-homogeneous capital. That, and the fact he was gorgeous. He'd inherited his Algerian mother's complexion, dark hair, aquiline nose and full mouth along with his French father's deep blue eyes.

When Frédéric's midlife crisis hit in a big way, he'd walked in and quit the firm he'd been with since graduation. A few days later, he'd shown up at Renegade Tea asking for a job. Jo hired him on the spot even though Vesna thought she was crazy. Jo figured anyone ready to make that kind of change needed an outlet and a chance.

Maja walked out with Jo so she could have a cigarette, pausing to point out something on the chalkboard to Fred. She laughed again and touched his arm before joining Jo in the courtyard and offering her a cigarette, which Jo declined. She'd quit years ago, though she would occasionally have a social smoke. Shit. She'd probably quit smoking before Maja was born, or close. That was sobering.

Maja held her cigarette between two fingers tattooed with astrological symbols, and exhaled a perfect O smoke ring. "What's this thing you're going to?"

"It's to celebrate the success of the Emona exhibit." It was the 2000th anniversary of the founding of Emona, the Roman city that would become Ljubljana. The summer had been filled with activities around the celebration, including this exhibit at the city museum and tours to all the Roman sites in Ljubljana, complete with costumed characters. "There's drinks and schmoozing at the City Museum, and Gregor asked me to join him at the Emona house excavation for an even schmoozier gathering with more expensive drinks, for donors or something, afterward."

"Doesn't much sound like your kind of thing." Maja took another long drag off her cigarette. Her gaze kept straying back

to the shop windows.

“Not really. But Gregor needed a date, and I enjoy people-watching.”

Maja laughed. “And no way in hell could Gregor take his actual love interest and still be one of the elite.”

Jo arched her eyebrow at Maja. “What are you talking about?” She kept her tone light, but she was fiercely protective of Gregor.

“Keep your shirt on, boss lady. I don’t care if Gregor’s gay. I just know that he is, and despite the more liberal attitudes of those elites, he’d still have a hard time in that crowd with another dude on his arm. Everyone knows you’re his beard. They just don’t care because Gregor plays along with their bullshit.”

Jo was surprised Maja was so frank. She usually kept herself to herself, did her work and ducked out, but her other job probably made her privy to a lot of gossip. Jo didn’t really know what to say.

Maja bent over to stub out her cigarette in the ash can hidden behind the planter full of herbs at the front door. “The thing most people don’t know is that Gregor is kind of your beard, too.” She pulled the elastic out of the bun on top of her head and a curtain of neon blue hair, black at the roots, fell to her shoulders.

“Okay. What?” Jo didn’t even pretend lightness this time.

“We all see you almost every day. I could set my watch by when you come downstairs and by when Milo or Rok or whoever that goddess is you’ve been seeing heads out in the morning. Otherwise, you do a pretty good job of keeping your private shit private. Being Gregor’s public companion probably helps with that. I did overhear my boss one night talking with

someone at the bar about being surprised you don't know or don't mind that Gregor's gay."

Jo was rarely at a complete loss for words.

Maja slapped her playfully on the shoulder and laughed. "Hey, it's no big deal. I like you and don't give two shits about who you, or Gregor, are sleeping with, as long as someone signs my paycheck."

Jo smiled. She couldn't quite bring herself to laugh, but she figured her not-so-secret secret was probably safe with Maja. Maja turned to go back inside and Jo crossed the courtyard to the stairwell that led back up to the flats.

She saw the top of Goran's salt and pepper head bent over in the antique shop's windows as he selected an item from the display that faced the courtyard. As always, the window was dark and the "*Zaprto*" sign was on the door of the accountant's office next door to the antique shop. In all the time Jo had lived in the building she'd never seen it open. She'd asked Gregor about it. He said he didn't worry too much; they paid rent by bank draft and kept the place clean.

Did she really need a beard, as Maja had suggested? She wasn't ashamed of her life. Her son knew she dated around, and they were no more likely to discuss her sex life than they were his. Faron was first among the handful of people whose opinions mattered to her. The others, she could count on one hand: Gregor, Vesna, Rok, and her Aunt Jackie. Rok because they'd been friends, with benefits, for almost fifteen years. And Jackie, because she was the only "old life" family Jo kept in touch with.

It didn't do much good to dwell on these things, or on things in general. Jo's life suited her temperament. She liked the way things moved along in an orderly fashion, with just the little bit of turbulence and rush that came with restaurant life and

none of the crap she'd left back home. Jo liked her personal excitement scheduled. Rok and Milo had days assigned to them, in her head at least. Helena, the "goddess she'd been seeing," was always a surprise, as she'd been from the beginning.

Not that she had never been attracted to women; she had just consistently preferred men. Her biggest concern about getting involved with Helena was stepping into unknown territory. She didn't want to hurt someone inadvertently by not wanting anything serious. Helena had put that fear to rest as quickly as she'd gotten Jo into bed. Romance wasn't her thing either. She was more feral and demanding than any man Jo had ever been with, and she wasn't even remotely sentimental. Helena would soon tire of her, so she intended to enjoy the ride while it lasted.

