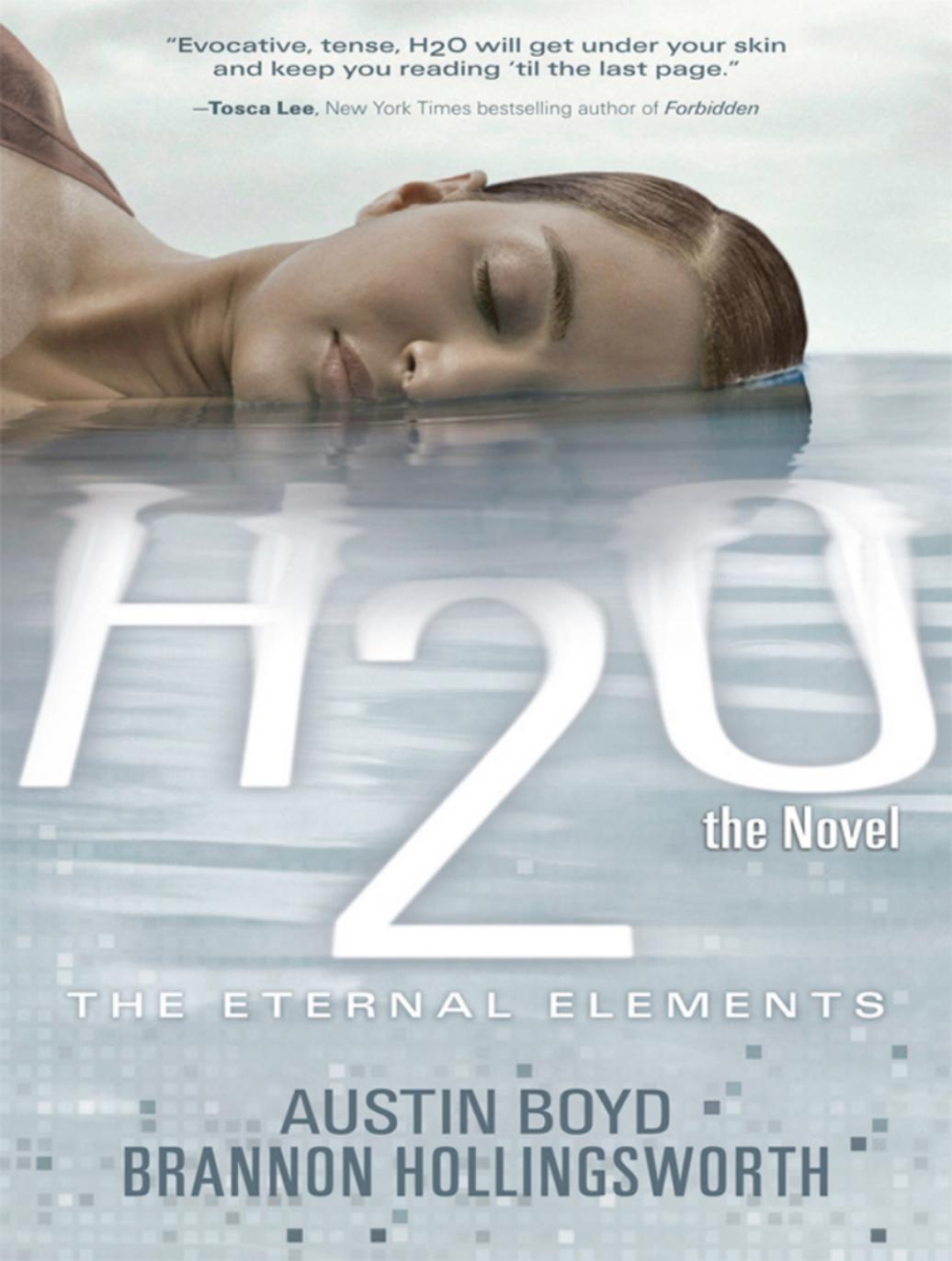


"Evocative, tense, H2O will get under your skin
and keep you reading 'til the last page."

—**Tosca Lee**, New York Times bestselling author of *Forbidden*



H2O

the Novel

THE ETERNAL ELEMENTS

AUSTIN BOYD
BRANNON HOLLINGSWORTH

“Boyd and Hollingsworth combine forces to create a heroine so vivid I swear I’ve met her before. Evocative, tense, H_2O will get under your skin and keep you reading ’til the last page.”

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“Take one of the most stunningly creative story concepts ever imagined, add a compelling, passionate heroine named Kate Pepper, then spin her life out of control at the mere touch of the most common substance on the planet—*water*. These are the makings of a fascinating tale and an irresistible spiritual journey. *H₂O* manages to be hip and contemporary while also remaining timeless. The story drew me in and pulled me along—and didn’t let go until the final page. I recommend it!”

— Jim Denney, author of the **Timebenders** series and
Answers to Satisfy the Soul



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H₂O

the Novel

THE ETERNAL ELEMENTS

AUSTIN BOYD
BRANNON HOLLINGSWORTH

H₂O, The Novel

Volume 1 in The Eternal Elements series

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DEDICATION

To the author of life, water, and forgiveness.

CHAPTER ONE

WATER SPILLED over the blade of my knife like liquid silk. Flushed by the stream, raw fish swirled down the kitchen drain on a mysterious journey, headed back to Puget Sound and home. Fluid poetry gushed from the tap, beauty rinsing away grime. I held my hand under its caress, entranced. Water was too special, too eternal, to be so common.

“Aren’t you finished yet?” Xavier asked, shaking his head as he peered into the kitchen sink of my Seattle condominium, just an arm’s distance from the fish I prepared. “I can’t believe people eat this stuff.”

I dangled a fresh slice of buttery-rich raw tuna before him and winked. He jerked back as though contact with beady-eyed water creatures might taint him. Perhaps he feared that one brush against piscine slime would transform him into a rough guy on the wharf or a wrinkled old man sitting by a pond with a cane pole.

“Skip the drama, Xavier,” I said with a laugh, biting into the sweet flesh. I brushed bangs out of my eyes with the back of my hand and waved another slice of tuna in his direction. He ignored me.

“My guests will be here in half an hour,” he said, retreating toward the den. “The main dish still has scales on it.”

“You can’t see tuna scales, X. So, quit worrying. I’ll be ready.” I picked up a quarter section of tuna waiting to be skinned and drew in a long whiff, pretending to take a bite out of the whole fish. Xavier just shook his head.

“They’re donating for your cause, but they’re here to eat my sashimi—and they’ll love it.” I popped a second slice of tuna in my mouth and savored it as I went back to slicing fish. “Go pour some more wine or something.” I sighed, wishing he’d go out for a walk and leave me alone.

When I looked up from the knife a few moments later, he stood halfway across the room, his eyes narrowed. I knew the look. “I’ll bet that stuff is what makes you fat,” he said, the last ugly word drawn out for emphasis. The thin arches of his eyebrows rose like black scalpels above eyes that probed for any hint of something soft. Sky-blue irises, devoid of love, scoured my nakedness on the hunt for the plump evidence of joy—as if eating around him could ever be called joy. In his mind, I was failing him, stuck at a hundred and two pounds in a tight size two.

I looked back down to the dead fish, my only friend, and pushed the knife hard against its firm, cool flesh. I knew my failings. But not as well as he did, apparently. I love to cook. I love to eat. And even if I am a size two, the joy of food has left its mark—however slight—on my middle.

“I lost another pound,” I offered, almost under my breath. I didn’t have to see him to feel those black scalpels above his eyes stripping away what little dignity I had left. The truth was easy to see. My tummy was soft. And it always would be. “I’m sure it’s not water weight.” My voice cracked in the midst of the lie.

“What-*eeeeever*, Ms. Pepper.” He frowned and turned away, not looking back.

“Shut up!” I slammed my left fist on the cutting board and stepped toward him, knife in hand. Xavier spun around and caught my glare. When I waved the long razor-sharp *Fujiwara* in his direction, he backed out of reach. Harping on my weight was one thing, but now he’d gone too far.

Every time I hear “whatever,” I’m stuck back in Queens trying to drag a conversation out of my couch-potato father, Norman Pepper. It was the throwaway phrase for “don’t bother me,” uttered by an emotionally absent father, a man glued to his TV and recliner—the epitome of sloth. In my mind, *fat* is the logical root word in *father*. I hated the unforgivable softness of my midriff, but I despised his podgy addiction to laziness. That *W* word summed it all up for me, in one miserable excuse for a man I could never call “Dad.”

I sliced an *X* through the air with my knife as I glared at Xavier. He turned with a shrug and walked toward the bay window. The cutlery shook in my hands, images of my father springing to mind, salt rubbed in raw mental wounds.

The shaking worsened as I watched Xavier move with a feigned slowness, spinning around to drop into a seat in the den, a glass of wine in one hand and a remote control in the other. His gaze was locked with mine. I felt my grip tighten on the knife. Surely, he wouldn’t do this.

I watched him settle into the padded chair, like viewing a movie running at half speed. My lover raised the remote control like a digital rapier and pointed it toward me. He made a loud *click* with his tongue and pushed a button, presumably to command me, his human television. He drew out my father’s disgusting epithet once more, for effect. “What-*ev-er!*”

“Stop it!” I screamed, pivoting to my left to impale the tuna. With a trembling arm, I rammed my knife through the fish and deep into the cutting board’s hard maple. Xavier didn’t blink; the hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. We faced off, wrapped in the temporary armor of a prickly silence.

I choked back a dozen words I’d regret, then turned away and let him win the standoff. I could hear him snicker his trademark “beat you!” when I started to retrieve the thousand-dollar slicing knife. I

hesitated, hand to the hefty weapon, and glared at him. He shut up. I wiggled my precious *Fujiwara* out of the wood, and then returned to the sink, fish in hand.

I had to cut something.



The artery under Xavier's left temple wriggled like a scared earthworm. Watching him pace in the den for the next half hour while I finished slicing tuna, I knew he was close to a meltdown. Almost as close as I'd come to losing it, enduring his verbal jabs about my weight while I slaved away to prepare a sushi dinner for his clients. But this dinner—and his customers—meant nothing to me.

My rude boyfriend is the unlikely hybrid of a giant redwood and Bruce Willis. He's a towering shaved-head stoic and a brilliant executive with a rock-hard body. Xavier has many faults. He's selfish, hypercritical, impatient, and punctual to a fault. His obsession with time defines him. Yet his strengths make him tolerable—he's gorgeous, well connected . . . and rich.

I despise ordinary.



Never slice fish when you're angry.

That thought shot through my mind as a piercing sting mingled with the familiar dull thud of knife contacting wood. Mentally distracted, I watched an inch-long serving of the fleshy base of my palm tumble into the pile of sliced tuna.

Human sashimi, I thought. What the Japanese call "pierced body."

But it wasn't fish; it was part of me. The damage finally registered when blood started to flow.

I screamed.

Xavier reached me a couple of heartbeats later and pressed a white cotton cloth into my wound. The rice vinegar on the wet

rag, used to wipe out my sushi molds, shot daggers of pain into the severed muscle. My body's red spilled across a pile of sliced yellow-fin, mingling with the wet pinkness of raw tuna flesh in a Hannibal Lecter platter of seafood and human blood. Xavier took one look at the ruined morsels, his face white with a pitiful jumble of empathy and fear, then thrust his face into the sink.

He vomited. And the doorbell rang.



"Kate! What happened?" Andrea asked she entered my kitchen. She never noticed Xavier's mess; he'd churned the last of it down the disposal. My blood drew her attention. I suspected that her-boss-slash-my-boyfriend welcomed the momentary distraction.

Saved him again.

"We need to get a dressing on that," my one and only girlfriend said, her hand shaking. She plucked the thin sliver of my left palm from the pile of sushi and dropped it into a glass of cold milk. "There's a doc-in-the-box on West Garfield. We'll take you there."

Her face said more, like she could read my mind. I imagined she could follow the invisible counter that clicked off the number of times Xavier had complained tonight when I ingested even a morsel, or exposed a hint of cellulite through skintight slacks. Size two slacks, no less. Maybe she understood, without saying, why I'd been distracted. My heart hurt worse than my hand.

"There's no time for doctors, Andrea. Our party starts in an hour." My words were for Xavier's benefit, in vain hope of some sympathy. I couldn't expect he'd cancel this dinner; it was too important. "I've cut my palm like this before. Really, I'm okay. It'll grow back." I forced a smile.

"You amaze me, Kate," she replied. "You carve your hand into sashimi, and all you can think about is feeding a bunch of snobby rich folks."

“They’re our clients, Andrea.” Xavier’s color—and his voice—returned. “I’ll take Kate to the doctor. You finish this up while we’re gone.”

“And what? Host your party, too?” she asked.

“That’s what I pay you for.”

Andrea shrugged, looked at me with a “you love this guy?” roll of the eyes, and grabbed a rag. “Okay, boss. Come wash her up. I’ll get a dry cloth while you get some water on that.” She motioned to the sink, and he complied.

Xavier hates blood. He never looked at my hand, but his warmth felt good when he took me gently by the wrist and shoulder, then started the water.

Before the liquid swept over my wound, I remembered slicing my hand in third grade while crawling over a ragged chain-link fence outside the elementary school playground. The sting of water when Mother washed me was a fresh memory. I braced for a repeat sting, but it never came. Somewhere between Xavier’s warm touch and the silver stream of water before me, I lost all connection with reality.

For the briefest time—like a micro-dream when you fall asleep driving and then snap awake—a picture formed in my mind of a basin, perhaps a wooden bowl, filled with water. A cream-colored rough-woven garment, maybe a robe, lay beside it. Nothing else. I remember thinking, in that split second, that there was nothing like this in my kitchen. The mental picture flashed into view, and then it evaporated. On, then off, like a camera flash.

Was it for a heartbeat or for a minute? I had no idea. One moment I’d pulled closer to Xavier, and the next he stood there, holding me up, my knees reduced to rubber. When I regained my bearings, his hand pressed a dry cloth into my freshly washed crimson palm. My hand was wet; I could feel its dampness and see the water’s sheen, but I had no memory of the washing. Seconds of my life had vanished.

“Kate? Did you hear me?”

Xavier's huge blue eyes, dotted with the tiny black spot of his pupils, shone like mirrors. My face reflected in his blue. The waxed line of scalpel eyebrows made perfect umbrellas over his eyes, deep set above high cheekbones. I let him hold me up while I tried to remember what just happened.

"Kate?" he implored. The tone of his voice was soothing, inviting. He blinked and it broke the spell. It felt good to be held.

"Yeah?" A sandpaper tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. Wasn't it just a moment ago that he had taken me in his arms and thrust my hand under the tap? I couldn't remember the embrace of the cool wetness. Only the basin of water, and the cream-colored robe. I shook my head, desperate to reboot.

"I—I'm okay," I said. "I need to sit."

Xavier lowered me gently, and I settled on the cool tile of the kitchen floor, pressing the cotton mitt into my wound. I looked up at Andrea, her mouth agape where she stood near the sink.

My girlfriend reached toward me, her palm to my forehead. "What just happened?"



A few minutes later, after a drink of water and Andrea's gentle touch with a cool wet towel, I could stand again. I glanced at the clock, time now my enemy. I took a fresh white cotton towel from Xavier and wrapped it around my palm, then motioned to my flesh in the glass of pink milk. "I need to stay, Andrea. Can you go to the doc by yourself? Ask about sewing that back on while I bandage up and get dinner ready." I secretly hoped Xavier would object. But he didn't. No surprise there.

"You fainted, Kate! Your hand's sliced up, and you just bled all over a catered meal. *You're* the one who needs to go." She stamped her foot like it made a difference. Xavier tried to butt in; I pushed him back with my good hand.

“Please, Andrea. Really. I’m better. I can finish the tuna. Hurry over there and call me if the doc says I need to come in. Otherwise, we’ll let it grow back like the last time.” I shoved my white cotton paw toward her. “Do this for me, okay? But hurry back. I need you here when the guests arrive.”

“Go,” Xavier barked. “Kate’s right. Find out what the doc says while we get this dinner wrapped up.”

“We?” she asked, eyebrows raised. I pinched her forearm, shaking my head.

Don’t taunt this bull.

Andrea relented and headed for the door with her gory glass. “Mr. Compassion,” she whispered to me, then spoke up as she headed for the door. “Be sure to get some antibiotic ointment on the wound, boss. If you don’t, the flesh will knit into the gauze before she can change that bandage. And keep it dry.”

“Just go, Andrea,” Xavier replied, distracted by his iPhone and the *ding* of another e-mail. He left me standing at the sink.

Dry. Yes.

My good hand touched the faucet handle, recalling the first drip before I’d blanked out. I traced the chrome lines of the spigot, the curved silver of a gooseneck spout reflecting a distorted view of the room around me. Distorted like the strange moments when Xavier had held me at the sink.

Missing moments. Seconds of my life that had mysteriously vanished.



Five days later

Xavier is tight. Tight with his money, and tight-lipped. I hate empty talk, so we fit well together. But it’s special when he splurges on me, because I know he’s really trying to make a point. He made that point on Thursday night.

The restaurant? Exquisite. When he told me a special dinner awaited, I knew something was up. No one goes to a restaurant like Canlis on a whim. It takes reservations far in advance and a wad of cash. But it's worth every penny. The private table for two near tall windows had a stunning view of Lake Union and the Cascades.

"Did you see this?" I asked. Napkins folded like swans craned their pale-blue necks over brilliant silver cutlery that adorned starched white tablecloths. A handwritten card atop the menu spoke to my heart. "'Cooking is like love, Kate,'" I read from the dainty card. "It should be entered into with abandon, or not at all. That's me!" I turned and took Xavier's hand. "Thank you. For this."

Xavier nodded and took a seat next to me. He shrugged. "You deserve it. You serve the finest sashimi in Seattle."

I massaged my left hand, remembering the sting of the slicing blade.

"You really put yourself into that dinner," he said with a grin. "Very fresh. And they loved it. Corporate got a very nice thank you from my guests, by the way. You outdid yourself." He reached out and laid a gentle hand on my bandaged paw.

"The things I do for you . . ." I said with a wink. "But this is a huge gift. Thank you."

"Has Andrea forgiven me?" he asked. "She's been a cold shoulder at the office."

"She'll come around. She's a little upset I didn't take her up on the palm transplant and the milk preservative." I smiled. Dear Andrea was crushed that she'd gone all the way to the medical clinic to learn that you're never supposed to put severed flesh in milk, and that the sliver was too small to sew back on. But at least she'd tried.

"Keeping it dry?" Xavier asked. He fidgeted with the obscene watch on his wrist, his monster timepiece worth more than months of my salary. His eyes darted around like they had on our first date,

desperate to connect—yet failing. I caught his gaze at last and forced my best smile.

“This place is posh, X.”

“Wait till you try the wine,” he replied. His eyes went to the wine list. “Their collection won the Grand Award.”

I reached out and tried to dislodge the list, to pull it down and get him to look at me. He lowered it and kept chatting, his eyes diverted to the fancy menu.

“You’ve got to try their special salad—romaine, bacon, Romano cheese, mint, and oregano. With a lemon, oil, and coddled-egg dressing.”

“You sound like a cook,” I said, leaning toward him, then scooting partway around the table to get closer. “I thought you hated the kitchen.”

He smiled, looking up past me, his eyes still focused beyond the windows. “Maybe so, but I love to eat.” He opened the menu for me and looked my way. At last. I didn’t move, marveling at the depths of his blue eyes. He took my good hand, holding it for a long embrace, and I squeezed his fingers.

The warmth of Xavier’s hands tingled my spine, a magic electric connection I’d felt the first time his skin met mine. He still had the touch, the gentleman who’d swept me off my feet when I moved from Silicon Valley to Seattle. That man appeared less often as we became more comfortable—and more familiar—with each other. I missed those early days, the marketing manager in hot pursuit of his company’s newest employee. It was exciting to be noticed again, to be desired.

Mother used to comment about men all the time that “familiarity breeds contempt.” Familiar as a worn slipper in our relationship, I craved the passion and spontaneity of our early days. Lately it seemed I competed with work for his time. I’d birthed his mistress; the promotion I’d helped him to win had spirited him away. A

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God places people and events in our lives to draw us to Him. He put Brannon Hollingsworth, and this unique novel, in my path so that I might understand Scripture in a new and vibrant way. For Kate Pepper, that person was her Instant Messenger friend John Connor, and the event was her unexplained visions when she touched water. Who is it—or what is it—that God has sent to draw you to Himself? Remember, Jesus will never give up on you, no matter how far you think you’ve drifted away.

BRANNON HOLLINGSWORTH

I would first like to acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for who He is and what He has done for me, for this book idea, and for the creativity that all comes from Him. This is YOUR BOOK, Jesus. Congratulations! Second, I want to acknowledge my bride, Heather, who walked faithfully beside me through every step of the amazing and unexpected H₂O journey. “Blue eyes,” you complete me! Third, I would like to thank my dear friend, mentor, and coauthor Austin Boyd, for the opportunity to write this book together. It’s been an amazing and invaluable experience. And thanks so much to AMG Publishers for having faith in our idea and taking the steps to bring it to market. I am honored to be partnered with a group of folks who are so passionate about spreading the Gospel.

To God be the glory!