

G. P. Guarente

HOOK, LINE & SINKER

a novel





G. P. Guarente



Hook, Line & Sinkers

RAZORBILL

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Young Readers Group  
345 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.  
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York,  
New York 10014, U.S.A.  
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto,  
Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada, Inc.)  
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England  
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland  
(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)  
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,  
Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)  
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,  
New Delhi – 110 017, India  
Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,  
Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)  
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Interior design by Marci Senders

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Guarente, G. P.

Hook, line & sinker / by G. P. Guarente.

p. cm.

Summary: Fifteen-year-old Fiona collects fish and names them after her former boyfriends and crushes, not realizing that the best catch of all is closer than she thinks.

ISBN 1-59514-011-5

[1. Fishes—Fiction. 2. Interpersonal relations—Fiction.] I. Title: Hook, line and sinker. II. Title.

PZ7.G93413Ho 2005

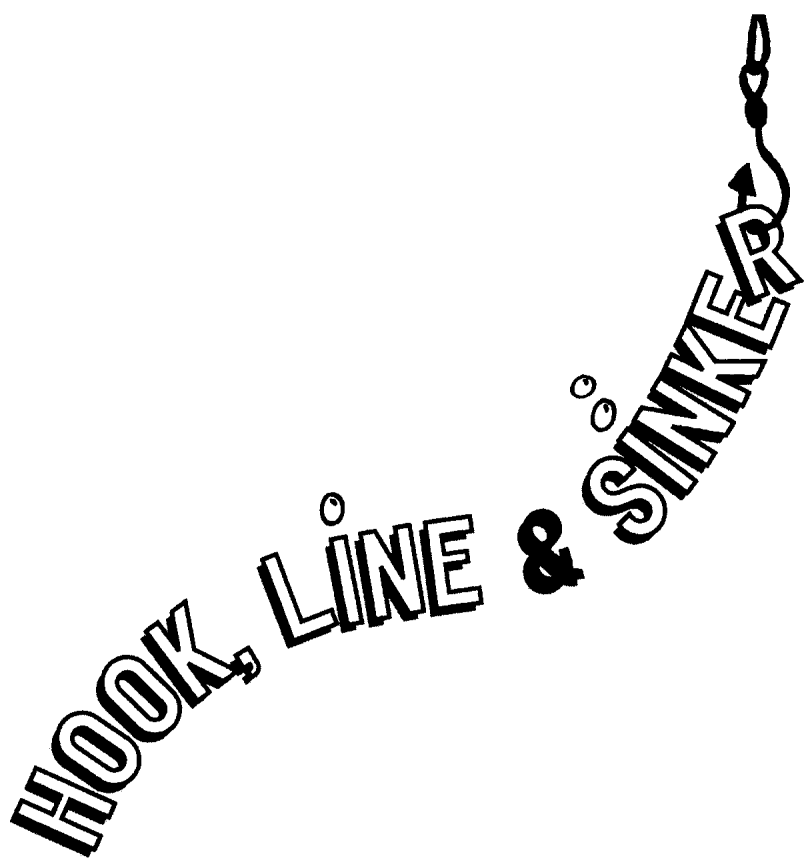
[Fic]—dc22

2004026076

Printed in the United States of America

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**HOOK, LINE & SINKER**

The title 'HOOK, LINE & SINKER' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font, slanted upwards from left to right. The words are separated by a comma and an ampersand. The letter 'i' in 'LINE' has a small circle above it. The word 'SINKER' is integrated with a graphic of a fishing hook and line that loops around the letters 'K' and 'E'. There are also small circles above the 'i' in 'LINE' and the 'K' in 'SINKER', suggesting bubbles or droplets.

To Calliopi



## ETHAN

“I’M SO DONE with guys it’s not even funny,” I say to my friends as I pace back and forth in the back aisle of Pet Planet, one of the largest suppliers of tropical fish aquariums and aquarium accessories in northern New Jersey. I’m still simmering from the e-mail I got last night from Ethan, my boyfriend of two weeks. Actually, he’s my *ex*-boyfriend now.

“Wanna know what he told me?” I’ve memorized the message, so I don’t need to refer to the e-mail printout that sits in my right jeans pocket, jabbing me in the thigh. “Fiona, you’ve been so cool and everything, but I just think we’d make *butter* sense as friends.” I emphasize Ethan’s *butter* mistake for effect. I want the whole world to know that

he didn't even care enough to proofread a breakup letter.

"I wrote back: 'Friends: I can't believe it's not butter,'" I rant on. "I hope he got the joke, but maybe it was too subtle." I let out a soft groan and twist my hair into knots. "I should've just told him to forget it—there's no way we're gonna be friends." I sigh. "Do you think he's seeing another girl?" My Pet Planet buds think this over—neither one is a big talker. This conversation has been completely one-sided, but it feels good to get everything out without being interrupted.

A woman in a yellow sundress walks by and gives me a strange look as she picks up a package of tank cleaner capsules. I blush and try to act like I'm just another customer. She probably thinks I'm crazy. I can't say I blame her—most people don't hash out their heinous breakups with a couple of angelfish.

Doris and Daisy seem to watch my fingers as I tap gently against their aquarium glass. I'm not even sure which one's which since they look so much alike. But they've been at the store for a long time and have always been good listeners. For a while, they were stuck in a tank with two small male tetras that kept nipping at their long dark fins. So they know guys can be jerks.

I hear someone sweeping up the floor behind me. "Hey, Fiona—can I help you with anything?" Jonas leans his chin against the broom handle and looks down at me with serious brown eyes.

"I think I'm all right," I say, smiling weakly at "Pet Shop

Boy,” as he’s known to me and my friend Mel. Even though he’s only fifteen—the same age as me—Jonas has been working at the store for over a year. Whenever I see him, he always seems spaced out, his dark eyebrows furrowed in thought as if he’s trying to figure out a complicated algebra problem.

“Is it time for another one?” he asks.

Jonas probably knows more about my pathetic love life than anybody except Mel, thanks to my rants at Doris and Daisy. But Jonas always humors me, telling me which species to add to my special collection of tropical fish at home.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I say, biting my lower lip. “Not sure how to describe him, though. A lot of people say he’s good-looking, but I think he knows he’s good-looking, which might have been part of the problem.”

“Hmmm.” Jonas brushes his floppy hair away from his forehead and scans the rows of aquariums. “I think I know the type.”

He nods toward a small, unassuming tank in the corner of the aisle. “*Capoeta tetrazona*,” he says. “Otherwise known as the tiger barb. They’re nice to look at but kind of live in their own little world.”

I marvel as I watch one of the barbs hover along the bottom of the tank, scraping the gravel with his red ventral fin. He seems clueless and completely content at the same time.

“Perfect,” I tell Jonas as I point out the barb I want, the one I will name Ethan. Jonas gets out his small net to



wrangle up my selection and then plops my new pet into a clear plastic container the size of a Chinese takeout box.

“And I don’t have to worry about him too much?” I ask, wondering if adding a seventh fish will overcrowd my aquarium.

“After a couple of weeks, you’ll have forgotten he’s even there,” Jonas assures me.



I’ll never forget the day Ethan Penske told me that he liked my nose.

“It’s got lots of freckles,” he said as we sat on the couch in my parents’ den, waiting for my older sister, Steph, to finish getting ready in the bathroom. She and Ethan were going to catch a movie—their usual Friday night routine.

My face felt hot as I mumbled a weak “thanks.” Though I had known Ethan as my sister’s friend for over three years, I wasn’t used to him talking about parts of my body. The fact that he finally said something about the way I looked changed everything. As he channel surfed, he put his feet up next to mine on the small divan in front of us. The end of a shoelace from his ratty Puma sneakers touched my ankle. I didn’t move an inch.

“Wanna check out a *Real World* rerun?” he asked, still looking straight ahead at the TV.

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"Sure. I love that show." Okay, so I lied.

"Steph and I are going to watch the *Real World* marathon this Saturday at my mom's house," he said. "You can come if you want."

I wanted to leap onto the couch cushions and dance, but I kept it smooth. "Okay, I'll try to swing by, maybe." I pinched the skin on the back of my left arm to keep from smiling.

That Saturday, I put on the most slimming outfit I had—a black T-shirt and jeans—and spent about an hour on my hair because the mid-March breeze was wreaking havoc on it. But when I went to see if my sister was ready to go to Ethan's, I found her sick in bed. I have to admit, I was totally bummed because I knew it meant we probably had to cancel our plans. Still, I made her some chicken soup with saltines crumbled in and brought it to her on a tray along with some magazines. We always do that for each other whenever one of us is stuck in bed with a cold. "You should head over to Ethan's without me," Steph said through her sniffles.

"I can't, Steph. He's *your* friend," I said, even though I was aching to go.

She honked loudly into a Kleenex. "Would you feel weird?"

"It's not that." The butterflies in my stomach fluttered as I perched on the edge of her bed. "You're sick. . . . Mom and Dad aren't home. . . ." Our parents were at the grocery store—which was usually a two-hour ordeal for them.

Steph sneezed. "You've hung out with my friends

before. Remember when I couldn't go to the Vans Warped tour with Roxanne and I gave you my ticket?"

"Yeah, so?" I couldn't give in so easily—not until she had told me what I wanted to hear.

"So just walk over to Ethan's and hang out." Steph gingerly sipped her soup and then rubbed her nose. "No use hanging out in the infirmary."

"You sure?" I was torn. On the one hand, I felt kind of bad leaving Steph. But on the other, I couldn't wait for my afternoon with Ethan.

"Have a good time," she said in a nasal tone, making my decision for me. I gave her a hug and a big goodbye kiss on the cheek, ignoring the germs.

An hour later, I found myself in a poorly lit basement, sitting next to Ethan on a threadbare flower-patterned love seat, my feet planted on the deck of his skateboard. *The Real World: San Diego* flickered across the screen as I sipped from a fingerprint-streaked glass of water.

A commercial came on, and I struggled to think of something to say. Somehow, "This is really good water," didn't seem to cut it.

"What do you think?" Ethan asked after a period of awkward silence.

Ooh, a topic of conversation! "About what?"

He picked up the skateboard, turning it over to show me the design underneath: a painting of a double-headed dragon with orange and red scales breathing flames around the metal axles. I nodded in approval, even though I

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thought the painting was kind of cheesy. Ethan looked up at me with a glint in his eye. "Wanna learn a trick?"

"Here?" I looked around the basement. There was a pile of junk in one corner, old football helmets and tennis rackets lumped in with ripped lampshades and a dusty vacuum cleaner. A Ping-Pong table sat off to the side, next to a washing machine/dryer unit. Other than the little lounge area where we sat, there wasn't much room for skateboarding.

"We'll clear a path." Ethan folded up the Ping-Pong table and shoved it in a corner with the rest of the junk, creating about ten feet of clear space. "I'll show you how to ollie."

I watched his feet closely, his right Puma perched on the back side of the board, his left one resting on the front. He rolled forward just a hair and in one motion kicked down with his right foot so that the front of the board popped up into his left heel. I learned absolutely nothing.

"That looks hard," I said, sitting on the arm of the love seat, trying to replay the fluid motion of his feet in my head.

"It's as easy as jumping." Ethan took my hands and I could feel the calluses on his fingertips as he delicately placed me onto the deck of the board. "Don't be nervous," he said softly, making my knees tremble. He moved my feet into the correct ollie position and gave me a little push. Suddenly, the board seemed to slip away, and I fell forward, bumping my head into the edge of the TV stand. White flashbulbs exploded in front of my eyes and a tinny buzz rang in my ears.

“Fiona! Are you okay?”

I was on the ground, lying faceup, still conscious, with a sharp sting above my right eyebrow.

“Oh, man.” Ethan ran upstairs to the kitchen as I picked myself off the floor and crawled over to the love seat.

“You must think I’m such a klutz.” I groaned when he came back with some ice cubes wrapped in a dishcloth. The flashbulbs started to disintegrate.

“Actually, if you don’t get injured, you’re not a true skater.” Ethan smiled as he gingerly held the ice against my eye. “You’ll be on the Tony Hawk tour in no time.”

“Tony who?”

Ethan laughed again and pulled the ice pack away, peering at my forehead. He ran his finger over the injury. Even in my woozy state, I felt a tingle run up my spine. Time seemed to slow down as he leaned in and pressed his lips against mine.

My heart performed an ollie of its own.



As I walk out of Pet Planet through the mall with my new fish, I finger the small nick above my right eyebrow. That day in Ethan’s basement seems like a million years ago—but the cut is still healing.

“Fiona Delmar—we meet again,” a familiar voice says. I turn around and see a tall, good-looking guy wearing a

huge smile. Who is this? I wonder as I take in his piercing blue eyes and dimpled chin. "What's up?" he asks, as though we've known each other our entire lives.

*Our entire lives . . . Oh . . . my . . . God.* Suddenly, the face rearranges itself. It's Ty Barnes.

Before I can say anything, he sweeps me into a bear hug. It knocks the breath out of me. The last time I saw Ty was the July after fifth grade, right before his parents got divorced and he moved to Parsippany with his dad. He used to be a shy, scrawny kid with crooked front teeth and a bowl haircut. I had no idea he would grow up to be so hot.

"I c-can't believe it," I stammer, still stunned. "Y-y-you look great, Ty."

"So do you," he says warmly, his blue eyes crinkling at the edges. "Your hair is so short now." When I was younger, my hair was down to my waist. Now I keep my waves roughly shoulder length, with streaks of blond highlights. Hopefully, he noticed the highlights—I just got them touched up last week.

"Did you move back to Lake View?" I ask eagerly.

"Nah, I've been in Ramsey with my dad since January," he says. "Not sure if it's permanent."

What do I say next? I think, feeling suddenly shy. Should I apologize for not keeping in touch? Does he think I'm a horrible person? "It's been so long—"

"I know," he interrupts. "But I've been thinking about you a lot lately." His grin widens. "It's pretty crazy running into you like this."

“Yeah?” It’s weird because Ty never made me nervous before, but now I’m so jittery, I can barely hold on to Ethan’s container.

“Yeah, I’m in this theater troupe nearby. We’re doing *Grease* this month.” Ty waits for my reaction and looks a little disappointed when I don’t say anything. “I thought you’d be psyched—you used to be obsessed with *Grease*.”

It’s true. When I was nine, I wanted to be Olivia Newton-John. Ty and I used to raid my mom’s closet and put together fifties costumes with her eighties clothes, and then I’d make him reenact scenes from the movie with me. There was a three-month period in fourth grade when I popped in my VHS copy of *Grease* every day after school. I couldn’t get enough.

“Hey, you know what? You should totally try out,” he says, his eyes lighting up. “We’re having open auditions this Sunday.” Ty punches me lightly on the shoulder. “Everybody’s welcome. I know it’s short notice, but you should swing by.”

My heart melts. “I don’t know—maybe,” I say, trying to play it cool. I can’t help but wonder what might have been if his family had stayed together, if he had stuck around Lake View. Would we have stayed friends or become something more? Actors always hook up with each other, right?

Ty touches my elbow. “Well, even if you don’t come to the audition, we should get together to catch up.” He digs a pen from his jeans pocket and writes his digits on my hand. “I gotta run.”

Ethan continues to bang his head against the walls of his temporary home, but I ignore him. Ty moves in closer. At first, I think he's going to kiss me on the cheek, but instead he gives me another hug. I can smell a spicy deodorant on his clothes as his cheek brushes against my ear for an instant. I shiver with delight as he lets go but manage to keep my balance.

Just barely.

I head to Starbucks to meet my friend Mel. She's fresh off a haircut and I can tell she hates it because she keeps running her hand through her choppy brunette locks. I think the short look frames her strong cheekbones and olive complexion perfectly, but she's her own worst critic.

Mel holds up a CVS bag. "Just got some more black-and-white film. The last roll I took sucked." She's been taking a photography elective this semester. At first, she signed up for it because she heard the teacher, Ms. Blaine, was a pushover. The class hasn't been as easy as she thought, but to Mel's credit, she's become extremely dedicated.

"I thought the shot of the chipmunk in your backyard was pretty cool," I say, trying to encourage her.

"Chipmunks aren't edgy enough for Blaine." Mel slumps down in the chair across from me, gnawing on a brown plastic straw and tapping her fingers against the table. "Oh, speaking of annoyingly chipper creatures, you'll never believe who cornered me in the pharmacy as I was getting the film—NutraSweet."



“Ugh, brutal.” Mel came up with the apt nickname “NutraSweet” for Carla Cantone, a girl in our class at school. There’s something artificially sweet about her, something in her super-cheerful voice and perfectly coordinated outfits. We have a theory that Carla’s straight black bangs hide a secret mechanical control panel on her forehead.

“Hey, you look happy. What’s wrong?” Mel asks, narrowing her eyes suspiciously. I’ve been attempting to hide my post-Ty smile, but I can’t help it.

“Oh, not too much. I got a new fish.”

“I noticed Ethan, yeah.” She looks at me and then squints. “But something else is up. Spill it, Fee.”

“I just ran into Ty Barnes.”

“Really?” Mel’s brown eyebrows arch in surprise. “From G. W. Elementary? What’s he up to these days? Does he still have the bowl haircut?”

My deliberate pause gives it away.

“He’s cute now, huh?”

I say nothing.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Mel sighs. “Fiona, Fiona, Fiona.”

“What?”

“I’m all for you moving on with your life and everything, but it hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since—”

“I bought the fish already.”

“A good step,” Mel admits. “But I just don’t think you need to dive into something else so quickly.”

“I’m not diving, don’t worry,” I assure her as I watch Ethan gloomily suck the surface of the water, looking for

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