

"A SPARKLING ROMANTIC COMEDY... [THE] CHEMISTRY...  
IS CRACKLING." —TRISH DOLLER, AUTHOR OF *FLOAT PLAN*

# PASSION PROJECT

LONDON SPERRY

*A Novel*



## Praise for *Passion Project*

“Moving, witty, and unputdownable, *Passion Project* is an ode to New York City and the people who can put us back together when everything falls apart. A clear-eyed, relatable exploration of mental health and grief that sparkles with hope and romance on every page.”

—Cat Shook, author of *Humor Me*

“*Passion Project* is not only a sparkling romantic comedy but a thoughtful look at navigating grief and the hopefulness of opening yourself to new possibilities. Bennet is messy and relatable, and her chemistry with Henry is delicious, crackling, and immediate.”

—Trish Doller, internationally bestselling author of *Float Plan*

“London Sperry is a breath of fresh air. I adored *Passion Project* and its tender and romantic portrayal of grief, guilt, and learning to love again. I was cheering for Bennet and Henry the whole way through! A witty and poignant romance that I didn’t want to end.”

—Ellie Palmer, author of *Four Weekends and a Funeral*

“*Passion Project* will charm your pants off and carve itself a permanent place in your heart. Full of deep emotion and top-tier banter, this authentic, affectionate slow burn is absolutely worth the wait.”

—Laura Hankin, author of *One-Star Romance*

“Unabashed, funny, and romantic, *Passion Project* is a deeply relatable character study and an inimitable portrait of a relationship, set on New York City’s richly rendered backdrop. Sperry’s debut is brimming with compassion and heart.”

—Emily Wibberley and Austin Siegemund-Broka, authors of *The Roughest Draft*

“A fresh, smart, and deliciously flirty friends-to-lovers story.... Bennet and Henry are the most irresistible couple I’ve encountered on the page in a very long time. I loved every witty, messy, achingly tender moment I spent in their world, and I dare you not to fall madly in love with them too!”

—Erika Montgomery, author of *Our Place on the Island*

“A must-read for all of us readers who love to have our hearts broken and put back together again.... You will chuckle at the sharp banter, swoon over the undeniable romantic chemistry, and, mark my words, you will cry. Read it now. Thank me later.”

—Meredith Schorr, author of *As Seen on TV*

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## PASSION PROJECT

London Sperry is a New York–based author of romantic comedies full of heart, humor, and hope. A lover of storytelling, she received her bachelor of fine arts in musical theatre from The Pennsylvania State University before finding her true passion for writing. *Passion Project* is her first novel.

# *Passion Project*

*A Novel*

LONDON SPERRY



PENGUIN BOOKS



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*Mom—the pigs are flying.*

## Chapter One

I've been betrayed by pasta carbonara.

I sit back on my heels, trying not to tip over and smack my head on the bathroom wall or, worse, the rim of the green ceramic toilet in front of me. Dean Martin's voice wafts through the speakers, an embarrassing reminder of where I am—the bathroom of a fast-casual Italian restaurant on the Lower East Side. And I just puked my guts out in their toilet like a frat boy. I wipe my chin and press the flush tab, wincing at the seasick feeling of the room rocking back and forth.

I lied before. It's not really the pasta's fault. It was the wine. It was the two and a half bottles of Chianti I slurped back like one of the Real Housewives. Who on earth told me I could afford that? One single glance at my bank account would make me vomit again, I'm sure.

I squeeze my eyes closed and cradle my head in my hands. It's like my stomach knew to expel any evidence of tonight's disaster from my body.

I'm assuming my date left hours ago. I don't really know. I've already blocked his number. We were supposed to meet at a cocktail bar across the street called Rosencrantz & Guildenstern, where customers learn how to make personalized signature cocktails and sample them all night. Their Instagram advertises maple Manhattans with bourbon-soaked cherries, mezcal palomas with charred grapefruit wedges, and matcha martinis with mango honey. In other words, if you're like me and you have the anxiety of an entire therapy waiting room, it's the perfect spot for a first date. You can

dodge eye contact and focus on the bartender-slash-instructor, and then get drunk and forget about it in the morning.

This was supposed to be a night one hundred percent curated by my roommate and oldest friend, Sonya, and honestly, she has to get at least some of the blame for this shit show. Sonya planned everything—the guy, the location, the day, the time down to the minute, and even *me*. She gathered pictures from my social media accounts and slapped together something resembling a dating profile. I have to admit, when I looked at her finished product, I was impressed. On the screen I look like a shiny twenty-five-year-old ready to take on life.

*Oh, how misleading.*

Henry had liked my fourth photo, which was a picture of me across the table from Sonya, taken on one of the nights I wasn't too depressed to let her drag me out to dinner. I'm grinning. A full toothy smile. A comically large bowl of guacamole sits in front of me. I look happy.

*Liar.*

Sonya insisted that *this* was what I needed to get out of my slump. *This* was the guy. I didn't have the heart to tell her that there was no guy alive who would tempt me to fall in love. Not even if he was the Swedish boyfriend from *Mamma Mia! 2*, or the British boyfriend from *Mamma Mia! 2*, or the other British boyfriend from *Mamma Mia! 2*. Not even then.

Henry's not really my type anyway. His profile was generic enough, one snap of him at a wedding with some friends, another rock climbing, a candid photo at the top of a mountain with a camera slung around his neck.

I rolled my eyes when I saw that one. Outdoorsy I am not.

I could see from his pictures that he had messy walnut-brown hair and a smile that was friendly, if a bit cheeky—cheeky in the “smirky” sense of the word. Not anything to do with his literal cheeks. His cheeks were normal. His eyes were forest-green behind a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. I know this because Sonya zoomed in on his eyeballs and said, *Do you have any idea how rare real green eyes are, Bennet?*

I agreed to go out with Henry because he seemed like a safe choice. It didn't appear we had much in common beyond being in the same city at the same time, but the wordy answers to the question prompts on his profile told me he would be able to carry a conversation even if I couldn't. The opportunity to smile and nod without the pressure to talk about myself goes a long way with me. Basically, he seemed nice. Nothing more, nothing less. I could tell by his profile that I was unlikely to be murdered by him, and even less likely to fall in love with him.

Sonya hyped me up as much as she could. She dressed me, swiped makeup on my eyes, and sprayed a fancy-looking perfume on my neck as she blasted ABBA on her phone. When the time came, she pushed me out the door like she was pushing me out of an airplane without a parachute.

She means well, I know she does, but is it too much to ask to be left alone? I'm not her project. I'm her roommate.

And it turned out, my gut was right. I couldn't do it. When I dragged my sorry ass to the bar for the date, I froze. I stood there in front of the door, panicking as the street closed in on me. *What if I'm not interesting? What if he's not interesting? What if I can't think of anything to say? What if he hates me? Or, worse...what if he doesn't?* I pressed my nose to the window, trying to catch a glimpse of him. If I could just see him, if I could just observe his mannerisms, maybe I wouldn't be so goddamn petrified. But all I saw were couples. Couples *everywhere*. Kissing cheeks, holding hands across tables, sipping their cocktails out of the same glass. I tried to picture myself as part of one of those couples...tried to pretend it wouldn't be so wrong.

I should've known then and there that my night would end with my head draped over the toilet, because the bile was already beginning to rise.

My body collapsed to the sidewalk, on top of chewed gum and cigarette butts. I couldn't muster up a deep breath or a coherent thought as the world shook and knocked itself off-kilter. All I could do was tuck my knees to my chest and wait it out until my fingers stopped tingling and I could stand up without tipping over. New York didn't even stop, didn't even bother to look at the girl with her head between her knees on the sidewalk. It must've been

the least interesting thing any of the people who passed by me had seen today. I could almost hear their internal monologues as they walked by. *Oh wow! Someone's having a mental breakdown on the sidewalk? Business as usual, carry on.*

There was no way I was going to meet Henry. I couldn't. So I slinked across the street to L'italiano and sat at the bar to drink off the panic attack.

He probably thinks I'm an asshole. He's probably right.

*Why is it always like this? Why can't I be normal?*

Normal people's dates end with a good-night kiss, not a vomit carnival in the back of a nice restaurant.

I should get myself together before they send a medic in here. My head thumps as I pull myself up off the tiled floor to stand in front of the marble sink. I'm surprised that instead of my reflection, I see a white brick wall with the word *BELLISSIMA!* written across it in black paint—the subtext of this message being *Don't worry about what you look like! Go out! Enjoy life! Don't be vain!* It's like those terrible coffee shops that don't have Wi-Fi because they want you to talk to other people instead of looking at your devices. Torture. With no mirror in sight, I roll my eyes and open the camera app on my phone. *Bellissima, my ass.*

My eyeliner has magically stayed in place, but there's only a thin line of sweaty eye shadow left, tucked in the creases of my sockets. The layer of foundation I used to try to cover my freckles has all but disappeared, and my dark brown hair looks like it's been styled by a leaf blower. I keep it in a chin-length bob so I don't have to think about it. Most of the time it works out fine, but today I wish I could throw it up into a bun to air out the back of my damp neck. There's a small blob of something beige on the lapel of my shirt; whether it's carbonara or puke, I may never know.

I turn on the faucet and start to wash the grime from the bathroom floor off my hands. There's no soap in the dispenser. Of course.

A loud knock on the door spikes my blood pressure.

"Someone's in here," I croak.

It feels like a medieval torture device is clamped onto my skull. I splash water on my face so I don't look so much like a drunk psychopath. Almost immediately I regret it, because there are no paper towels, just an electric hand dryer. A fat drop of water clings to my eyelashes. I dab it with the back of my sleeve, smearing what's left of my mascara.

Another knock booms through the tiny bathroom. Does this person think I magically disappeared in here?

"One minute!" I grunt.

I pop a piece of gum into my mouth, wipe my eyes, and sling my bag over my shoulder.

Three deep breaths. *Act normal. You can do this.*

Another knock. Louder and more aggressive.

*Who does this asshole think they are?*

"I said one minute," I snap as I crank the door handle. "What don't you understand about that?"

I whip the door open to see a tall man standing in the way. He looks at me like I have three heads.

Brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses—just like his dating profile. An expression of pure shock and horror painted across his green eyes—decidedly *not* like his dating profile.

"Shit." I drop my gaze down to the floor. Maybe by some miracle he won't recognize me. "Excuse me."

"So this is where you've been." Henry leans on the doorframe, blocking my exit. His expression changes from shock to something else completely. Something almost smug. A tattoo on his bicep peeks out from under his pink short-sleeved shirt.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I let my hair fall in my face, obscuring his view.

He smirks. *Smirks*. "Bennet, right?"

My name sounds so stupid coming out of his mouth. I've always hated it. It makes me feel like an adolescent boy or trust-fund-douchebag-finance bro, which I know was not my mother's intention when she gave it to me.



“Nope.” My voice sounds like my larynx has been run through a blender. “My name is Andy. Goodbye.” I try to map out an escape route, but the way he’s casually leaning on the doorframe and the unfortunate largeness of his body block my path. Why is he here, all these hours after our planned date? Why did he cross the street and turn into the same restaurant I had?

“Look, *Andy*,” he mocks, doing air quotes around my fake name. “If you didn’t want to go out with me you could’ve just said so.”

“I’m late for a...uh...” *Come on, Bennet. Think of something. Anything.* “I’m late for a baptism.” A *baptism*? What the fuck?

“Really? On a Wednesda—”

“I have to go.”

I squeeze myself through the archway between his arm and the door and spill out into the dining room.

The space is almost pitch-black compared with the fluorescent light of the bathroom, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. There are old-fashioned lantern-type light fixtures peppered through the dining area that glow red and orange like tiny matches. The tables are so close together that navigating the floor would be difficult for a sober person, let alone a drunk idiot like me.

I make my way through the darkness, barreling straight into the blond bartender who overserved me. She’s handing a glass of red wine to an unsuspecting gentleman at a bar table as we collide. I don’t have time to stop and say sorry, but I look back long enough to catch the gruesome sight of wine splattered across the man’s chest like blood. The bartender curses at me as she grabs a rag from her belt and dabs his chest, soaking up my wreckage. Of course he was wearing a crisp white button-up. Why wouldn’t he be?

I finally reach the door and frantically try to pull it open, but it won’t budge. It won’t move. *Dear god, why me? Why must I be punished? What did I do to deserve this?* My heart is pounding, sweat is dripping from my forehead. I feel a body behind me, his heat warming my back. An arm

stretches over my right shoulder, a tattoo peeking out from under a pink shirt. He pushes gently against the door. It opens without a fight.

I turn around, once again pinned between a dude named Henry and a door.

“It’s a push.”

## Chapter Two

I've never considered myself a particularly agile person, but I'm almost proud of how quickly I managed to haul ass out of L'italiano and book it to the subway. The only saving grace of this entire night is that I didn't have to wait too long for an uptown train. I now sit on the B across from a woman with a sleeping child slung across her lap. I massage my temples as the train pulls away from the station, knees bouncing in my seat as I try to shake the humiliation out of my body. I glance up to the woman across from me, who quickly looks away. She pulls the sleeping toddler on her lap closer to her chest, kissing the child on the forehead. I make a mental note not to be too offended when she inevitably moves seats at the next stop—I'm sure I smell like sewage and look a bit unhinged.

I never want to be myself, but today I'd especially like to melt into this subway seat and wake up in a new body with a whole new life. But, alas. Like always, I wake up as Bennet Marie Taylor, and I wake up to the subway announcer's garbled voice calling a stop that is definitely not mine.

I must've dozed off somewhere between Columbus Circle and 125th Street. My eyes are heavy and saturated, and I blink away the tears. They say you're not a true New Yorker until you cry on the subway, but I never cared much about being considered a true New Yorker.

I stagger through the sliding doors and into the dark station, trying to get my bearings. It smells like any other station in the Bronx: stale, sweaty, and sour. I make eye contact with the butt crack of a man peeing on the tracks. My stomach churns. There are no boundaries in this city.

I scan the station to figure out where exactly I am, until I see a sign—YANKEE STADIUM. I'm at Yankee Stadium. It's a relief to realize I'm not actually too far from my apartment in Harlem, and that all I have to do is catch the D going in the opposite direction and I'll be home in a couple stops.

I pry my eyes away from the roach skittering across the station sign to check my MTA app. The next downtown train isn't arriving for twenty-nine minutes.

Well. It seems as good a time as any to finally see what all the fuss is about over a baseball stadium. Sam's favorite baseball stadium.

I climb up the subway steps, careful not to stagger and twist an ankle, and emerge into the cool night air. The stadium is across the street from the subway exit I chose, so I wait until I get the little walk signal, and then I cross the street. I hold my breath and stare at my feet on the pavement as I approach the sleeping giant, almost afraid that looking at it before I'm right underneath it will somehow ruin the experience. When I feel its stoic presence upon me, I stop, take a breath, and look up.

And up.

And up.

It's dark out, but the sign is lit up so bright I have to squint. It's huge. Bigger than I pictured it. Like a twentieth-century Colosseum where men come to fight. Although when Sam played, the game seemed more like a dance: delicate, elegant, and refined.

The Yankees were his favorite team. He used to take the train from Jersey with his dad once a summer to see them play. I imagine him, age seven, standing here, staring up at the huge monument. He's holding his father's hand while eating Dippin' Dots out of an upside-down batting helmet. His rosy cheeks are smeared with sugar and dirt and his sandy blond hair is mussed by the wind. I've seen pictures of him at that age, all joy, growing into himself. I stand, still as a statue, looking up at the towering stadium, feeling everything and nothing at the same time. Minutes pass, though it feels like hours.

It's colder than I'd anticipated at the end of May. I shiver as a breeze blows my hair across my face. I tuck it behind my ear as the chill delivers me back to reality. I have no idea how long I've been here, and I might have missed my train by now. I rush back into the underground tunnels of the city, making my train by a couple of seconds, and emerge in Harlem.

I live in a fifth-floor walk-up, and by the time I reach the top, I'm out of breath. I pray to god that Sonya is asleep so I can spare her the sound of my labored breathing and the scent of my L'italiano bathroom visit. Truthfully, Sonya has seen me far worse than this—we've known each other since our awkward middle school days—but living in New York has peeled me open in ways I hadn't expected. It takes everything in me not to let my mushy, tangled insides pour out into our tiny apartment and slowly drown her. So I try my best to keep our relationship in check. Safely distant. Sonya loves it here. She found her home. She found her people. And I'm a specter of the friend she once knew, haunting her apartment and shrieking like a harpy at anyone who gets too close...even my oldest friend.

I reach down into the dark pit of my purse, rifling through gum wrappers, Sour Patch Kids dust, Band-Aids, loose change, and two pairs of sunglasses, until I loop my fingers through my key ring.

I unlock the door and say a silent prayer. *Please, if there's a god above, Sonya will be asleep.*

When I push into the living room, she springs up from the couch like a bird in a cuckoo clock.

"How was it?" she asks, shuffling toward the door. I flinch. *Kill me.*

"I didn't go." I kick my shoes off and slip past her. "I wasn't ready."

She tilts her head, her brows wrinkling above her deeply concerned eyes. "Oh no," she says. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I rub my forehead and cross into the kitchen to fill up a glass of water.

She follows close behind. "Want to talk about it?"

*Talk about it? No. I want to forget about it forever.* I shake my head. "I just need some sleep. That's all."