

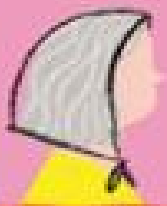
"Freya Sampson's writing is like a feel-good magical potion made of everything that's beautiful in life. This book is my happy place!"

—New York Times bestselling author ALI HAZELWOOD

# THE LOST



# TICKET



Freya Sampson

Author of THE LAST CHANCE LIBRARY



PRAISE FOR

## ***The Lost Ticket***

“It’s hard to think of another book quite as delightful as this one. *The Lost Ticket* is basically the best hug in the world in book form.”

—Jesse Q. Sutanto

“*The Lost Ticket* is an unputdownable masterpiece of heart, hope, and humanity. I cheered, swooned, and gasped with each turn of the plot, staying up well past my bedtime because I needed to know what would happen next.”

—Sarah Grunder Ruiz, author of *Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships*

“*The Lost Ticket* is one of the loveliest novels I’ve read. Gorgeously written, it’s brimming over with hope, inspiration, and endearing humor. I completely adored this wonderful, warm hug of a book.”

—India Holton, national bestselling author of *The Wisteria Society of Lady Scoundrels*

PRAISE FOR

## ***The Last Chance Library***

“A wonderfully warm and uplifting story of kindness, community, and love that made me laugh, cry, and cheer.”

—Clare Pooley, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Authenticity Project*

“*The Last Chance Library* is a heart-squeezing and charming story about grief, love, and the power of community. An absolute delight.”

—*USA Today* bestselling author Colleen Oakley

“*The Last Chance Library* is absolutely irresistible! Curl up and indulge in Freya Sampson’s charming novel about a shy librarian in a small town with a great cause. You’ll have such a good time and you’ll love the unexpected twist at the end!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Nancy Thayer

“Both spellbinding and tender, *The Last Chance Library* is a gorgeous love letter to books, a celebration of the characters that make a community, and an inspiring call to muster our courage and fight for the things that matter. Simply put, this book is sublime.”

—Libby Hubscher, author of *Meet Me in Paradise*

“A delightful exploration of personal growth, inner strength, and the importance of family, friends, and love.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Fans of libraries and heartfelt, humorous women’s fiction with a powerful message and a hint of romance won’t want to miss this one! It’s so good that readers may very well devour it in one sitting.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“A sweet testament to the power of reading, community, and the library.”

—*Booklist*

“*The Last Chance Library* unravels with great wit and tenderness. . . . Readers will eagerly invest in the cause to save the library and be greatly amused by plot twists that play out with pleasant surprises and heart-tugging twists.”

—Shelf Awareness

Titles by Freya Sampson

THE LAST CHANCE LIBRARY

THE LOST TICKET

# THE Lost Ticket

FREYA SAMPSON



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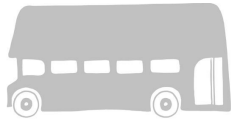
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*For my parents, Alison & Roy*



## PROLOGUE

April 1962

Frank spotted her out of the front window as the bus pulled up at Clapham Common Station.

She was standing at the bus stop, wearing a pair of wide-legged trousers, what looked like a man's tweed jacket, and a black beret, set on a sideways angle to reveal a shock of red hair underneath. The whole ensemble was unlike anything he'd ever seen a girl wear before, both boyish and feminine at the same time. From his seat at the front of the top deck, Frank saw a flash of green eyes under the beret and felt his heart quicken.

The 88 stopped and the girl boarded, disappearing from view. Frank could hear the conductor downstairs greeting passengers as they paid their fares, and he imagined the girl taking a ticket and finding a seat on the lower deck. Should he move downstairs? He paused, struck with indecision. And then he felt a movement behind him and caught a glimpse of tweed to his right. Frank kept very still, his head facing the front window, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw the girl sit in the vacant seat across the aisle from him. She put her bag down by her feet, closed her eyes, and let out an audible sigh.

The bus pulled away from the stop and set off up Clapham High Street. The girl didn't move from her position or open her eyes, so Frank was able to steal glances at her. He guessed that she was slightly younger than him, maybe eighteen or nineteen, although she held herself with the confidence of someone twice her age. She was surprisingly tall, with a long, slender neck and a sharp, pointed chin. Her skin was so pale it looked like porcelain, and up close he could see that her hair was the color of the orange marmalade his parents sold in their shop. As the bus approached Stockwell, she still hadn't moved and Frank was beginning to wonder if she'd fallen asleep, when all of a sudden she opened her eyes and turned her head toward him.

"Do you make a habit of staring at girls on the bus?"

Frank was so taken aback that he felt himself blush.

“Oh, I’m . . . eh . . .” he stumbled, sounding like the schoolboy he suddenly felt like. “I’m sorry.”

She looked at him with her olive green eyes, and Frank saw a flicker of amusement dance across her face. Oh god, she was laughing at him. “It’s rude, you know. Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?”

“I’m sorry,” Frank said again. His pulse was racing, and he reached into his pocket and pulled out his book, desperate to end this excruciating moment. He could feel her watching him, so he hurriedly turned to a random page and pretended to read.

“What’s the book, then?” she asked.

“Eh . . . it’s *On the Road*. By Jack . . .” He hesitated, unsure how to pronounce the surname. “Ker-oooh-ick.”

“Any good?”

At once, Frank had an urgent sense that how he answered this question was vital; that he had one chance to make up for the terrible first impression he’d made. But the problem was, he really didn’t like the book. He’d been lent it by a friend who loved all things American and had ordered it all the way from New York. His friend had raved about the book’s modern style and said something about Beat poets, but Frank had been struggling with its chaotic and strange narrative and had barely got past the first ten pages.

“Yes, it’s great. It’s from America. The author is part of the Beat generation.”

Frank hoped that sentence made him sound grown-up and sophisticated, but he saw she still had that same faintly amused expression on her face.

“What happens in it?”

“Oh. Well, he goes on a journey. On the road.”

“Yes, I’d got that much from the title. Then what?”

“He meets some people and goes to parties and . . . eh . . .”

Frank tried to remember what else he’d been told about the book, but this girl was making his brain turn to jelly. She was watching him silently, with no intention of putting him out of his misery.

“To be honest, I’ve not got very far with it yet,” he said, and heard a sigh of defeat in his own voice.

The girl didn’t say anything, just reached into her bag, pulled out a large notebook and pencil, and began to scribble something down. Frank waited for her to speak again but realized with a sinking sensation that she’d got bored of him and their conversation was over.

The bus trundled on, up South Lambeth Road toward Vauxhall Junction. Frank desperately wanted to observe her some more, but whenever he glanced over, she seemed to sense it and looked back at him, so he resigned himself to staring out the front window instead. He was painfully aware that she might get off at any moment, and as they approached each bus stop, he held his breath in case this was the one. But she didn’t leave, and the only sound was the scratch of her pencil on the paper.

Finally, when he could bear it no longer, Frank turned back to her.

“What are you writing?”

“What’s that?” she said, not looking up from the page.

“I said, what are you writing?”

“I’m not.”

“But you’re—”

“Here.” With a flourish she ripped the page out of her notebook and thrust it toward him. Frank took the piece of paper and turned it over cautiously, unsure what he was about to see.

It was a sketch of a young man, and with a jolt like an electric shock, Frank realized it was him. She’d caught his hair perfectly, the way he styled the front with wax so it stood up high, and there were his too-big ears and the crooked nose he’d inherited from his mother. Yet somehow she’d taken all his odd features and still made him look, well, handsome.

“This is . . .” His voice came out in a boyish squeak, and Frank winced.

“It’s very rough,” she said, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her bag and extracting one.

“I can’t believe you did it so quickly.”

“I like to sketch on the bus.” She struck a match and lit the cigarette, inhaling deeply. “There’s always an interesting selection of life models,

with the added frisson that you never know when they'll suddenly bugger off."

"It's wonderful."

"It's not one of my best," she said, dismissing the compliment with a wave of her cigarette. "Do you like art?"

Again, this answer felt important, and Frank opened his mouth to bluff, then stopped himself. "I don't really know much about it, I'm afraid. My family have never had much interest in art."

He waited for her to mock him, and was surprised to see her smile, warmly this time. "My old man's the same. His idea of art is the cartoons in the *Daily Mirror*. He tried to stop me going to art school."

"It's not that I'm not interested. I just don't know where to start. It's all a bit . . . intimidating."

"I know it can seem like that, but it's not really. Anyone can enjoy art. That's why it's so exciting."

Frank wasn't sure he agreed. His parents' attitude to art was the same as their attitude to the pictures or the theater: that it was something frivolous that only those with too much time or money could enjoy. "So, how did you learn to draw if you don't go to art school?"

"Oh, I do go."

"But I thought you said your father stopped you?"

"He tried, but I left home and went anyway," the girl said. "I moved in with a friend in Clapham, and I have a part-time job in a clothes shop so I can pay the rent—that's where I'm headed now. My family have pretty much disowned me."

She dropped her cigarette on the floor and ground it out with her shoe. Frank watched her in awe. Even though he was twenty-two, he could never imagine disobeying his parents like that. His father would kill him.

"You're much braver than me," he said, but she shrugged.

"It's not really bravery. I didn't have a choice. Painting is all I've ever wanted to do."

"And what will you do when you finish your course?"

"I'll be an artist." The way she said the word sent a thrill down Frank's spine. He'd never met an artist before, and it only made her seem more exotic and wonderful.

The bus passed through Parliament Square, and Frank stared out the window at Westminster Abbey. His parents had brought him here when he was thirteen to join the cheering crowds at the Queen's coronation. It was one of the few times Frank could remember them ever closing the shop. He imagined turning round to his parents now and telling them that he didn't want to work there anymore, that he had bigger dreams than standing behind a counter for the rest of his life. He glanced across at the girl, who was lighting another cigarette. What must it be like to be her, to have such a strong sense of purpose that you'd risk your whole family for it? He wanted to reach out and touch her arm, to soak up some of that unbridled confidence.

"What about you?" she said as the bus turned onto Whitehall.

"Oh, I just work in my parents' shop."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"No, I hate it. But they expect me to take over the business."

"And what do you want to do?"

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," she said, her face so solemn he smiled.

"I want to be an actor." As he said the words, Frank realized this was the first time he'd ever spoken them out loud.

"I'm sure you'd make a fine actor," the girl said. Frank looked across to see if she was teasing him, but her face was still serious. "You even look a bit like Rock Hudson in *Pillow Talk*."

"Oh, I loved that one. I saw it twice."

The first time, he'd taken Rosamund Green, and the second time, he'd gone on his own, sneaking in so no one saw him going to a romance flick without a girl.

"I go to the pictures as much as I can," he said. "I've seen almost everything they've shown at the Electric Palace."

"Well, then, you've begun your acting education already," she said. "Now you just need to tell your parents."

"I wish it were that simple."

"It won't be, but I swear you won't regret it. You only get one life, after all."



The bus had reached the top of Whitehall, and Trafalgar Square came into view in front of them.

“You know, if you’re serious about wanting to learn about art, this is a good place to start,” the girl said as the bus turned left in front of Nelson’s Column.

“Trafalgar Square?”

“No, the National Gallery.” She pointed at a large, domed building at the far side of the square. Frank had seen it dozens of times before, but never paid it any attention. “It’s got over two thousand paintings inside, from all round the world.”

“Two thousand? How are you meant to see all of them in one visit?”

“You’re not,” she said. “It’s free, so you can go as often as you like. I could spend hours there staring at just one painting.”

Frank looked at the girl in disbelief. “Hours looking at one painting? Don’t you get bored?”

“God no. There’s a painting called *Bacchus and Ariadne*, by an artist called Titian, that I must have spent days looking at. Every time, I see something new.”

“Goodness,” Frank said.

“Sometimes I wonder why I’m bothering with art school. Spending time in that gallery is like being taught by the greatest art masters in the world.”

“I suppose I should go and take a look, then.” Frank couldn’t believe he’d lived in this city all his life and never even known the gallery existed. How small his world suddenly felt.

They were passing through Piccadilly Circus now, under the huge neon signs advertising Coca-Cola and Cinzano. The girl began to gather up her belongings and, with a start, Frank realized that she must be about to get off the bus. He felt such a rush of emotion that for a moment he couldn’t speak. He’d asked girls out before, and some of them had even said yes, so why did he feel so nervous now?

“Look, this might be presumptuous, but . . .” He faltered as she turned to look at him with those bewitching eyes. “I was wondering if perhaps you’d like to go to the National Gallery next Sunday? With me, I mean. You could show me that Bacchus and Adrian painting you like so much.”

She squinted at him, and Frank braced himself for rejection.

“Why not?” she said, and in that instant he thought his heart might explode.

“Wonderful! That’s . . . Thank you!”

“You can call me if you like,” she said. “There’s a phone in my building and you can always leave a message with one of the girls.”

“I will do.” He reached into his pocket, then realized he didn’t have a pen or anything to write on.

“Here.” She produced her pencil and bus ticket, scribbling her number at the bottom of the small rectangular card. She held it out to him and then stopped, pulling the ticket back. “You’re not one of those boys who like to collect girls’ numbers, then never call, are you?”

“Of course not!” Frank said. “I swear, I will call you tonight, and every day if you like.”

“Just the once is fine,” she said, but she smiled as she handed over the ticket. Frank’s thumb brushed against hers as he took it, and he felt like he’d been burned.

He put the ticket into his jacket pocket and then went to hand her back the drawing. “Thank you for showing me this. It’s wonderful.”

“You can keep it if you like.”

“Really, are you sure?”

“’Course. It’s just a scribble.”

“Well, then, I should give you something in return.” He felt in his pockets but all he had was his friend’s copy of *On the Road*. “You can have this, if you like? I’m not sure it’s for me.”

“Thanks. I’m intrigued to see what this Mr. Kerouac is like.”

The way she said his name was completely different to how Frank had pronounced it, and he felt himself blush again.

“I’ll give it back when we meet,” she said, taking the book off him.

The bus was approaching Oxford Circus, and the girl stood up to disembark. Frank watched her, savoring every last detail to remember until he saw her again. He wanted to say something profound or funny, something that would make her smile when she remembered him later. Something they could talk about in years to come.

“It was lovely meeting you,” he said, feeling once again like a hopeless schoolboy.

“You too, Rock Hudson. See you soon.”

She turned and walked down the aisle toward the stairs, not looking back.

