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# THE SWITCH

A NOVEL

# LILY

# SAMSON



THE  
SWITCH

Lily Samson

PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS / VIKING

VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)

Simultaneously published in hardcover in Great Britain by Century, an imprint of Penguin Random House Ltd., London, in 2024.

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A Pamela Dorman Book/Viking

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Samson, Lily, author.

Title: The switch / Lily Samson.

Description: [New York] : Pamela Dorman Books/Viking, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023038902 (print) | LCCN 2023038903 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593656013 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593656020 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Domestic fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PR6119.A49 S95 2024 (print) | LCC PR6119.A49 (ebook) | DDC 823/.92—dc23/eng/20231113

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023038902>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/20230389>

Ebook ISBN 9780593656020

Cover design: David Litman

Cover art: Getty Images

Designed by Cassandra Garruzzo Mueller, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

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*For L. K. and Andrew Gallix*

*And for Lyra, 2003–2023*

# PART ONE



# 1.

## NOW: ELENA

**T**onight it all begins.

As I sit on the sofa, watching a Netflix crime series with Adam, I can't quite believe I'm going to go through with the plan. My nails, once well-maintained, are now ragged and blunt. I feel certain that, at the last minute, I will chicken out and curl up in bed and escape into sleep.

"For God's sake, the weapon's right there, in her kitchen, with blood on it," Adam playfully mocks the detective onscreen, who keeps missing vital clues in the shakily scripted drama.

I resist the urge to yawn. I didn't sleep well last night. I tell Adam I need the toilet.

Upstairs, I flush without using it and tiptoe into our bedroom. Adam looked surprised when I gave it a thorough clean yesterday, even using the Hoover extension to spruce every corner, and ironing all the bed linen before putting it on. I've always been the messy one.

The new Habitat duvet cover is white with little green sprigs on it. I smooth away a crease with my hand.

On Adam's side is a bedside table where his iPhone is charging, a box of tissues and a few Arthur Conan Doyles. There's a small table lamp and I unscrew the bulb gently, centimeter by centimeter.

I click the switch. Nothing. If Adam gets anxious, if he reaches for the lamp in the dark, it won't help him.

From the window, I gaze out over the rooftops, lights going on in the houses as people settle down for the evening, the last rays of the sun faint in the pale pink sky. My eyes fall to the clock. *Seven thirty-six.*

Four and a half hours to go.  
My heart trembles.

## 2.

### THEN: ELENA

**I**t began with Sophia MacInnes. I first encountered her in my local café three months ago on a March morning. Adam and I had just moved to Wimbledon Village and it felt like we'd won the lottery.

Our previous accommodation had been a flat in Walthamstow, which had been okay, if a little cramped, until some noisy neighbors moved into the flat above, driving us mad with parties and banging and music at all hours. It came out of the blue, the offer: Adam's aunt, aware that our lease was soon to run out, was going to the US for eight months and would we like to housesit? We'd be allowed to bring our cat. After moving in, we spent the first weekend wandering about, drunk with joy at the charm of our new area: the green beauty of the Common and the swans on Rushmere Pond, the old-fashioned feel of the Village with its quaint shops, the lovely local pubs. And the quiet! Peaceful nights; no need for ear-plugs; the joy of waking up and hearing birdsong from the garden and feeling human again.

Even for Adam, who'd had a much more privileged upbringing than me, this world was aspirational: the average house price ran into millions. We were conscious that we were temporarily existing in a bubble of luxury, which made our excitement bittersweet. Already two months had passed, way too quickly.

Adam had a new job in an investment bank in the City while I had given up office life for freelancing. It was too easy to spend the day in my pajamas with my laptop on my knees, surrounded by half-drunk cups of Earl Grey, so I had taken to working in a local café.

The day it happened, I was sitting there with a tea, toying pleasurably with a Word doc covered in red corrections, when I became aware of a commotion near the door.

There was a woman. Distressed. Early thirties. Blonde-haired. Glamorous. She hurried to the customer restroom, hurried back to the café entrance. “I just left it in there,” she said, visibly distressed. “And—he—he took my bag!”

“I’ll call the police,” said Antonia the waitress.

I told myself not to get involved. I had a deadline for the end of the day. But the woman looked so vulnerable that my heart went out to her. I waved at her, calling: “If you need to cancel your cards or anything, you can borrow my mobile.”

She sat down next to me, relaying her horror story: she’d accidentally left behind her handbag and when she went back for it, she saw a teenager had grabbed it and was dashing past her toward the exit. She had just moved to the area and was shocked.

“It’s normally so quiet in here,” I reassured her. “It’s nearly always yummy mummies, to be honest. I think you’ve just been unlucky—sorry.”

We chatted some more, Antonia brought her a free coffee, she called her husband to get him to check their insurance policy for her card numbers and got them canceled. Soon a policewoman arrived. At this point I left, walking home with a guilty zing of excitement. Meeting Sophia had been a thrill, broken the routine of my day. It made me reflect, later, that though we loved our new place, we were lonely. The trek back to Walthamstow was more of an effort than we’d imagined and often Adam was too tired after long days at work; we’d only seen our old friends a few times since the move. Adam didn’t mind as he preferred staying in, but I’ve always enjoyed socializing.

Back home, it was my turn to cook dinner. Adam sipped a Siren beer and watched me chop veg as I enthused about my afternoon. “I found her on Instagram.” I showed him my phone.

“Sophia MacInnes.” Adam’s eyes lit up. “She’s hot!”

I gave him a sharp nudge and he grabbed me and kissed me, declaring that nobody was as gorgeous as his wench.

“Oh, wow!” My heart leaped as I noticed a little red person icon in my notifications. “She’s just followed me back! And sent me a message, saying thank you for my ‘extraordinary kindness’...She’s actually an artist.” I scrolled through images of her paintings. They were in the style of Vanessa Bell: vibrant colors and abstract shapes. “She’s done designs for Liberty’s... she’s had exhibitions...”

“How many followers does she have?” Adam asked, a teasing edge to his voice.

“Over six thousand.”

“And how many do you have?”

“Fuck off!” I gave him a cross kiss. “I only joined a few weeks ago. I’m *building* a base...”

“You should invite her over for dinner,” he reflected. “Her and her chap. It would be nice to meet some new people.”

### 3.

## THEN: ELENA

The next time I bumped into Sophia at the Vicomte Café, I invited her and her husband, Finn, over to dinner for the following evening. I tried looking up Finn on her Instagram, and was surprised to find no trace of him. Just Sophia, looking impeccable with her hair scooped back with sunglasses, cool as a Hitchcock blonde. She'd mentioned her husband was older than her. I wondered if she was embarrassed by him, if he was a lecherous old goat she'd rather hide away. In my head he became a caricature: a ninety-year-old needing her help with his walking frame.

Adam and I were rusty at entertaining guests. We cooked together, chopping and singing along to the radio and joking about. At one point I splashed water at him and he tickled me and thwacked a tea towel against my bottom. This was what I loved about Adam, the way we could be childish together and let off steam and stress, knowing that the moment the doorbell rang we'd have to present ourselves as grown-ups.

I wondered nervously how we might seem to our dinner guests. People would sometimes do a doubletake at me and Adam, musing that we looked mismatched. He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt with a rock music logo on it; he looked as though he could be the lead singer in a band. At the weekend he would grow blond stubble, to be shorn off for work first thing on Monday morning when it was back to a suit and commute. In contrast, I'd dressed up, putting on heels, an Oasis dress patterned with red flowers, and a bright slash of lipstick.

My cat Lyra sat at the end of the hallway, picking up on the tension in the air, flicking her tail with nonchalant curiosity.

The doorbell rang. Lyra fled. Adam and I froze: *they were ten minutes early.*

On my way to the door, I checked my reflection in the mirror. My freshly washed brown hair was still a little damp. Was the lipstick too much? The bold gesture helped to hide my shyness; I loved meeting people but found first encounters hard.

I opened the door.

I had been right to dress up. Sophia was wearing black velvet, and she looked stunning.

“Elena!” She gave me an exuberant hug and a kiss.

Her perfume was gorgeous: like walking through a cottage garden in the summer, breathing in shades of rose and jasmine. I noticed a small gold crucifix glittering at her neck.

“And this is—” she began.

“Hi, I’m Finn.” He shook my hand. He wasn’t what I had expected at all. His hair was as dark as patent leather, flecked with gray, his eyes like black olives framed with thick lashes, his tan light. He was older than Sophia by five years at most, I’d guess. Hadn’t she said he was in business? He looked like a film star.

We went into the dining-room, where Sophia cooed over the table arrangement, the vase of freesias. There was something so gushing about her compliments that I felt on edge. Adam’s aunt had a tendency toward clutter and sentimentality; old dressers and china, dull landscape paintings on the walls. Yet I didn’t want to confess to Sophia that we just had a housesit. I wanted her to believe in us as a couple who could afford to live in Wimbledon Village.

“It’s lovely here.” Sophia went to the French windows. “So much light coming in.”

We were proud of our garden, even if we couldn’t take credit for it. Several camellias were still in brilliant scarlet flower, and a pretty cherry tree was covered in buds of blossom.

I wondered what Finn made of us. His expression was hard to read.

Adam, who had been busy in the kitchen, came in then, shaking hands, grinning, offering them rosé in his loud Scottish accent. I felt a flash of pride: everyone liked Adam. He had such a warm, sunny face, blue eyes framed by laughter-creased crinkles, freckles that reminded you of how cute a boy he must have been. He was confident, which rubbed off on me and helped me feel more bubbly.

We sat down to eat asparagus as a starter, drizzled with olive oil and topped with Parmesan.

Finn was on my left. The glow of his charisma kept tugging at my attention; even when I wasn't looking at him, I was aware of him, electrified.

"Elena says you moved here recently too," Adam said.

"In February," said Sophia. "We moved to Murray Road—just round the corner. We were in Cornwall before."

"I love Cornwall," Adam enthused. "I remember holidays there when I was a kid. Whereabouts were you?"

"In Crugmeer. Don't worry, nobody's ever heard of it!" Sophia laughed. "It's right on the west coast—quite cut off. It's been a big change, coming to live in London—but I love it. Most of the time..."

"Sophia tells me that you saved her life," Finn teased me.

"Oh, I just lent her my mobile."

"Elena was my guardian angel." Sophia spoke fast, with an almost theatrical delivery. "I was completely stranded!" she exclaimed, as though the café was in a foreign country rather than just down the road. "Thank goodness you were there that day, I don't know what I would have done otherwise."

"I just did what felt right, what anyone would do." I blushed, smiling at Adam. "I'm in there most days, actually—I call it my office."

"The freelancer lifestyle. Some of us get to sit in cafés every day drinking coffee," Adam teased me.

"Oh, but that doesn't mean her job isn't as important as yours," Sophia berated him with feminist disapproval. "Freelancing is hard work!"

"Yes, *Adam*." I mock-glared at him.

Adam looked chastised; I wanted to give Sophia a hug.



“So what do you do?” she interrogated him.

“I’m at Commerce Bank, in IT, programming.”

“Sounds like hard work.”

There was something a little dismissive about her tone; Adam bristled. He was proud of his breadwinner status, but he hated being defined by his job, which he did for money rather than love.

“It *is* hard work, long hours, and I sometimes have to do weekends.”

Sophia patted his arm and he looked appeased.

“Oh, me too,” she said. “People think being an artist is fun, and I know I’m lucky, but it can be grueling. I’m popping over to Venice soon. I’ve got an exhibition at the Contini Gallery...”

I felt a stab of envy, covering it up with praise. Venice was a city I’d always longed to visit. As Sophia described her exhibition, my gaze wandered to Finn’s fingers, curled around the stem of the wine glass. He caught me looking and I was scared my attraction to him was evident, amusing to him.

I retreated into the kitchen to get the main course; Adam joined me.

“They seem nice,” he whispered cheerfully. “Bit bourgeois.”

I gave him an exasperated nudge and he grinned.

We served up the plaice, roast potatoes, beans, and took them in. Adam lit some candles, turned down the lights. An itch in my heart: for all the patter of polite compliments, I dreaded that they were bored.

A conversation about boxsets started up, Adam and I clashing over *The Sopranos* versus *Mad Men*, but Sophia and Finn fell quiet.

“We don’t watch much TV,” she confessed, lifting an eyebrow.

“No? That’s refreshing,” said Adam. “I waste hours staying up late getting hooked on some piece of rubbish.”

“I like black and white films,” said Sophia. “And the old-school stars: Sophia Loren, Cary Grant, Audrey Hepburn—what a goddess! My mother was actually friends with Audrey...”

Adam’s eyes lit up; movies were his great obsession. Not a day went past without him enthusing about an obscure seventies classic or an old Hitchcock

he'd just rewatched. Soon they were chatting away, forming their own bubble. For a moment Finn and I sat in silence, then he addressed me.

"You must have a precise mind if you're a proof-reader."

I blinked: mostly people assumed it was a very boring profession.

"It's quite wild," I said in a deadpan voice. "I mean, no two days are ever the same—it's semi-colons one day, colons the next. And I have to pay high insurance premiums to deal with the risk..."

Finn smiled.

"But I enjoy it, and it's been going so well I'm about to put my rates up." I was touched when he looked impressed.

A breeze slanted the candle-flames, rippling shadows across his face.

"How long have you been a proof-reader?" He made it sound fascinating, as though I was a spy.

"Three years. Before that I worked for a PR firm in the City. I ended up hating it," I replied. "I think I had a bit of a midlife crisis."

He raised a thick eyebrow.

"You're far too young for a midlife crisis." His gaze flitted to my lips, back up to my eyes.

"I'm thirty-seven."

"No! You look thirty." His surprise seemed genuine. *He's such a charmer*, I thought. I was conscious of how fragile the moment was. I wished we were at a party, in a corner, and could talk like this for hours.

"Adam and I joke that the average midlife crisis starts around the age of eighteen and finishes around the age of sixty-five."

When he laughed, Adam and Sophia looked over, each a little territorial.

"*Attends avant de te lancer! Rien n'a encore été décidé.*" Sophia addressed him quietly in French and he replied in the same language. I felt the door that had opened between us slam shut. My French was GCSE level, decidedly rusty.

Adam and I exchanged looks: how sophisticated.

"I know how to order a pizza in French. And a beer. That's about it," Adam reflected, and Sophia smiled in amusement.

At the end of the evening, when we were all a little tipsy, I gave Sophia a grand tour of the house. I was taken aback when she reacted badly to Lyra, saying she was terrified of cats, and I had to shut my beloved pet away. But she gushed compliments about all the rooms, gave me advice on how I might jazz everything up—add a rug here, put up some curtains there. She admired the blackout blind in our bedroom, which I recommended as the perfect antidote to insomnia. We all wandered into the garden, gazing up at a moon that was nearly full. Finn was standing by my side. I felt his skin close to mine, the kiss of our hairs just touching—and a shiver passed over my body. I had never been attracted to any man with this intensity before, and it scared me.

## 4.

### THEN: ELENA

**M**urray Road, read the sign.

I twigged. Realized that this was the very road that Sophia and Finn lived on.

It was a Monday morning. I had woken early and, before going to the café, decided to take a quick walk on Wimbledon Common, when I saw the street sign.

On impulse, I turned on to it, even though the thought of Sophia felt like a sting.

We had planned to meet for a drink the previous week, but she'd canceled on me at the last minute. And an invitation back to theirs for dinner hadn't materialized. Adam wasn't fussed; he'd found them a bit over-glossy and flashy. He had replied to my moans by saying I was being too sensitive, too impatient, everyone was busy. But Sophia seemed to have enough time to post on Instagram three times a day and while I had liked every one of her posts, she'd only liked one of mine. It was dogging me: I felt a sense of unworthiness that hadn't bothered me in some years, now that I had a proper, grown-up life with a fulfilling job and partner. Sophia and I clearly belonged in different worlds.

Adam and I were living on a nice road, but this one was in another league. Each detached house was a variation on grandeur and beauty. One might be contemporary, the sort a James Bond villain might live in; another Edwardian, a glorious muddle of brick and chimneys, a porch gorgeously drenched in wisteria.