

The Secret Layer

SIMMS THOMAS

scribefreelance.com

SOUTHERN BOOK CLUB
KNOXVILLE, TN

Copyright © 2008 by Simms Thomas

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

Published by the
Southern Book Club
Box 53112
Knoxville, Tennessee 37950

SouthernBookClub.com

For more information on Simms Thomas go to SimmsThomas.com

Comments and Letters:

Simms Thomas
C/O Southern Book Club
Box 4763
North Hollywood, CA. 91617
Email: Simms@SimmsThomas.com

ISBN: 978-0-9801876-0-1

Set in Perpetua
Book Design by Daniel Middleton
www.scribefreelance.com

Printed in the United States of America

To my closest women friends whom I know bury, hold on to, live and lie down each night with too many secrets. What an accomplishment to find the freedom in life when a secret means nothing and holds nothing on you.



Thanks to my husband who keeps my secrets, believes in me and was immensely helpful in making my first novel a reality.

Chapter One

▪ Christmas 1959 ▪

EMILY WAS EXHAUSTED. Her fingers ached and her head hurt. But she was happy. She looked around her small bedroom littered with bits and pieces of every color of fabric in the rainbow. Yellow, black, and brown yarn lay in tiny balls at her feet. Small plastic eyes stared up blankly at the ceiling. Emily rubbed her own eyes and stretched.

Making her family and friends something for Christmas was giving her a great sense of achievement. Her grandmother had actually come up with the idea. She was the one person in the world Emily could always count on and she loved her more than anyone else in the world. Granny Millie was a tiny woman with tight white curls that lay flat against her head. She weighed all of one hundred pounds and stood just five feet tall. But she was a powerful woman, smart and bright. Emily would sit by her side for hours sharing all of her deep dark secrets. Not that she really had anything to tell. She would look into her beautiful sea blue eyes and pour out her confessions of love and hate. Her grandmother took her as serious as a heart attack, as she was fond of saying. She never laughed at Emily's confessions, only smiled and nodded before giving Emily deeply thought out advice.

Some thought her grandmother old and senile. But, Emily knew better. Emily closed her eyes and pretended her grandmother was sitting right there in her room. A smile crawled across her face. She knew her grandmother would stroke each doll and lovingly pat it on its yarn head and then tell her how proud she was of her.

Her grandmother heard everything and saw everything. Not much

escaped her.

Her knowledge of current events had always impressed and fascinated Emily. She knew politics and had never missed the opportunity to step into a voting booth and pull that curtain as if it were the grandest thing on earth to do. She had voted through rain, shine, snow or sleet, threats of tornadoes and floods each and every election day since women had won the right back in 1920.

She was a staunch Democrat and really didn't care who the candidate was as long as he was a Democrat. She would support him fiercely and knew everything a candidate stood for along with his issues, his platform, his views, his wife's name and his children's names.

Granny Millie had lived with her family until late last summer and Emily missed her greatly. But, the "family" had decided it was best for the old woman to live with her mother's sister in South Carolina. Emily felt a tinge of sadness creep through her body. She wished she could hug her grandmother right now and smell the sweet lilac scent she wore. That smell always made Emily feel warm, wanted, and secure.

Emily shook her head. "Now, now, Em. Don't go tearin' up on me now." That's exactly what her grandmother would have told her. She thought of the upcoming summer visit with her grandmother in South Carolina. She was going to fly. Emily couldn't imagine what it was going to be like to soar through the air high above the world, flying with the birds. She knew she would love it because her grandmother had told her she would.

"Oh, 'tis a grand thing to fly my child. All of the houses look small as toys and cars are so tiny you'd think they were ants marching down the road. You never see people. Plain too small," her grandmother had said.

Emily picked up one of the rag dolls she had so meticulously crafted and sewn that day. She stroked its long strands of yellow hair with a certain pride and love, just as a mother would stroke her daughter's hair.

"I'll name you Lilly. And I'll make you a little necklace with your name stitched on it so you'll never forget."

Emily reached for her yarn, cloth, and sewing needle. With deftness and a skill beyond her twelve years, she sewed the name on the cloth. She brought the small square of fabric close to her eyes because the

lettering had to be so small and exact. She could not chance missing a stitch. She smiled as she worked. She couldn't wait until her cousin, Mary Jo, opened her gift. She knew Mary Jo would love Lilly as much as she did.

Emily finished the doll's necklace and tied it around her neck. She gently placed the cherished piece in a box and wrapped the beautiful handmade gift of love with the paper from left over brown grocery bags. Emily used the remaining yarn to fashion a ribbon on the package. Carefully she wrote her cousin's name on the package.

Emily worked into the late hours finishing the dolls, placing each one lovingly in a box, covering it first with newspaper and then wrapping it with the brown paper from the store. Even with left over materials, Emily managed to make each package look festive. She glued stars and bells and angels on the boxes and carefully wrote her name to and from on each one. When the last one was finished, Emily tried to move her fingers.

"Ouch! This manual labor stuff is hard!"

Suddenly the quiet of the night made Emily feel very alone. Her mother had yelled good night to her hours ago after having a few cocktails. Emily knew she was snoring on the couch. She longed for her mother to just sit with her and talk. Just talk. "What did you do today in school, Emily?" "Who are your friends, Emily?" "What did you get on your math test, Emily?"

Was that too much to ask? She knew in her heart that would never happen. Emily's mother worked hard cleaning other people's houses in the little town of Sevierville, Tennessee. She took in laundry two days a week and was a seamstress in any spare time she happened to have. She was always working. Emily couldn't fault her mother for that.

Her thoughts drifted to her father. She wished she could be the little girl she saw in the magazines giving a welcome home hug and kiss to the tall man in the business suit after his long day at the office.

Emily's dad wasn't a large man, but he was built solid and could squeeze the life out of you with his tight muscles and hard callused hands. He had worked at Brogan's Chair Factory since he left school in the fifth grade. For some reason which Emily could not explain, she was proud of him. She really didn't care that he didn't wear a business suit.

He didn't even own a suit. She just really wanted more time with him. But he was like her mother. Always working and always tired.

Emily surveyed her day's work. She was satisfied and was more excited about giving her friends and cousins and grandmother the dolls than she was about getting anything for herself. She couldn't wait to hear their squeals of delight.

Emily truly couldn't remember when she had been happier. She crawled into bed with the doll she had made for herself.

"Oh Patsy, Santa will be here before we know it. Just seven more days then everyone can see your friends. And you will have someone to play with, too," Emily said sweetly to the doll she cradled in her arms.

Emily kissed her doll good night and like a beautiful young child on the verge of young womanhood, she sank into a deep peaceful sleep of dreams of her grandmother. They were laughing and cooking brownies, but something kept shaking her. Emily laughed at her grandmother, but the hand grabbed her again.

"EMILY, WAKE UP, EMILY," the voice said. "No, I don't want to," Emily begged. She didn't want to listen to the voice, but it persisted. The brownies and the dreams of a new Barbie doll slowly began to vanish.

EMILY'S TWO UNCLES, DELBERT and Roy, had spent the last four hours at the Elm Grove Tavern consuming a bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey and chasing each shot with a bottle of beer. Nothing was unusual about this. This was routine for the pair and they were a familiar sight in the small town nestled in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. They were the town's twin drunks who often ended their nights staggering down the street, holding onto each other, stumbling toward their rented trailer. But, this night, the wind whipped cold against their drunken breaths and they made it as far as their sister's house.

Delbert fumbled as he search for a key in his pocket while Roy looked under the torn straw mat on the front step and clumsily grabbed the spare key.

"This what ya lookin' fer?"