



The New  
Millennium Girls

*Isabel's Secret*

by

Jan May

Illustrated by  
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New Millennium Girl Books

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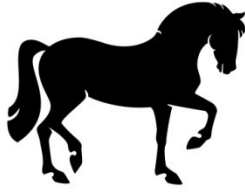
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## Chapter One

### *The Secret*

Holly held up her watch. "Get ready, Izzy... Get set... Go!"

Isabel tightened her red bandana and took five steps backward. Then she darted forward, grabbed a fistful of Starlight's mane, and flung herself onto the horse's back. Her heart jumped. She gave him a kick. "Hee Yah!"

Starlight whinnied and tossed his head into the morning air, then bolted across the field like he was being chased by wild bees.

Holly jumped up and down. "You're going to do it, Izzy!" she shouted. "You'll be Misty Springs' winner again!"

The chilly November air swished Isabel's black hair across her face. Her knees gripped Starlight's sides. Together they raced past the tree house she and Holly had built five summers ago. They

galloped past the pumpkin patch she and Mom planted this spring. They sprinted past the tree-lined slopes and into the wide-open rangeland of the Angel Ridge Ranch.

“Winners never quit,” she chanted, “and quitters never win, because I serve the mighty God that lives deep within!”

Isabel Morningsky never did anything halfway. It was November, but sweat beaded her forehead and dripped into her dark-brown eyes. She swiped away the drops and leaned forward. Small rocks shot up from under Starlight’s hooves. Isabel could feel the rumbling of his gait on the dirt as they rounded the oak tree.

“Get up!” she shouted. A cloud of dust rose from the ground and covered her boots. “Come on, boy!” she nudged harder with her foot. “You can do it! We’ll take back the gold cup from Kip Johnson. That’ll show him. Don’t tell me a girl can’t race as fast as a boy!”

Starlight snorted as if he understood every word and picked up the pace all the way back to the ranch.

Holly stood on the corral fence with her wavy blonde hair pulled back by a lavender headband that matched her shorts. She raised her arm like a flag then lowered it as Isabel and Starlight flashed by.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Holly, pretending to be an announcer. “Eleven-year-old, soon-to-be-twelve, Is-a-bel Morn-ing-sky, Misty Spring, Colorado’s new winner of the bareback competition!”

Isabel pulled back hard on the reins, and Starlight skidded to a halt. Isabel jumped down and trotted over to Holly, panting. “How fast was I?”

“Six minutes, forty seconds. You beat your time!”

Isabel slapped her leg. “Rats! I still need twenty more seconds to beat Kip Johnson. She frowned and looked down. “Losing two years in a row is such a disgrace. Besides,” she said, glancing up at Holly, “I hate the way he gloats when he wins.”

“Everyone does,” said Holly, folding her arms.

Isabel’s heart sank as she petted Starlight’s nose. “I know you did your best.” She grabbed his reins and tugged. “Come on, Holly, let’s give Starlight a drink.”



That night Isabel lay wide-eyed in her bed, staring out her window at the starry night sky. The annual Thanksgiving Day Bareback Race was only three days away. She *had* to win the title back from Kip Johnson this year or she would never live it down. Kip had moved from Kentucky two years ago, where he’d been a champion in jumping

competitions. She had to admit, he was a pretty sharp rider, but so stuck up!

Isabel rolled over and tapped her fingers on the nightstand. *And the way he brags about boys being better riders than girls!* Isabel punched her pillow. Then she jumped out of bed and paced back and forth. "How can I make Starlight run faster?" she murmured.

Little shivers of joy filled Isabel's heart at the thought of Starlight. The moonlight had shone through the barn window the crisp October night he was born. It lit up the white star on his little brown head. Isabel knew instantly his name should be Starlight. Once he could stand up, she'd stroked his soft mane. He looked at her with big brown eyes and nuzzled her.

Isabel sighed at the memory. It was one of the best nights of her life. *Kindred spirits*, she thought, *right from the start. Maybe I should go out to the barn and check on him right now.*

Isabel pulled on her jeans, tucked in her nightgown, and crept down the hall. When she reached the top of the stairs, a voice startled her from the downstairs den. There was no mistaking her Grandmother Biltmore's sharp tone.

"Isabel is a complete mess. She doesn't comb her hair, and she smells like a swamp. For goodness' sake, she is almost twelve years old!"

Isabel looked in the hall mirror. "Geesh!" she whispered, flattening her hair with her hands. "It's not *that* bad."

Isabel knew Gran could be difficult. Like the time Isabel wanted to bake Mom's special cookies for their tea party last summer. Grandmother Biltmore had insisted they drive into town and purchase two dozen pink and white petit fours from Camilla's Bakery instead. Isabel had no idea what a petit four was, but Grandmother Biltmore insisted that she *should* know. Isabel licked her lips at the thought. She did love those sweet, tiny, iced squared cakes with crème inside. That's when Grandmother Biltmore asked Isabel to call her Gran.

*Hmmm...Isabel thought. Things always seemed to work out. Maybe Gran's ranting this time is just like one of those other times.*

Isabel could hear her mom pipe in, "Now, Mother, I know Isabel may not be the perfect little lady, but she is amazingly smart. Do you know that she knows almost as much about horses as any rancher around here does? She raised Starlight from a foal and trained him all by herself."

*That's it. You tell her, Mom,* thought Isabel, pursing her lips. She crept down the stairs further to peek into the room.

"This ranch!" said Gran, throwing up her hands. "I was hoping it would be financial security for



Isabel's future. She looks and smells more like a ranch *hand*."

Mom's face turned red, like she might explode any minute. Isabel held her breath to hear what she would say.

"She's happy and healthy," Mom said. "That's what matters."

Isabel grinned and nodded. Happy and healthy for sure! How could Gran not love the flower-covered hills that perched outside her front door? They were Isabel's best friend. Or the horses! Isabel shivered with delight thinking about being them. It was magical riding on the back of a horse, anytime you wanted. She felt so free on Angel Ridge Ranch. It was so much a part of her. She could never leave it.

Isabel could hear Gran's voice like a whistling tea kettle boiling over with hot steam. She leaned closer.

"Next year she'll be a teenager," Gran huffed. "You can't stop her from growing up, Grace. Who is she really going to meet out here? In Boston she could meet young men from all the finest families – someone who could" --Gran hesitated – "give her a future."

Mom scowled. "You mean . . . unlike Isabel's father?"

"Hmph," Gran grunted.

Isabel knew Gran didn't approve of Dad. She always talked "down" to him, sniffed, and put her nose in the air whenever Dad was in the room. Isabel's blood boiled just thinking about it.

She glanced up at the family pictures on the wall. Dad was a wild, dark-haired, modern-day cowboy when Mom met him at a rodeo that day. Dad always told her it was love at first sight.

Isabel peeked back in the room.

Mom stood up and paced over near the window. "People who are born with money are no better than those who get it through honest work."

Grandmother Biltmore sat tall in her chair and straightened her white nightdress. "I've come to a decision. I've decided to take back the loan I gave you for the ranch."

Isabel ducked back on the stairs and clapped a hand over her mouth to keep her gasp inside. *No ranch?*

Mom's voice was quivering. "What? Mother, you can't do that. It would kill Sam. He's put his heart and soul into this ranch. If you would take just five minutes of your time to look around, you'd see what a great job he's done with it."

"You mean raising smelly sheep and horses?"

Isabel could see her mother's shadow pacing back and forth.

"You're impossible!" said Mom.

“All right,” said Gran. “Keep the ranch, but Isabel comes to Boston with me to attend a private school for girls. Maybe we can somehow stop this runaway train.”

Isabel couldn't believe her ears. *Tear me away from the ranch and haul me back to Boston? No!* Isabel shook her head. “Of all the mean things to do, Gran,” she whispered. “I thought we were friends.”

“This is not the Old West, Mother,” Mom said. “It's the twenty-first century. Woman can be anything they want to be.” She raised her voice. “You're never happy unless you're controlling someone's life, are you, Mother? It's the Biltmore way, after all. Well, you're not going to control Isabel's.”

“She's going to find out the truth soon enough, Grace. She's getting older. Then where will her future be?”

Mom sighed. “I wish we'd never kept it a secret. I knew it was a mistake from the beginning. Now you're trying to use it against us.”

Isabel sat on the stairs with her head in her hands. Grandmother Biltmore's words pierced her heart like a dagger. *What secret? Why did they keep it from me? I can't leave Misty Springs and go to Boston. I just can't!*

Isabel sprang to her feet. *I won't!* She carefully crept down the stairs, sneaking past the den, and fled outside into the cold night air. She marched

across the yard as if she were going to war. She clenched her teeth and slapped her fist in her hand. "Why would Gran do this? I don't understand!"

Isabel whistled low when she walked into the barn. Starlight walked over to the stall door. His soft lips nipped at her pockets, looking for a treat. Isabel reached out and stroked his soft neck. "Sorry, boy," she said. "I didn't have time to get one." She tilted her head and thought for a moment. "What did Gran mean about taking back the loan on the ranch? What loan?"

Isabel couldn't imagine life without Angel Ridge Ranch. She loved waking up before the sun every morning and hearing the last cricket sing at night. She didn't mind the hard work of feeding the horses or mucking out the stalls. It all felt so right.

"Starlight, I don't understand. Will Mom and Dad lose the ranch if I don't go to Gran's snooty old school?"

Isabel slid down on a pile of hay like a limp noodle and stared at the wooden ceiling. "What are we going to do?" She lay there for a good long time, chewing on a piece of hay and trying to figure out how to stop Grandmother Biltmore's terrible plan.

Isabel yawned. She was too weary to keep on worrying. She cuddled up on the hay. "Winners never quit," she mumbled, "and quitters never..."

Isabel slipped off into a restless sleep before she could finish the sentence.