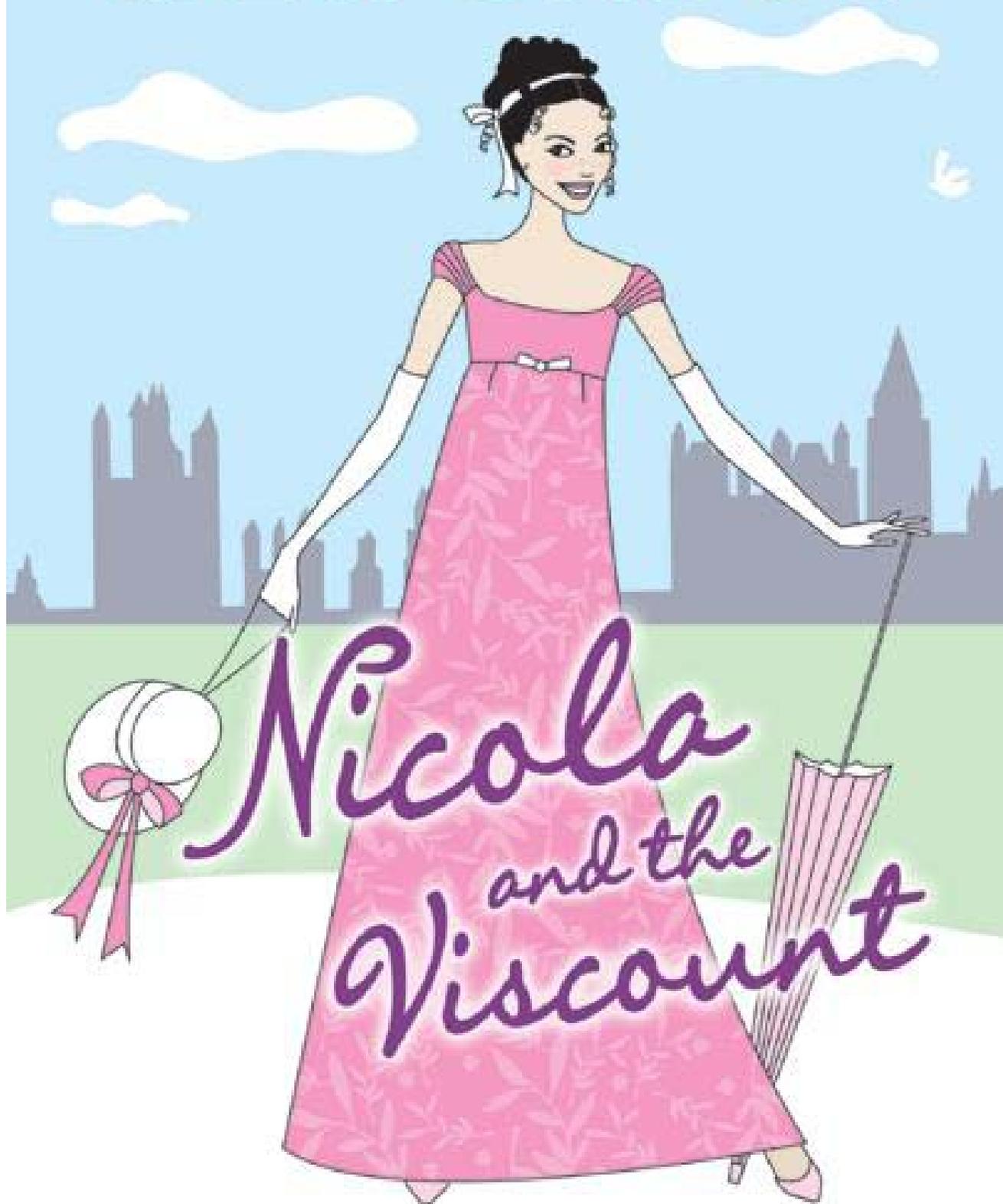


#1 *New York Times* Best-selling Author of *The Princess Diaries*

# MEG CABOT



## Nicola and the Viscount

**Dear Nana,**

I hope you received the gifts I sent you. The shawl is pure Chinese silk, and the pipe I sent for Puddy is ivory-handled! You needn't worry about the expense; I was able to use my monthly stipend. I am staying with the Bartholomews-I told you about them in my last letter-and they won't let me spend a penny on myself! Lord Farelly insists on paying for everything. He is such a kind man. He is very interested in locomotives and the railway. He says that someday, all of England will be connected by rail, and that one might start out in the morning in Brighton, and at the end of the day find oneself in Edinburgh!

I found that a bit hard to believe, as I'm certain you do, too, but that is what he says.

Nicola paused in her letter writing to read over what she had already written. As she did so, she nibbled thoughtfully on the feathered end of her pen.

Nana was not, of course, her real grandmother. Nicola had no real grandparents, all of them having been carried away by influenza before she was even born. Because her sole remaining relative, Lord Renshaw, had had no interest in nor knowledge of raising a little girl, Nicola had been reared, until she was old enough to go away to school, by the wife of the caretaker of her father's estate, Beckwell Abbey. It was to this woman-and her husband, whom Nicola affectionately referred to as Puddy-that Nicola looked for grandmotherly advice and comfort. Dependent, as Nicola was, on the small income the local farmers supplied by renting the abbey's many rolling fields for their sheep to graze upon, Nana and Puddy lived modestly, but well.

But never so well as Nicola had been living for the past month. The Bartholomews, as it turned out, were every bit as wealthy as Phillip Sheridan had declared . perhaps even wealthier.

But what Phillip had not mentioned, since he could

not have known, was that the Bartholomews were also generous, almost to a fault. Nicola needed to express only the slightest desire, and her wish was immediately granted. She had learned to bite back exclamations over bonnets or trinkets at the many shops she and Honoria frequented, lest she find herself the owner of whatever it was she'd admired. She could not allow these kind people to keep buying gifts for her . especially as she had no way to return the favor.

Besides which, Nicola did not really need new gowns or bonnets. Necessity, in the form of her limited income, had forced her to become a skilled and creative seamstress. She had taught herself how to alter an old gown with a new flounce or sleeves until it looked as if it had just come straight from a Parisian dress shop. And she was almost as fine a milliner as any in the city, having rendered many an out-of-fashion bonnet stylish in the extreme with an artful addition of a silk rose here, or an artificial cherry there.

Eyeing her letter, Nicola wondered if she ought to add something about the God. It seemed as if it might be a good idea, since it was entirely possible that Sebastian Bartholomew was going to play an important role in all of their lives, if things kept up the way they had been. Having grown up almost completely sheltered from them, Nicola knew very little, it was true, about young men, but it did seem to her that Honoria's brother had been most attentive since she'd come to stay. He escorted the girls nearly everywhere they went, except when he was not busy with his own friends, who were quite fond of gambling and horses, like most young men—except perhaps Nathaniel Sheridan, who was too concerned with managing his father's many estates ever to stop for a game of whist or bagatelle.

Even more exciting, the God was always the first to ask Nicola for a dance at whatever ball they happened to be attending. Sometimes he even secured two dances with her in a single evening.

Three dances with a gentleman to whom she was not engaged, of course, would be scandalous, so that was not even a possibility.

On these occasions, of course, Nicola's heart sang, and she could not believe there existed in London a happier soul than she. It seemed incredible, but it appeared she had actually accomplished what she'd set out to do, which was impress the young Viscount Farnsworth-for that was Lord Sebastian's title, which he would hold until his father died, and he assumed the title of Earl of Farelly-with her wit and charm. How she had done it-and quite without the help of any face powder-she could not say, but she did not think she could be mistaken in the signs: the God admired her, at least a little. She supposed her hair, which she wore upswept all the time now, with Martine's aid, had helped.

All that Nicola needed to forever seal her happiness was for the God to propose marriage. If he did-no, when, when-she had already decided she would say

yes.

But there was, in the back of her mind, a niggling doubt that such a proposal might ever really materialize. She was, after all, not wealthy. She had nothing but her passably pretty face and keen fashion sense to recommend her. Handsome young men of wealth and importance rarely asked penniless girls like Nicola—even penniless girls of good family and excellent education—to marry them. Love matches were all well and good, but, as Madame had often reminded them, starvation is not pleasant. Young men who did not marry as their fathers instructed them often found themselves cut off without a cent. And it was perfectly untrue that one could live on love alone. Love could not, after all, put bread on the table and meat in the larder.

But from parental objections to a match between her and the God, at least, Nicola felt she was safe. Lord and Lady Farelly seemed prodigiously fond of her. Why, in the short time since she'd come to live

with them, they seemed already to think of her as a second daughter, including her in all of their family conversations, and even occasionally dropping their formal address of her as Miss Sparks, and calling her Nicola.

No, should Lord Sebastian see fit to propose to her, she could foresee no difficulties from that quarter. But would he? Would he propose to a girl who was merely pretty but not beautiful? A girl with freckles on her nose, who had only recently been allowed to put her hair up? An orphan with only a bit of property in Northumberland and a vast knowledge of the romantic poets?

He had to. He just had to! Nicola felt it as surely as she felt that the color ochre on a redheaded woman was an abomination.