



Beyond the Velvet Rope (Club Babylon) (English Edition)

By Tiffany Ashley

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Welcome to Club Babylon: where the A-list VIPs come to play

Scoring a gig at Miami's Club Babylon is a fantasy come true for New York promoter Thandie Shaw. The hottest club on the strip is a magnet for major South Beach movers and shakers. And Thandie's about to meet the biggest player of them all.

Babylon owner Elliot Richards is macho, arrogant, sexist—everything Thandie doesn't want in a boss or lover. Elliot is also the most erotic man who's ever wanted to take her to bed. But Thandie's no fool. Even as he tries to seduce her into a world of intense and shocking passion, she knows it's too good to last...especially after she uncovers Elliot's explosive secrets.

Thandie's going down a dangerous road, and she's risking a lot more than her career. Torn between doubt and desire, will she have to pay the ultimate price?

Darkly sensual and deeply moving, *Beyond the Velvet Rope* takes you into a world of uncontrollable desire and unexpected consequences.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Tiffany was born in Detroit, and her family relocated to Dallas when she was one. After graduating from the University of North Texas in 2002, Tiffany decided to pursue her dreams of becoming a novelist. Known for her steamy and sometimes emotionally exhausting interracial romances, Tiffany looks forward to a long and adventurous career. She lives in Dallas with her husband, where she continues to write her novels.

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New York City

5:32AM

She had made a mistake.

Thandie realized it the instant she woke up. Before she'd even had a chance to open her eyes or take a sip of coffee, she knew the truth. She'd made a big mistake, and she would pay dearly for it.

She buried her face into the pillow, and breathed in a familiar scent. His scent. She groaned. This only confirmed last night had really happened. Images came back to her in flashes of vivid clarity. She wished she could blame it on the champagne, but she'd barely finished one glass before everything fell apart. How could things go horribly wrong so fast? And on the most sacred of holidays?

It was the first day of Fashion Week. The streets of New York were abuzz with excitement. Celebrities flooded the city for a chance to preview this year's winter collection. For every self-proclaimed fashionista, Fashion Week was like Christmas extended for seven wonderful days.

It was too bad Thandie would miss it. And all because she'd had a moment of weakness. Now that she thought about it, this had been building for weeks. But never, in her wildest nightmares, did she think things would have played out like this. And she certainly hadn't imagined it would be so public.

Thandie buried her face deeper into the pillow, refusing to open her eyes; refusing to face the mess she'd created. She wished she had something to focus on other than what had happened hours before. She muffled a groan as her mind unwillingly recalled the sequence of events preceding her waking in a bed that was not her own_____

Several hours earlier...

Thandie had been in Bryant Park, seated in the front row, watching the new Beverly Horton Collection being revealed. The tent where the show was taking place was filled with famous faces. Thandie had only to look across the aisle from her to see actress Nia Reynolds and fashion icon Victoria Beckham whispering to each other.

On Thandie's left sat her former boss and good friend, Gage Ali. Gage was a heavyweight in the public relations field. Her contacts were everywhere, and her influence was boundless.

On Thandie's right sat Bailey Woods, a celebrity publicist from Los Angeles. Like many present, she was in

town for the shows. Bailey was another dear friend, but Thandie had seen little of her since Bailey relocated to California a few years ago. Having recently survived a hard breakup from her actor boyfriend, Bailey was going through a rough time in her life. Thandie and Gage were having a hard time trying not to mention he-who-must-not-be-named, or beg for all the gorry details. At least, not until after the shows.

And then Cam had shown up. The timing could not have been worse. Thandie had been praying she would not run into him tonight. But fate has a bizarre sense of humor.

Cameron Stewart was tall and boyishly handsome, with a lopsided grin and thick shaggy dark hair. The instant Thandie laid eyes on him, her earlier reluctance melted away. She hadn't seen him in weeks, and she missed Cam. There was a certain comfort his nearness offered that few people outside her family supplied. She would always have a special place in her heart for him.

Cam was Thandie's ex-boyfriend. They'd been together for nearly three years. Many believed the two of them would eventually get married. Until recently, Thandie had thought the same thing. Their breakup had been a gradual conclusion; an end to an era that had long outlived its usefulness. She had seen it coming, but had been unwilling to acknowledge it. She'd hung in there, hoping the tide would turn and they would regain the special relationship they'd lost.

But had it never happened.

Their split had ended on agreeable terms. Although Cam hadn't been in favor of the decision, he'd accepted the decision because Thandie had wanted it. But he'd made it clear if she ever changed her mind, he would be waiting for her.

Cam had approached her group and partly out of instinct, but mostly out of habit, he leaned forward and kissed Thandie briefly on the lips. The mishap was further compounded by Thandie leaning into his touch. Quickly realizing their error, the two awkwardly pulled away from each other. To mask the discomfort that had settled over them, Cam began to tease Bailey, a mutual friend of theirs. As usual, Cam's easygoing nature brought smiles to the faces of those around him. Thandie could literally feel Gage and Bailey's spirits lift in his presence. Thankfully, his visit had been short. Cam, a fashion photographer, was working the Horton event, and had to get back to his seat before showtime.

Thandie watched as Cam crossed the tent and took his place among the other photographers. She wasn't sure if her eyes were deceiving her, but there seemed to be something different about him. Something she couldn't see, but sensed.

Thankfully, the house lights suddenly darkened, and the show got underway.

She pushed all thoughts about Cam from her mind, hoping that would be the last she saw of him tonight. But fate had other plans.

Hours later, at the after-party, Cam showed up with his new girlfriend. Thandie spotted him the moment they'd entered the club. She'd always known he would find someone else sooner or later, but actually seeing him with another woman made something tighten deep inside Thandie. It wasn't jealousy exactly. It was something more basic, something more carnal.

Suddenly, in a room crowded with strangers, Cam's eyes found hers. As if seeking her out, his dark gaze locked with Thandie's and refused to let her go. In that instant, Thandie was able to define what she'd felt

earlier. Desire. She desired Cam. It was as if seeing him with someone else stimulated her sexually in a way it never had before.

As if reading her thoughts, Cam's gaze grew darker, and then he did something shocking. Cam disengaged himself from the statuesque beauty at his side, and purposefully crossed the room. When he was standing less than a foot away from Thandie, he wordlessly took the flute of champagne out of her hand and deftly pushed the glass toward a shocked Bailey.

Not caring who was watching, Cam pulled Thandie into his arms and kissed her with a passion that left them both shaken.

Details became blurred after that point. Thandie vaguely remembered Cam guiding her onto the patio. There, the two of them began frantically kissing and pulling at each other's clothes. Cam lay her down on a chaise longue, and the two of them became wildly intimate.

They were so enraptured in each other, they paid little mind to the crowd of partygoers surrounding them. Thandie vaguely recalled Gage pushing her way through the throng of voyeurs, hurrying her and Cam out a back exit, and shoving them into the backseat of her waiting town car.

The short ride to Cam's apartment was filled with more hot kisses and a great deal of fondling. Things only escalated when they arrived at their destination. Their lovemaking was quick and fervent; their climaxes hard and satisfying. Afterward, they tumbled back onto the damp sheets; too exhausted to move. They fell asleep to the sound of Cameron's cell phone ringing incessantly; no doubt from his girlfriend.

5:45AM

Now, in the light of day, Thandie regretted everything. She should have never given in to such madness. It had been satisfying for her, but the big problem was that Cam would assume more from their encounter. Thandie cringed at the thought of hurting him further.

Ashamed, Thandie buried her face deeper into the pillow. Perhaps she could escape before he woke? Maybe she could sneak out without being noticed. She wouldn't be able to entirely evade their showdown, but she could at least put it off for a day or two. She would run and hide until she was ready to deal with Cam on her own terms. And preferably with clothes on.

Opening her eyes slowly, Thandie surveyed the room. Although dimly lit, she could make out Cam's shadowy bedroom. In their haste to get to the bed, they'd made a mess of the room. She could see a trail of discarded clothes starting from the hallway and ending in a heap at the bedside. She groaned inwardly. It would be impossible to find all her clothes among the debris without making noise.

Turning her head slightly, Thandie noted where Cam lay. He was sound asleep in his favorite position, on his back with one arm tossed over his eyes. This might be her saving grace.

Clenching her teeth together, Thandie slowly and soundlessly attempted to ease herself out of bed. Inch by precious inch, she slipped free of the sheets. With one hand pressed firmly on the floor, and one foot extended to brace her weight, she was almost there. Thandie knew she looked ridiculous, but if she could just slide the rest of her body out of bed, there was a chance she could collect her clothes and sneak out of Cam's apartment undetected. Holding her breath, she inched farther off the mattress.

She might have made it had it not been for the sound of a cell phone chiming at that very moment. It shattered the silence of the room like a bullhorn. Thandie froze. She watched in horror as Cam jerked awake and then rolled out of bed. The movement pulled the bedsheets with him, making them spill off the foot of the bed. As if in a sleep-induced trance, Cam shuffled to the dresser and snatched up his cell phone. Rubbing his eyes, he looked at the display. And then he swore. He seemed to be debating whether he should answer. Deciding not to, he tossed the phone aside, and then looked up.

"Oh, shit," Thandie grumbled.

Cam blinked, taking in her bizarre position. Half of her was hanging off the bed, while the other half was outstretched toward the floor. Her intentions could not have been more obvious. Cam leaned his hip against the dresser and simply stared at her. His expression was solemn. "What are you doing?"

Awkwardly, Thandie came to her feet. Self-conscious because of her nakedness, she grabbed a pillow and held it in front of her. It offered little coverage, but since her clothes were not easily accessible, it was her best option.

"I have to go," she said, her voice husky from sleep.

Cam looked up at the ceiling, hurt settling onto his features. "Why are you leaving?"

She sighed. "You know why I'm leaving."

Cam threw his hands up helplessly. "I thought after last night..." His voice trailed off.

Thandie looked away, too ashamed to meet his pleading eyes. She regretted her actions last night, regretted the way she'd fallen into his arms without a care to the world. Regretted the way she'd blindly disregarded the consequences. There would be plenty of time to feel humiliation over the public episode. Everyone would be talking. It might even be reported in a local gossip column.

But Thandie couldn't be bothered with that right now. She was too guilt-ridden to consider anything except that she was hurting Cam again.

"I made a mistake," she said.

"You made a mistake? That's all?" he said with a humorless laugh. "I had a girlfriend, Thandie."

"I—I can fix that," she stammered. "I can try to explain to her—"

"Explain what?" he snapped. "Explain that in the blink of an eye, I chose you over her? Explain that I'll always choose you over her?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Yeah, well I'm sorry, too," he snapped. "I'm sorry, Cam. I truly am."

"And your mother?" he asked quietly. "Does she know about us?"

"Don't," Thandie said sharply. "Don't you dare bring her into this." The mention of her mother caused

Thandie's eyes sting with sudden tears.

Cameron swore, all the fight gone out of him. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I'm just so..." he dragged a hand through his tousled hair, searching for the right word. Then he froze, a thought having occurred to him. He looked at Thandie with tired eyes. "You don't love me anymore, do you?"

She'd been expecting this question, but was still unprepared with where the answer would leave them. "Of course, I love you," she confessed. "Just not like that anymore."

"But last night—"

"I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. "Nothing has changed. Last night should have never happened."

"Thandie, please don't do this," he groaned.

"Cam, we've been broken up for weeks. What did you expect? Did you think things would magically go back to the way they were?"

"Yes," he said defiantly. "Yes, I did."

"Oh, Cam," she choked out. "I thought you understood—"

"Get out."

Thandie's head popped up. "What?"

"I said get out," he repeated in a voice void of any emotion.

"Cam." She took a step toward him, but he turned his back on her and abruptly walked out of the room. Thandie jumped when she heard the bathroom door slam shut.

She stared at the spot where Cam had stood. She hated hurting him. Cam deserved better. He deserved to be with someone who would mirror his bright, happy personality. It hadn't been that way between them for a long time.

She called out to him again. When he did not respond, she debated going after him or simply leaving.

Her indecision caused agitation to bubble up inside her. She couldn't stand for Cam to be upset with her, but she also did not want him to entertain any notions of them rekindling their relationship.

And then it happened. Thandie felt her breathing catch and then quicken to a pace she could barely control. Soon she was doing more gasping than breathing. Her hands began to shake frantically, and beads of sweats dampened her forehead. She was suddenly hot, so hot she was burning with it.

Oh, God, no, she thought. *Not now*. She reached out, steadying herself on the edge of the bed. Clenching her fingers tightly in the sheets, she struggled to slow her breathing before the panic completely overwhelmed her. Forcing herself to focus on an imaginary spot on the wall, she repeated her breathing exercises. Inhaling deeply through her nose and exhaling through her mouth. It was difficult to concentrate. She had to try three times before she found her rhythm. Once found, she concentrated on it with desperate determination. It took

several painstaking minutes before her breathing returned to normal. When she felt the crippling hold of fear loosen slightly, she reacted with cat-like instincts.

Her still hands shaking, she quickly dressed and got the hell out of there. Twice she had to lean against the hallway wall to brace herself and catch her breath. She needed to sit down, but the urgency of putting distance between herself and Cam pushed her forward. No one knew she suffered from panic attacks. And she had no intention of broadcasting this fact; not even to Cam. Aside from being embarrassed by it, she knew it was a scary thing to witness.

Thandie had been plagued by panic attacks ever since she was a little girl. She had learned to control them as she got older. Her experienced episodes had become less frequent, and often occurred while she was alone. But every once in while, she was caught off guard by the sudden grip of anxiety. They were brought on by stress. It was an oddity that she would choose a high-pressure career. Strangely enough, Thandie never had an episode while at work. Her attacks were remarkably selective. They chose only to present themselves when she was dealing with personal issues.

It was just after dawn, and the sky was just beginning to brighten with flecks of sunlight. Taking a cab to her loft uptown would be ideal, but the streets were empty. Apparently, it was too early for taxi drivers to earn a living. Taking the bus was out of the question. She was dressed for a fashion show. She'd rather walk before facing the curious stares. But it was cold outside. Too cold for pride. And certainly too cold for a woman to walk around in six inch suede boots and a sequined miniskirt. Stares or no, she was not walking home.

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