

(Note: Tropical Treasure is a romantic comedy about a pair of contestants on a reality TV game show who compete and fall in love. This is a personalized novel, where customers can choose the names, hair color, eye color, and other features of the three lead characters of the hero, heroine, and the heroine's best friend. This chapter introduces the game concept and the other contestants.)

## Chapter Two

The slender, golden-haired man looked towards the camera, grinning with the malicious glee of a Cheshire cat with a mouse in its claws.

“Welcome to TreasureQuest, ladies and gentlemen. I’m Clive Patterson, coming to you live from the remote tropical island of St. Isabelle, a virtual dot in the Atlantic Ocean. Where brains will battle against brawn, the clever will clobber the clueless... and eventually, the winner will whip the losers and bring home a golden prize worth one million dollars.”

Julie, Hillary, Ben, and three other contestants whom Julie had met only briefly, had been corralled outdoors in the back of the cottage, where a flagstone patio was surrounded by palm trees, thick-leafed shrubberies with massive coral flowers, and – most importantly – three huge television cameras. Mounted atop a small crane was a monitor, allowing the contestants to see the TreasureQuest news desk back in the network’s Los Angeles studio.

Julie knew she was perspiring, thanks to the trickle of perspiration running down her back. She rubbed her left leg nervously beneath the hem of her long floral skirt, trying not to stare like a frightened rabbit into the camera nearest to her. Instead, she kept her gaze steadily on the tall, Armani-clad figure of their host and moderator.

Clive was a handsome man in his early forties, with a smooth London accent and a perpetually amused gleam in his eye. Well-known in the U.K. as a former print journalist turned talk show host, he’d been pegged for TreasureQuest to improve its chances at cross-Atlantic popularity. Julie had read that TQ’s producers wanted a unique style for their show – without the sometimes pretentious melodrama or catty banality that had often plagued other reality shows. TQ was supposed to put the “game” back in “reality game show,” and Clive Patterson was recruited to help provide the sense of irony and humor that the producers were looking for.

Now he strode down into the lower level of the patio, sweeping his arm in a broad gesture encompassing Julie and the others. “These six contestants you see around me,” he continued, “may have different backgrounds and personalities, some of which you’ll learn about in just a moment. But they all share one thing: the thrill of the hunt. They’ve been chosen for their ability to think outside of the box, as

well as for their stamina. To get here, they've had to make it past hardcore interviews, video auditions, and tests of intelligence and dexterity.”

Clive glanced at each contestant in turn, his eyes glinting in the firelight. “Our guinea pigs here will be using every possible skill at their disposal to solve the mystery of the hidden treasure. We'll give them daily challenges that will probably make them question their decision to take the Quest. And I have the happy task of making their lives a living hell for your fun and enjoyment.” His sly face almost glowed with pleasure as a crooked smile twisted his lips. “And frankly, I'll be enjoying it too.”

Julie knew that he meant what he said. She had read the TreasureQuest rules on the long plane ride here, and the booklet had stressed that Clive had the power to ask them to do anything, from bug-eating to tightrope-walking. Contestants could be challenged at any hour of the day or night, and failure to perform some feat could cost them the ultimate prize. In short, they'd be less like guinea pigs than lab rats scurrying through a maze.

Breaking into her thoughts, the camera suddenly swung over to her, making Julie inhale in alarm. Clive had walked up behind her chair.

“Before we get into the details of the game rules, let's get to know the players. To help introduce them to you, we've roped in Entertainment Nightly correspondent Summer Radcliffe, who'll give you the lowdown on each victim. Summer, love, you there?”

Up on the monitor appeared the porcelain-like face of the Entertainment Nightly anchor, all blonde hair and white teeth. “Hi there, Clive. And hello to the Questers!”

Like the rest of her fellow contestants, Julie waved and said a casual “Hi, Summer” in response. Julie was slightly aghast to see her own photograph – the one she'd had to send in with her application – up on the monitor, coupled with her name, age, and hometown.

“Our first player hails from New York, Julie Alderton. How're you doing, Julie?”

“F-fine, thanks, Summer.”

Summer seemed to be smiling right at her through the monitor. “You look a little nervous.”

“Well, I... I wasn't expecting to be first on the chopping block,” Julie said with a little laugh, trying to ignore the quickened pulse that seemed to be pounding in her ears. “But I'm okay.”

“Just introduce yourself to the other players. Tell them what brings you to TreasureQuest. If it helps, forget all about Clive and me.”

“And the millions of viewers at home,” Clive murmured sadistically.

Julie turned to the others and nervously repeated that she was from New York, then she quickly listed her pre-planned comments. She mentioned her love of games and puzzles, her fantasy of living in a mystery, and the need to challenge herself. Naturally she avoided mentioning her ex. Julie refused to

boost his ego by mentioning that he'd hurt her self-esteem. He was probably home watching with his new love...

As she talked, she noticed that Hillary, sitting next to her, offered Julie an encouraging smile that seemed just as nervous as her own. Before long (although it seemed like an eternity to Julie), it was time for her new roommate to speak.

“Hi guys. My name’s Hillary Bartlett. And, um, I’m probably like the rest of you. I’ve seen a lot of these programs and they all looked exciting. The whole tropic isle thing really got to me. My reason for wanting the prize...” Hillary hesitated, self-consciously smoothing her red hair. “Well, I have a great job – but I’m not one of the bosses, so I do all the work and someone else gets the credit.” She smiled, and then continued, “I’ve always wanted to do something really big on my own, and I figured that spending three weeks on a treasure hunt and winning a million bucks would sure qualify as really big.” She laughingly added, “And after what I just said about my boss, I better win.”

She grinned, and Julie had to join in. Hillary’s cheerful demeanor was infectious – and judging by the look from one of the male contestants, it was highly attractive as well.

Next up was the woman sitting on the other side of Hillary, an almost aggressively fit young woman with frizzy copper red hair. She introduced herself as Erikka Marsden from New Jersey, an aerobics instructor who admitted her hope was to get a centerfold spread out of the show – which came as no surprise to Julie. If all of Erikka’s outfits were as skimpy as the bikini top and Lycra bicycle shorts she was currently wearing, Julie had no doubt that she would achieve her goal.

Erikka leaned back and crossed her long, muscular legs. “Look, there’s usually at least one chick on these shows who becomes the sex queen, right? That’s going to be me. I mean, don’t get me wrong, that money isn’t gonna be too shabby either. When I win that prize, it’ll go towards moving me from Bayonne to L.A.”

Summer raised an eyebrow. “Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Sure I’m sure. It’s all part of the game, right? I know how these things work. You don’t win by being insecure or nice.” The look Erikka tossed off at Julie and Hillary was almost contemptuous. “Same thing goes in Hollywood.”

“Indeed. Let’s move on from this shy, retiring young lady,” Clive said dryly, gesturing towards the older man sitting next to Erikka. “Tell us about yourself, Oscar.”

Oscar Cole had silver hair and a tanned, square-shaped face. “Well, like it said up there on the monitor, I’m a plumbing contractor from Florida. Fought in Korea as a young kid, came back and got married right away. Guess I’m here because they wanted some age variety – I mean, I’ve got two kids who’re older than most of you.” He smiled, blue eyes shining. “Anyway, my wife Margie wants me to retire, but I’m a bit obsessive about work. Heck, this is the first long break I’ve taken in fifteen years!”

Clive nodded amiably. “If you’re a plumber, you might not get much of a vacation. There’s only one bathroom for the lot of you. Wallace, you’re next.”

Wallace Kendall was the tall, slim man whom Julie had seen glancing with interest at Hillary. He hailed from Canada, and had a thick crop of brown curling hair, a prominent nose and emotive, almost liquid black eyes. “If I win, I’ll use part of the money to pay off my veterinary school loans and start my own practice,” he said when introducing himself – a revelation that seemed fitting to Julie, since he reminded her of a sweet, goofy puppy.

When he was through, Ben’s gaze shifted to the man leaning comfortably back in the chair furthest away from her. Ben now wore a blue polo shirt and loose Bermuda shorts, and Julie had to admit that his athletic frame looked almost as good dressed as it had in that towel. His brown hair was still damp from the shower, and he brushed a hand through it self-consciously just before Wallace finished speaking.

Up on the monitor, his frozen, smiling image appeared with captions that identified Ben Ford as the owner and operator of a carpentry company and – to Julie’s surprise – he lived in a town only fifty miles away from her home.

“This game means a lot to me,” Ben said, sitting forward a little. His voice was quieter than the others, but no less compelling for its lack of volume. “And for a lot of different reasons. Competing is something I’ve done all my life... for sports, for business, even for women. I haven’t always gotten what I wanted, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. Never wanted anyone to be able to say I didn’t give a hundred percent. At work especially, even though things have slowed down in the carpentry business, like they have all over...”

After a brief pause, he smiled suddenly, shrugging away the sober quality of his words. “So that’s why I figured a break was in order, and the fact is, I haven’t had any sheer, unadulterated fun for quite a long time. And I’m ready to kick some serious butt while I’m at it.”

Julie found herself smiling with him. Ben was charming, there was no doubt about that, even when challenging the others. At least he didn’t seem as full of himself as he had earlier. Maybe it had been an act. Or... maybe this was the act now.

Frowning slightly, Julie realized that figuring out people’s motives and true personalities over the next three weeks was going to be mighty tricky.

On the monitor, Summer Radcliffe appeared again, her perky demeanor a contrast to Clive’s more jaded persona. “So, you’ve all heard the bare bones of everyone’s story... but during the course of the game, you’ll get to know your fellow Questers in much greater detail. After all, they’re the only people you’ll be in contact with. Except for Clive, of course, and our intrepid cameramen, who’ll be sticking to you like glue wherever you go.”

“Right.” Clive looked at the players as a group. “Assuming you stay the entire three weeks, I expect you’ll all be dead sick of each other... or will have paired up like the animals on Noah’s Ark.”

“Your producers can only hope,” Ben said with a grin.

“Indeed.” Clive looked into the camera knowingly. “Well, let’s get down to the rules of the game, shall we? Although the contestants know the basics, Summer has the honor of explaining things to everyone at home.”

Summer bobbed her head. “Thanks, Clive. The rules are relatively simple; the object is to win enough QuestPoints to earn the key to a treasure chest filled with one million dollars worth of gold coins.” An animated picture of a treasure chest overflowing with gold coins appeared onscreen, with a spinning image of a silver key superimposed at the center. “You’re probably asking, how do people win QuestPoints?”

Julie knew the answer by now, as did all the other players. Every day, each player would receive a clue, riddle or logic puzzle that would lead them to the location of the next day’s challenge. Most importantly, solving the clue would earn them ten QuestPoints.

In addition, there were to be daily group challenges – which could consist of solving elaborate puzzles, mental or physical tests, or some other ‘surprise’ – for which winners would receive twenty additional QuestPoints. At the end of the three weeks, the person with the most QuestPoints would perform a final challenge for the right to unlock the treasure chest... and take home the million dollar prize.

“There’s something that the players aren’t aware of yet,” Summer added teasingly once her explanation was through. “The fact that there’s a third way to earn QuestPoints. If they ever get desperate enough – each player can go to Clive and request a secret challenge. A secret challenge is worth forty QuestPoints... very tempting for people who are falling behind.”

Clive nodded. “And what Summer’s not telling you is that I’m very likely to give you challenges that will be extraordinarily difficult. Not just difficult physically, but ethically, as well.”

The players looked at one another for a moment, and Oscar was the first to speak. “What do you mean, ethically?”

“Oh... for a purely hypothetical example, you may be asked to trick fellow players.” Clive gave them a devilish smile. “To play with their minds, uncover their secrets... so many wonderful things that can harm their chances of success.”

Ben leaned forward again, his blue eyes sparkling in curious interest. “To sabotage them, in other words?”

“Exactly. These challenges will be kept a secret, something known only to you and me – and the viewers at home, eventually.”

Though Julie was taken aback, she noticed that Ben definitely seemed intrigued by the concept, and he rubbed his upper lip in thought. “Seems to me that if this is part of the game rules, it’s not really much of an ethical problem.”

“Not much it isn’t!” Julie blurted, unable to keep silent. “What exactly do you mean by tricking people?”

Clive wagged his finger, amused at her indignation. “Now, Julie, you were warned before you got here that this game would challenge you physically, intellectually, and emotionally.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“You don’t have to take the secret challenges,” Erikka interrupted, her eyes rolling in annoyance. “He just said that, right? If it bothers you so much, don’t do ‘em.”

Julie clamped her jaw shut. Fine, if that was how they’d be playing the game, she’d just have to stay alert and on her guard. But it didn’t seem ethical or fun... particularly to the someone who was being sabotaged.

Clive patted her shoulder. “If it makes you feel better, there is a great risk involved to the person taking the challenge. If someone figures out what a saboteur is up to, the saboteur loses a day’s worth of points.”

“Whoa, that’s pretty harsh,” Wallace said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, but you’d deserve it,” Hillary countered. “If you’re willing to ruin someone else’s chances, you should be risking an awful lot.”

Summer nodded. “Exactly, Hillary. That’s why it’s something you should only do as a last resort. Or if you’re a big gambler.”

“Or,” Clive added with his trademark smirk, “if you’re a very good liar. Now, moving on to another fun way that you can confound your fellow contestants: the live broadcasts. Summer, can you continue?”

“Sure thing, Clive. On Saturdays, during our weekly live broadcasts, we’ll be conducting interviews with each of you, sharing viewer e-mails, and rehashing things that happened during the rest of the week. More importantly, we’ll share and update the scoring results. If you’ve solved all of your clues through the week, you should receive a total of seventy QuestPoints. Those who’ve won group challenges, however, will earn even more! And here’s the show stopper: the top two scorers take those extra QuestPoints from the other player’s loot.”

Julie had read about this in the rule booklet. It meant that if you were one of the top two winners of the group challenges for the week, you could take points from your fellow contestants. For example, if you won three group challenges – worth sixty points – you could take twenty QuestPoints each from three players of your choice. Or, strategy might dictate that you take all sixty QuestPoints from one unfortunate

player. The only people immune from having their scores lowered in this manner were the top two winners for the week.

She didn't mind this sort of game playing. It was the underhanded sabotage that troubled Julie... especially the part about uncovering secrets. Just what were the producers hoping to accomplish here?

Once the rule explanation was over, the broadcast came to a close. Summer thanked the players and told them that she'd see them Saturday at the next live show. The audience was invited back to see Wednesday's broadcast, which would show taped highlights of the daily games and interaction.

Clive turned to the players once the live feed went off the air. "Tonight, we'll have a sumptuous luau and a practice game. No points are at stake... it'll just be a hint of what's to come in the days ahead."

Erikka stood up, stretching her toned arms over her head. "So, what kind of game is it?"

The host smiled on his way to the producers' cottage. "A version of Truth or Dare. We'll be using some of the material you gave us on your applications. Some of the things you chose not to reveal on the live broadcast."

Hillary glanced at Julie as they both rose from their seats. "Why do I have a sinking feeling about this?"

Pursing her lips in a one-sided smile, Julie shrugged. "Maybe because we've apparently just booked ourselves seats on the Titanic."

Hillary nodded, looking over to Ben and Erikka. "Yeah, and I think I know who the icebergs are. Notice how interested they were in the whole sabotage thing?"

Julie had indeed noticed. Looks like maybe I was right about Ben in the first place.