

FINDING NORTH© by Lynne Marshall

Erica Yeager dreaded yet another company conference, but as assistant supervisor for the accounting department, she had to attend. Hot, overwhelmingly hot, Palm Springs was a departure from the usual locations, and her supervisor had promised something out of the ordinary at the end of the week. At least Paul North, her secret crush from Information Tech support, was there. But after a week of workshops and endless meetings, she'd hardly seen him, and as the week drew to a close her disappointment grew.

On Friday night, a huge charter bus appeared at the hotel entrance. The employees were being rewarded for a week of hard work. Wearing the recommended clothing, she boarded the bus along with fifty others for a surprise destination. Three rows ahead, she spied Paul casually chatting with another IT guy. His broad shoulders rose above the back of the seat, showcasing a western-styled shirt and Stetson hat. Would she have the nerve to talk to him tonight?

To Erica's surprise, the group was transported deep into the desert and back in time to an old western town. A bank, jail, trading post, hotel, and the most popular storefront – a cantina, lined a dusty desert street. The strong and enticing scent of cowboy BBQ started her mouth watering, and an inviting country band played the kind of music that made a girl want to Texas two-step, even though she'd never done it before.

But what really set her heart longing for a good old-fashioned romantic evening was the awesome starry night. Myriad stars blinked above, and combined with the warm breezy evening, her overly romantic tendencies kicked into gear. Erica felt as if she'd stepped back in time. Back when a man called a lady Ma'am and tipped his hat. Back when a gentleman asked ... "May I join you?"

Huh? Was it her imagination or had Paul North just spoken to her?

"Is this seat taken?" he said, motioning to the empty chair beside her.

"Oh. Uh, no. I mean, yes." Unable to verbalize a coherent sentence, she gestured toward the chair and nodded.

He sat holding a plate stacked with ribs, chicken, baked beans and cornbread.

Making a quick recovery, she nibbled at her chicken leg. "Isn't this great?"

"Fantastic," he said.

She glanced above. "Look! I can see the Big Dipper."

A wry smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "Ah, but can you find the North Star?"

She squinted and scrunched her nose. "Uh ..."

"Here's a hint. It isn't the brightest star in the sky."

She scanned and rescanned the sky without so much as a guess as to which the North Star was.

"Do you want to know how to find it?"

"Sure."

"See the Little Dipper?"

She nodded.

“Polaris, which is the name of the North Star, is the tail end of that constellation.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. And another way to find it is by locating the two stars that make the bottom of the bell of the Big Dipper. Now, follow that line south. See it?”

“I think I do!”

“Well, there you go then. You’ll never be lost again, ‘cause now you know how to find North.”

After they finished eating, Erica grew brave and was just about to ask Paul to dance, but Stacy from the secretarial pool beat her to it. Why couldn’t she learn to seize the moment when she had the opportunity? Once the rowdy hoedown song ended, Paul returned to the table without Stacy. Erica smiled inside.

The next dance started, a slow, romantic fiddle-driven song and she extended her hand toward Paul. “My turn?”

“You’ve got it,” he said, a huge grin spreading across his cheeks.

She beamed back as he took her hand. He led her to the dance floor like a hero from a historical novel. His arms felt solid and he guided her around the floor with practiced ease. She glanced into his eyes and was startled by the flirtatious glint there.

“I’ve been meaning to thank you for adjusting my paycheck when the company made that mistake,” he said.

“Oh, it was nothing. It’s my job.”

They danced a few more steps. The smell of sage and desert heightened her senses. His enticing aftershave reminded her of the time her computer had crashed, and

how pleasant it was to sit beside him in her office while he re-booted the accounting program.

She felt light as air as the desert evening breeze glided with them around the wooden planked floor. “And thank you for fixing my computer last month,” she said. She’d made a point to make the same error the very next week, just to get Paul back to fix it again. “Both times,” she added sheepishly, feeling a blush warm her cheeks.

“It was my pleasure, ma’am,” he said in character with the night.

He gazed into her eyes and she realized she’d been short changing herself over the years. Instead of waiting around for life to find her, from now on she was going to plot her course and make the first move. It hadn’t been hard to ask Paul North to dance. After all the years of feeling adrift, she felt a new direction in her life. If she wanted something, she’d go after it. Why not?

Her eyes connected with Paul’s gaze. Had he picked up on her thoughts?

“Would you consider having dinner with me next weekend?” she asked.

“I was just about to ask you the same thing,” he said with a wide grin. His hand grasped a bit firmer at her waist, and she moved closer as they continued to dance. A new feeling of contentment warmed her insides when she rested her head on his shoulder.

Erica glanced toward the heavens brimming with glittering stars and smiled, wondering what else she could expect now that she’d found her very own North.