

**Ultimate Power: Enemy Within the Ranks**  
**by Linda A. Fischer c1999**  
**Nonfiction/Memoirs**

**Chapter One**

**Why Can't I Say No?**

The night air was unusually hot and humid, even for Panama City—steamy as a sauna. Inside the Non-Commissioned Officers' Club, where I stood drinking my fourth beer, the temperature was a cool 65 degrees, but I felt as if the heat from outside had followed me in. I knew my light brown complexion was glowing with a hot redness, flushed from the alcohol I had consumed in the last hour. And under my battle fatigues, dampness soaked my body. Thank God my long hair was pinned up—the thick, wavy strands off my neck.

It was another Friday “hail and farewell” social, an opportunity for Lieutenant Colonel Harold Smith, my immediate superior, to bid goodbye to soldiers returning to the States and to welcome newcomers. He expected me to attend, like all the officers in his command. But, unlike the others, he expected me to stay close by his side whether I liked it or not, rather than mingle with the crowd. All evening I'd felt his pale blue eyes on me—just as they always seemed to be these days.

The beers I'd drunk this evening had done little to douse the angry fire within me—a fire kindled by the knowledge that my commander demanded and then monopolized every free moment I had. And I had no say about it.

When Lt. Col. Smith arrived in Panama in 1992, one year into my tour there, he and I began our relationship on respectful, friendly terms. Now, 18 months later, he treated me differently than he treated the other officers. He seemed to always want me nearby. Every day he would ask me to go running or play racquetball or come to his office for a chat even if he knew I had other obligations. He'd tell me to attend this affair or that event, and when I tried to beg off, saying I was swamped with paperwork or needed to take care of urgent details involving the unit I commanded, he would fire back some remark to remind me that *he* was the boss and that my fate in the Army rested with him.

“Yes, sir!” I'd learned to snap back in proper Army form. “What time, sir?”

Standing beside me in the dimness of the NCO Club, the slightly-built colonel seemed to tower over me. Not because of my 5 feet 2 inches or 120 pounds, but because in the shadow of his ultimate power and authority and the way he wielded it, I felt small and helpless. For some time now my normal confidence had been shriveling, my zest for life disappearing. This was a new and devastating experience for me.

For all of my 32 years, I'd seen myself strong like my beautiful Mexican mother and self-assured like my proud Texan father, a career military man. Growing up in a military family that moved constantly, I learned to take on bullies, even if they were bigger than me. Wherever we lived, I protected younger children, especially my little brothers, and never let anybody push them around.

Beginning in junior high, I'd grown intensely competitive, collecting awards and medals as an accomplished athlete. I was determined to succeed at everything I attempted and saw myself as an achiever, someone who could make it in life no matter what the

obstacles. In fact, a teacher of mine had once admitted admiring me for never giving up on what I wanted.

What I wanted, I discovered after putting myself through college in three years, was a successful military career. And, at this time I had achieved much of the success I had hoped for. I was Captain Linda Fischer, an 11-year career officer, commander of a 220-soldier military police unit. On top of all that, I was diligently working on a master's degree in educational psychology and had won numerous Army sporting championships.

Yes, the Army seemed the perfect place for me. Because of my background, I understood and could accept aspects of Army life that bothered some people—the chain of command, the code of absolute obedience to your commander. I thrived on the competitive life style, the challenge “to be all that I could be.”

Yet here I stood, feeling like my commander's possession, like a little girl trying not to make her daddy mad. It was not a good feeling, and the beer helped keep it at bay. For months now, I'd tried not to inflame the situation, to keep my respectful distance while remaining professional and friendly. But Lt. Col. Smith persisted in focusing his attention on me at command social and sporting events. Although he knew my romantic feelings were reserved for Jim, back home in the States.

Recently, his demands had intensified, and I found myself feeling more and more powerless, unable to say *no* to him. When I did, he would fix me with a disapproving look as if he were dealing with a willful child and remind me that he held my future in his hands.

For the past few months, I'd felt increasingly on edge. Like I did tonight. I must have been on my fifth beer, although I'd never been much of a drinker before. In fact, while others downed alcoholic drinks, I could usually be found with a soft drink in my hands. But I'd learned recently that beer and rum and cokes had a dulling effect, and they had become my primary comfort during social times with the commander. Only for some reason, I wasn't the one buying tonight, as I usually did. No, someone was stacking drinks in front of me faster than I could gulp them down.

Feeling like a dog on a leash, I swiped at the dampness trickling down the back of my neck. Did the other officers talk about what was—or wasn't—going on between the commander and me, I wondered? I knew my former first sergeant, Master Sergeant Martinez, sensed my frustration and anger for he made sure to check in with me often at these gatherings. And what about Sandy, Lt. Col. Smith's wife? I suspected that she hadn't picked up on her husband's strange behavior because he seemed more cautious in her presence. She often attended "hail and farewell" socials, but where was she tonight?

I sipped a beer, my mind whirling with endless threats I could only imagine hurling at the man I'd come to see as my tormentor. My thoughts jumped from strategizing an excuse for leaving to buzzing with a light alcohol-induced dizziness. All I wanted to do was escape from the party.

*Why can't I just say, "Sir, I'll be going now"?* *Why can't I just say it?* I asked myself those questions as I sipped at yet another beer that had been plopped down in front of me. And I had no answers. All I had was the anger that I felt welling in me like a volcano—the anger that arose from feeling trapped between my attempts to placate my

boss and protect my career and this strange paralysis. With no way to release my anger, at least around him and my troops, all I could do was run the anger out of me every night, with a fast paced 5 mile run before going home.

But I couldn't run now. I had to stay at his side while old, familiar arguments raged inside me. *I can't take this anymore. Yes, you can, Linda. Just go along with him. You've got 11 years under your belt now. Why jeopardize your whole career at this point? After all, you've only got six more months until you can leave Panama and the commander far behind. Your next tour of duty is bound to be better, and then you'll have just nine years until you can retire from the Army with a retirement pension and a whole 'nother life to live. Don't throw it all away now. You've achieved great success so far, and besides, you've set your sights on making major. So just stay cool!*

"Right, Captain?" Lt. Col. Smith's voice captured my attention.

"Wha..what, sir?"

"Captain, you'd better slow down. I'd hate to see you hangin' over the side of the boat tomorrow chuckin' all day instead of snaggin' a big one."

Laughter from the other officers rocked me sober enough to clear some of the buzz from my head. *The fishing trip tomorrow. I had forgotten.*

"The commander's right, ma'am." Master Sgt. Martinez whispered, gently nudging my arm. "With all due respect, ma'am, you've been acting like a zombie, and that's your, what...fifth or sixth beer? You better get yourself home."

“I’m just waiting for the right moment, know what I mean?” I gave a subtle nod towards the colonel. “Say soldier, it’s almost 9:00. Shouldn’t you be going? Aren’t your kids waiting up for you? *You* should get going.”

“Not a problem, ma’am.” The worried look on Martinez’ face was all too familiar these days. “But, ma’am, promise me you’ll get going soon.”

“Promise,” I chimed.

Still doubtful, the tall, muscular sergeant turned to leave, but halted. “You sure I shouldn’t wait and drive you?”

“I’ll be okay, so outta here!” I whispered. “You’re a good man, sergeant. You and the family have a good weekend, you hear?”

By the time the party started breaking up, I was cradling a fresh beer in my hands, not drinking much anymore but needing to hold on to something while I waited for the commander to finish his goodbyes. He’d dismissed his driver earlier and asked me to take him home. *There goes my run*, I’d thought to myself as I parroted the obligatory, “No problem, sir.” *Why can’t I just say no?* It wasn’t unusual for one of his officers to give him a ride, but I did wish he’d asked one of the others. I desperately wanted this night to be over.

Continuing to nurse my beer, I hoped the buzz in my head would subside before I got behind the wheel of my little white Chevy. I tried to reassure myself. *At least he lives on base, not far from here. With so little traffic at this time of night, I can get him home in a few minutes and be back at my place in no time at all.* I wasn’t thinking about playing it

safe. All I wanted was to get the colonel home *fast* and out of my sight. Tomorrow's fishing trip would come much too soon for me.