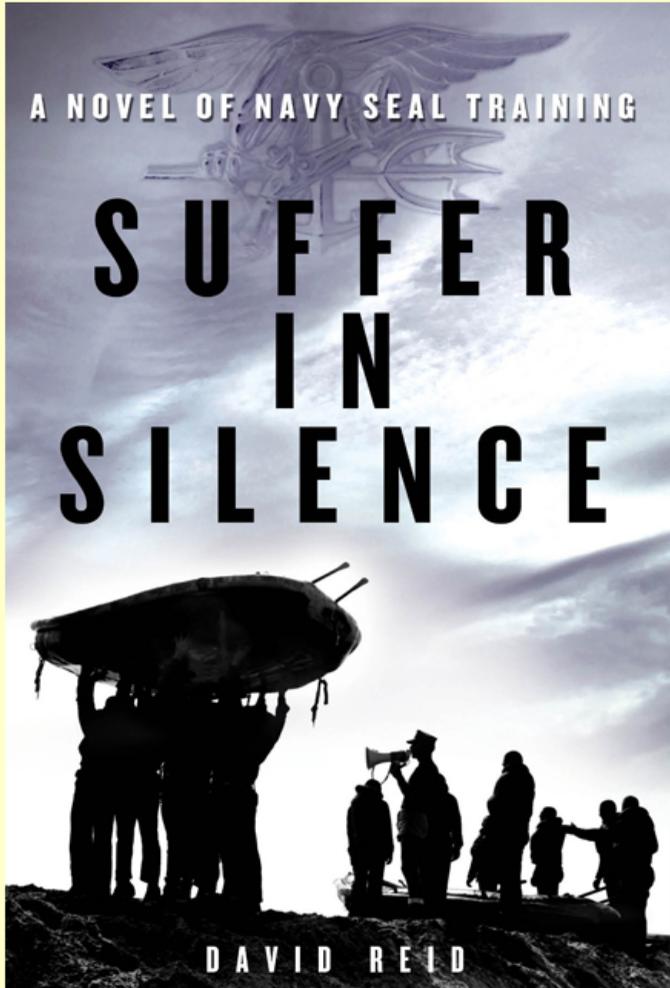


**READ IT FIRST**



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# ONE

**T**HE TENDRILS OF FOG that snaked through the Basic Underwater Demolition/Seal (BUD/S) training compound only added to Grey's misery. The last rays of sunlight scattered into a luminescent haze, providing little warmth to his drenched, sand-encrusted body. The asphalt slowly wore away the skin on his ass as he completed sit-up 450. A stocky instructor with calves the size of bowling balls squatted next to Grey, scrutinizing his every movement through narrow eyes.

"You know why you're here, don't you?" The instructor's voice was an artificial growl that Grey would have found comical, had he not been in such pain.

"Why is that, Instructor Logan?"

"Because you're weak." Logan slowly stood up. "And stupid." He turned his back to Grey, took two steps, then spun around. Grey suppressed a groan.

"It's not over, fuck stick. Hit the surf. Wet and sandy. Two minutes. Go!"

Grey scrambled to his feet and sprinted out of the compound. He flew across the instructor parking lot, labored up and over the ten-foot sand berm, struggled across the beach, and charged into the surf. With the 58-degree water lapping at his knees, Grey did a belly flop and let the darkness of the Pacific close around him. He floated for a moment below the surface. He wasn't taking any chances. The instructors loved to line up the students after they had journeyed to the surf zone; an on-the-spot

inspection often revealed telltale signs of cheating—a dry cover, a dry shoulder, a nervous facial expression. The punishment for cheating was always swift and severe. Satisfied that he was thoroughly drenched, Grey loped back to the beach and rolled in the sand. He powered up the berm, head tilted downward, eyes fixed on the sand. He looked up just in time to avoid knocking over Instructor Logan, who had been quietly watching Grey's progress from atop the berm.

“Thought you might just run me over, didn't you?”

Grey stood at attention, breathing heavily. He knew what was coming, and nothing he could say except “I quit” would change it.

“Running into instructors is bad policy, sir.” Logan scratched at a sore on his neck as his eyes lazily scanned the beach. “Time to pay.” The statement rolled off his tongue casually, as if he were commenting on the dreary weather.

Grey spent another half an hour somersaulting up and down the berm and into the ocean. By the time he was through, every muscle in his body screamed in agony. Life had not always been like this.

Mark Grey wasn't accustomed to failure. He was a masochist and a perfectionist, and these two qualities were generally enough to keep him out of trouble. In high school he had regularly logged eighteen-hour days in hopes of getting into a top university. At Stanford he had relaxed enough to find time for a string of girlfriends, but he never stopped working. After reading an article about the Navy Sea, Air and Land (SEAL) teams, he channeled all his energy into gaining admission to BUD/S. It was supposed to be the hardest military training in the world, and Grey couldn't read the word *hardest* without getting chills up and down his spine. He liked that SEAL officers and enlisted personnel went through exactly the same training. Months of mutually endured misery fostered a fierce loyalty between the two groups. Grey longed to lead men who had bled and suffered by his side.

With over one hundred applicants for ten officer spots, the competition for entrance into BUD/S had been stiff. To strengthen his physical fitness scores, Grey started competing in triathlons, eventually qualifying for a spot in the Hawaii Ironman challenge. Six feet one, with a lean,

muscular body, Grey was a natural athlete. By the time his fitness test came around, he could run a mile and a half in combat boots and fatigues in less than eight minutes, do 130 sit-ups in two minutes, and perform thirty-five dead-hang pull-ups. Those scores alone virtually ensured him a place at BUD/S, so his 3.8 GPA was simply icing on the cake.

Immediately upon graduation, Grey reported to Officer Candidate School for twelve weeks of training. He easily rose through the ranks, attained the position of company commander, and graduated at the top of his class. In short, Grey had been the ideal candidate for SEAL training, which is why he found all the unwanted personal attention he had been receiving from the instructors baffling. Of the eight officers in BUD/S Class 283, Grey spent a disproportionate amount of time engaged in after-hours training.

Grey pulled off his soaked greens and stepped into the shower back at the barracks.

“Damn hombre, you look like you’ve just been raped!” Petty Officer Ramirez exclaimed. To emphasize his point, he grabbed the seaman showering next to him and directed a few pelvic thrusts toward the startled eighteen-year-old.

“Yeah, baby, you know I love it!” Seaman Jones drawled, playing along. He smiled, exposing a mangled set of teeth that betrayed his backwoods Tennessee upbringing.

“Rough day?” Ramirez asked, pushing Jones away with a feigned look of disgust.

“You could say that. Logan didn’t like my sit-ups at PT this morning—claimed I showed a lack of motivation.” Grey scrubbed his cuts with soap. “You know how it is—a little remediation session after chow, a little beat-down, a little surf torture.” He winced as he touched his butt. The crack of his ass was as raw as hamburger meat, a phenomenon the students called “grinder reminder,” in reference to the courtyard where they performed their daily physical training, PT. The grinder was hollowed ground; Grey swore he could smell the gallons of sweat and vomit that the asphalt had absorbed over the years.

“Who’s leading PT tomorrow?” Grey asked.

“Redman,” Ramirez answered. “You better sleep well tonight, my man, ’cause you’re gonna need it come tomorrow morning.”

Grey leaned his head against the grimy wall and let the hot water wash over him. The instructors hadn’t broken his body yet, but they were sure trying. It was only the second week of training. Hell Week was over a month away, and graduation was too distant a goal to even contemplate. BUD/S was a six-month program, but by the time students graduated, most would insist all the abuse had taken at least five years off their lives.

Grey wrapped himself in a towel and stumbled into the room he shared with two other officers. Lieutenant Bell shouted into his cell phone in the corner of the room, and Ensign “Silver Spoons” Rogers spit-polished his boots. Bell was a former Surface Warfare Officer who had served two years aboard a frigate on the East Coast before transferring to BUD/S. He was an energetic man, prone to fits of profanity, and a shameless buttkisser who wasn’t popular with his subordinates. As the Officer in Charge (OIC) of BUD/S Class 283, Bell was supposed to be accountable to the instructors for all the actions of the students. In reality, he rarely took responsibility for anything, instead managing to shift the blame for the class’s many blunders to Rogers or Grey. At a diminutive five feet two, Bell was often addressed by the instructors as “Papa Smurf.” With his receding hairline and slight paunch, he cut a comical profile. Bell wasn’t overly athletic, but he somehow managed to pass all the physical evolutions. Nevertheless, he harbored a grudge against the exceptional athletes in the class, and this immediately put Grey out of favor. Grey felt certain that the fact that Papa Smurf had graduated from a poorly regarded state school didn’t help matters, either. Smurf wasn’t an “ivory-tower officer,” a term he often used to describe his two roommates.

Rogers had earned the name Ensign Silver Spoons from the instructors, and the students frequently referred to him jokingly by this dubious title. In truth, he was a hardworking officer who had graduated from Princeton with honors. He meant well, but he was often misunderstood by both his subordinates and the instructors. They assumed he had a superiority complex, but he simply wasn’t used to working with a bunch of rowdy sailors. A true gentleman, Rogers had been schooled in the classics and could recite parts of *The Iliad* from memory. The instructors

often entertained themselves by making him recite poetry or translate insulting phrases into Latin. His baby face and close-set blue eyes only added to the comic effect as he played the part of the bookish intellectual.

“Inspection tomorrow?” Grey asked, eyeing Rogers’s perfectly shined boots.

“Unfortunately. Didn’t you get the word?”

“Nope. I missed our meeting today.”

“What happened?”

“Just a little beat-down. Nothing big.”

“Logan really dislikes you, doesn’t he?”

“Seems that way, although I have no idea why.”

“Maybe his wife was that doll you chatted up last weekend,” Rogers suggested. “Remember? Over at Moondoggie’s?”

Grey laughed. A rumor was floating around that a student had been medically dropped from the previous class after trying to impress an instructor’s wife by claiming to be a SEAL. The woman had called her hubby and filled him in on the student’s charming efforts. Three days later the student was dropped from training, his body utterly broken. Since hearing the story, the boys were careful about whom they flirted with, and even more careful never to claim to be SEALs. Becoming a SEAL was a process that took more than a year, and BUD/S students who thought their status as trainees afforded them bragging rights risked a painful lesson in humility.

Grey sat down heavily on the edge of his steel-framed bed. The thought of staying up all night polishing his boots and waxing the floor made him nauseous. If he was lucky he’d get two hours of sleep, maybe three. He pulled his combat boots out of his locker and started rubbing small circles of polish into the dry leather.

“What’s on the schedule besides PT and the inspection?” Grey asked.

“The usual fun. Log PT and IBS. Maybe a little surf torture if we behave ourselves.”

The instructors always made a point of beating the students a little extra on Friday afternoon, just so they wouldn’t forget over the weekend that they were at BUD/S. Log PT consisted of a number of sadistic, back-breaking exercises performed with telephone poles. IBS, short for Inflat-able Boat Small, involved a series of races, either carrying or paddling a

hard rubber boat. The losing crew paid dearly. The winning crew occasionally got to sit out of the next race. Grey's boat crew was already notorious. Despite their best efforts, they often found themselves in last place.

Papa Smurf turned off his cell phone and surveyed his domain. "Boys, I'm hitting the rack. Don't work too hard tonight."

"It's only eight o'clock," Grey noted. "What about your inspection boots?"

"Done," Smurf answered. "Paid Owens ten bucks to polish them."

"And your knife?"

"Already sharpened." Smurf belched loudly. "Owens did it free."

Grey and Rogers exchanged glances. The concept of using money to pave the way to graduation disgusted them. They worked all night, finally crawling into their racks at two in the morning. Smurf's alarm went off at four o'clock, and the three roommates instinctively stumbled into the bathroom to shave, half blind from fatigue.

"Muster!" Petty Officer Burns strode angrily up and down the ranks of trainees, pushing people into their boat crews. "Muster, goddamn it!"

Grey glanced at his boat crew: Ramirez, Jones, Wallace, Stevens, and Tate. Someone was missing.

"Down one!" Grey called out.

"Who?" Burns asked loudly.

"Murray."

Burns shook his head in disgust and stormed into the barracks. He emerged a minute later pushing a barefoot, wild-eyed young man in front of him. The student's uniform wasn't buttoned, his belt buckle was turned backward, and his sand-encrusted boots dangled from his hands.

"What's the deal?" Grey asked, not sure if he wanted an answer.

Murray smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, boss. I was having a kick-ass dream. I must not have heard my alarm." He buttoned up his uniform and straightened his belt. "Won't happen again."

"I'd love to believe you," Grey said. "We'll talk later. We've got five minutes to be on the grinder for PT."

As Murray struggled with his boots, Papa Smurf motioned Grey over.

“You’ve got to control your boat crew,” Smurf scolded. “We got ninety-five people out here on time, and we’re waiting on one idiot. You better get him in line.”

“Will do,” Grey answered.

The class formed into sloppy rows and jogged in step toward the grinder. They called cadence as they went, hoping to impress the instructors with their volume. As soon as they rounded the corner of one of the beige buildings that surrounded the grinder, they sprinted to their designated spots. Over a hundred pairs of white footprints were painted on the asphalt. The students scrambled to fill up the rows.

“Drop!” The command echoed throughout the compound. Instantly, the entire class dropped into the push-up position and started counting out repetitions. When they reached twenty, Papa Smurf scanned the compound with panic-filled eyes.

“Who dropped us?” he whispered urgently. The students were required to call out the name of the instructor who dropped them in order to recover.

“I have no idea,” Grey responded. “Try Redman, he’s supposed to lead PT.”

Papa Smurf inhaled noisily, then belted, “Instructor Redman!”

“Hoo-yah, Instructor Redman!” the class answered.

“Wrong!” the mystery voice bellowed. “Push ‘em out!”

After twenty more push-ups, Papa Smurf looked back at Grey. “Well?” Grey shook his head. “Beats me. Logan, maybe?”

“Instructor Logan!” Smurf shouted.

“Hoo-yah, Instructor Logan!” the class answered.

A brief period of silence followed, during which the trainees shifted their weight from arm to arm uncomfortably.

“Wrong! Push ‘em out!”

“Who the fuck is it?” Smurf demanded. His face was turning beat red, contrasting sharply with his white T-shirt and green pants. With the blue vein running across his forehead and his thinning yellow hair, he was a veritable rainbow of color. Grey suppressed a laugh.

“C’mon. Give me a name.”

“How about Chief Madsen?” Grey suggested.

“Chief Madsen!” Smurf called out.

“Hoo-yah, Ch—”

“Shut up!” the voice interrupted. “Push ’em out!”

The class pushed out twenty more repetitions.

“Push ’em out!”

Arms shaking with effort, the class did twenty more push-ups. By now everyone had assumed the leaning rest position. The trainees brought their feet in toward their hands until their butts were raised high in the air. This took some of the pressure off the triceps and chest. Unfortunately, this was not an exercise position sanctioned by BUD/S instructors.

“Get your weak little butts out of the air and I might recover you,” the voice boomed. “I only want to see straight backs.”

Suddenly the air was pierced by an explosive release of gas. This display of flatulence temporarily broke the tension. A few students even managed a quiet chuckle.

“Who did that?” the voice demanded.

Murray shifted his weight to one arm and raised the other.

“Go hit the surf, you dirty bird! Give that ass a nice scrubbing. I don’t want any of your foul-smelling shit on my grinder.”

Murray got up to start running.

“No! Bear crawl! And don’t let me catch you cheating.”

Murray’s self-satisfied smile faded as he dropped into the push-up position and scampered the hundred yards to the surf on his hands and feet.

“Now, if the rest of you can keep your backs straight for exactly one minute, I’ll recover you.” The voice betrayed a high level of irritation.

The class snapped into proper push-up position. Grey knew they would never last a minute, but they had to try: giving up would only result in more punishment. Sure enough, thirty seconds into their endurance test a student let his back sag until his knees touched the ground.

“You are pathetic!” the voice screamed. “You are possibly the weakest class I’ve ever seen! Get your sorry asses down to the surf zone, get wet and sandy, and get back here! You have two minutes!”

Grey was growing used to this drill. The instructors would watch the students carefully. When it seemed they simply couldn’t complete another push-up, they were sent to the surf. This way they were cold, wet, and physically exhausted all day—the perfect recipe for misery.

“This sucks!” a student yelled as they sprinted toward the surf. Grey looked over and made a note of his face. Students who complained excessively tended to disappear. If a trainee didn’t truly want to be at BUD/S, he would go away. No doubt about it.

Grey leaped into the dark ocean, cringing reflexively as the water closed over his head. Although he hated the cold, he found his current situation perversely romantic. All his life he had dreaded the prospect of a desk job. He longed for adventure, and here it was, aching in every bone, coursing through every strained muscle. The bite of the ocean, the briny smell of rotting kelp, the sand abrading his legs—it all pointed to one glorious conclusion: he was living his dream. A smile broke out on his face as he sprinted back to the grinder.

“Are you fucking crazy?” Ramirez asked, eyeing Grey’s ecstatic expression. “Sir, with all due respect, I think you’ve lost it.”

The horrifying scene that greeted them back at the grinder quickly shattered Grey’s private revelry. A dozen instructors were stationed at various points on the pavement. Two held hoses, one brandished a bull-horn.

“Morning, gents! Ready to PT?”

“Hoo-yaaaah,” the class answered. They sustained the traditional battle cry, holding it for minutes on end. The brick walls of the compound magnified the eerie sound until it reached a fevered pitch. Grey could easily imagine that they were Viking warriors preparing for a raid, emptying their lungs in a display of raw masculinity. He felt alive: every nerve in his body was on edge. This was the instructors’ motivation check. They were always eager to find out who really wanted to be at BUD/S and who was just along for the ride. Grey yelled until his voice cracked, and then yelled some more. The result was a hoarse cry that modulated in pitch like the voice of a pubescent schoolboy.

Instructor Redman raised a clenched fist, signifying that he’d heard enough. He was an imposing figure: six feet four, arms bulging with muscle, a chest that seemed impossibly big. His skin was leathery, and his beady black eyes peered from beneath a prominent brow. A thick patch of spiked black hair crowned his head, and his nose looked like it had been broken at least a dozen times. The students were terrified of Redman. Especially Grey . . .

*I'm invisible.* Grey knew what was coming. *You don't see me. I'm not here.*

"Grey!" Redman bellowed.

"Hoo-yah," Grey responded. He winced as his voice rose an octave.

The class laughed. Redman's eyes narrowed even farther.

"Is that what they teach you at Stanford? How to scream like a woman?"

Grey felt like melting into the asphalt. At Officer Candidate School the instructors had stressed the importance of maintaining an aura of professionalism in front of the enlisted men. Over three-quarters of Class 283 was comprised of enlisted personnel, and they were currently having a nice laugh at his expense. So much for image.

"Think you can do proper sit-ups today?" Redman asked.

Grey nodded.

"What?"

"Hoo-yah," Grey croaked, straining to keep his voice low.

"We'll see about that." Redman laid a foam pad on the platform and assumed the sit-up position. "Sit-ups . . . ready?"

The students dropped onto their butts. "Ready!"

The instructors strolled between the ranks of trainees, hosing them down and assaulting them with a torrent of verbal abuse. Grey felt the scab on his ass scrape off as he completed sit-up after sit-up. The salt that clung to his uniform ground its way into his open wound, making his eyes water uncontrollably. The sit-ups progressed into push-ups, then lunges, pull-ups, dips, leg lifts. An agonizing hour later the madness stopped.

"I'm not impressed," Redman said, shaking his head in disgust. His blue T-shirt rippled as he tensed and relaxed his muscles. "Look at me." He jumped off the platform. "I'm not even sweating, and you guys look like a bunch of underfed refugees. You've got ten seconds to get off my grinder. Move!"

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