

WHAT CAN ONE MAN POSSIBLY DO?

CATHOLIC JOE

SUPERHERO

STEVEN S. THOMAS

This was to be dedicated to the Immaculata, the Mother of God and our Mother, but she deferred to her “most chaste spouse,” Joseph.

And to my beloved wife and family to whom I will forever be grateful.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Where real-life historical figures appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the fictional nature of the work.

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PREFACE

The tagline on the book says, “What can one man possibly do?” To be honest this was more of a challenge than a question. Whoever you are reading this book right now...I challenge you! I am getting right in your grill going nose to nose with you and asking, “what can **YOU** do?” You might say, “Well, I’m just one person, I have my obligations.” Tell that to William Wallace, St. Francis, St. Teresa of Calcutta, St. Joan of Arc, and St. Maximilian Kolbe. They were one person, who started very simply, but they had laser focus on what was before them. As you read this, know that marriage is under attack like never before. Our Mother at Fatima even forewarned us...the battle approaching will be over the very life of the family. And so I ask once again, “What will you do?” As you read this book I pray that the fire that is meant to be transferred to you will find a place in your heart. That the Triumph foretold will beckon you to take your part in this epic struggle.

I started writing this decades ago, but a plethora of reasons and life’s demands kept me from putting a serious dent into its completion. It wasn’t until I walked with a friend across the US on a pilgrimage of reparation for our country that God poured out His grace on this work.

There were many reasons that were instrumental in writing this book. One reason – and I’m almost embarrassed to say – was a sincere need for therapy. I kid you not...I don’t know about you, but I feel beat up, hollow, squeezed...like Bilbo said: **“I feel thin, sort of stretched, like butter scraped**

over too much bread.” After the “wokeness,” the “virus”, the turning of everything sacred upside down...the absolute insanity that everyone can see, and is becoming accustomed to (scary)...where do we even start? Another reason is that we live in a world that needs hope, direction, light, freedom... We need righteous, authentic heroes. In these pages you will find all of these things (plus some good laughs). Lastly, and most importantly, my heart aches for my church, Christ’s Bride. There is a gaping wound in the domestic church (the family) that needs to be healed. I will spare you the litany of woes. Joe will, in his own special way, speak to these issues.

Catholic Joe is an archetype, he is virile, highly intelligent, yet flawed in a comforting kind of way...he is filled with courage, and daring, and seeks to do the right thing, yet he must learn after touching the stove more than once that his strength and instincts may not always take him down the right path. As a husband, father, beloved son of the church, spec Ops ace turned military general, he is prone to follow the path of strength and power as his default setting.

One thing to remember: as our faith and our way of life continue to come under attack, there is always hope—for there is one (Jesus), who will never disappoint. So, as the demons screech and lash out, knowing their time is short, and their eternity set, we must arm ourselves with a most powerful, unstoppable weapon; that is, the knowledge and truth that we are all called to be

grafted into God's family. We are kin to the Most High.

I owe thanks to many people. The first would be to my wife who has sacrificed so much, and so many people who have planted and watered the seed of faith in me.

Sit back now in a comfy chair and prepare to enter a world where you are no longer the victim. Catholic Joe is based on some real people and events (especially the supernatural experience in Chapter 32), as well as a little fiction. See in Joe your dream...to feast on courage...to "dive into the darkness," to face the faceless enemy within.

Proverbs 16:32 says it all: *"More noble a man who conquers himself than even he who conquers cities!"*

CATHOLIC JOE

Chapter 1:

Joseph Salvatore strode through O'Hare Airport with a strong gait—his Gucci aviators gleaming and his trenchcoat rustling while his earbuds silently screamed “Boom, boom, boom, boom!”

Joe liked to go with John Lee Hooker's classic for unique missions ...and he was definitely on one now. Time was of the essence; three hours earlier he had called in a favor from his Jarhead buddy, Colonel Richard Lock, who ran worldwide logistics for the Marine Corps. Joe was hitching a 7:45 pm ride to Vegas on an equipment transport plane, a massive Airbus A400M.

His youngest brother, Vinny, was about to plunge into a dark chasm.

The eldest of eight, Joe came from a traditional Italian family. His grandparents had emigrated from a tiny island off the southern coast of Italy, Malta—which happened to be the most Catholic country in the world.

His faith was in his bones. Awake or asleep, this was not superficial or merely a cultural thing. He believed it; he breathed it—let there be no confusion or misunderstanding: Joe Salvatore was Catholic, and he *loved* it.

This, of course, is what made him the most dangerous man in the world.

Through a special door to the tarmac. Credentials were flashed. Then, up the stairs through the plane's door. Joe poked his head into the cockpit to give a subdued “Oorah” to the pilots (Richie's man

on location had already informed them about their deadhead). Respectful, mutual, sober nods.

As a Lieutenant General with legendary connections, in most places where he navigated through the military world, a red carpet rolled invisibly before each step. He had cheated death more times than a litter of cats, and his honest, no-holds-barred approach was his hallmark.

Joe had many nicknames. During boyhood it was Bully Buster or GI Joe because of his ardent desire to join the military. As a young officer it was “Storm,” and during ops it was Danger or HK (short for Hunter Killer—he hadn’t cottoned much to that one, however.)

He secretly favored Storm, because, back when he trained Marines, Joe insisted they sing his own Gospel-inspired cadence call entitled “The Storm is Coming.” Those who persevered to graduation were finally allowed to sing a new lyric with the instructors, “We are the storm!”

They were stone-cold killer Recon Marines now.

Now in the jumpseat, posture perfect, cocooned by the din from the massive turboprop engines, and concerned about Vinny, he pondered these things, smiled a small dark grin, and shook his head.

Joe pulled out the greatest weapon he had ever brandished: 19th century Rosary beads given to him by an old monsignor at St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice, Italy.

While the pilots were going through their checklist, a crewman appeared.

“Can I get you anything, Sir?” pointing to a makeshift bar that was obviously not a normal feature in the A400M.

“Whatdya got?” Joe asked.

“Macallan’s fifteen-year double cask?” (Richie had done his homework)

Joe nodded. “That’ll do.”

A rosary in one hand and Scotch in the other, Joe thought.

Anticipation of both helped break the melancholy that was pressing upon him.

The crewman produced a neat glass like a magician pulling out a bouquet of roses from his sleeve, poured a half-glass, handed it to the Lt. General, then disappeared down the arm of the fuselage.

Richie even knew my favorite type of glass.

He held the curved glass up and looked at the finely-aged amber liquid, slow waves rotating back and forth beneath his nose, relishing the distinct aroma of a perfectly aged single-malt whiskey—*Ah, faint vanilla and strong peat.*

Closing his eyes, and purposely breaking connoisseur protocol, he deftly tilted his head back and drained it all, welcoming the warmth as it made its way down.

Suitably glowing, he gazed upon the large, well-worn beads, which featured a palm-sized reliquary. He unscrewed the top of the crucifix to split it, then slid the front facing with the corpus to the side. Behind it he looked for the thousandth time at the small fragment of wood behind the glass and a Latin inscription, *Verum Crucis*.

The True Cross.

He closed his eyes and went to a place deep within his soul and kissed the priceless relic, then pressed it into his chest. As was his custom on flights, he began praying the Sorrowful Mysteries.

He marched from one smooth bead to another as he repeated Hail Marys. As he looked down at the beads, he flashed back to when he met the 91-year-old Monsignor...how he had kissed his hands out of respect (a tradition Joe knew well). The Monsignor had pulled out a well-worn leather pouch, and pinching the sides together, he reached in with two fingers to pull out a thick crucifix with black beads. He put his hand on Joe's shoulder, and with a warm and searing stare, he looked deep into Joe's eyes. In Italian, and with a barely audible, yet thick accent, he stated, "*Questa croce ha una reliquia della Vera Croce*" (This cross has a relic of the true cross). He pressed it firmly into Joe's hand.

Joe reached down to accept the gift, saying over and over, "Grazie...Grazie...Grazie, Tante," Taking the rosary, he kissed it reverently, slid it into the pouch, and placed it in his left pocket.

The Airbus jolted forward for takeoff, bringing Joe back to the present. He couldn't count how many take offs he had experienced. Each one represented a new mission, a new opportunity, and it usually filled him with a mixture of excitement and fear. This one did not have any excitement, or even any fear, but the unknown gnawed at Joe. Usually, he knew a mission backwards and forwards. He could tell you every possible variable to plan for. But this one was different as the plane's

high-pitched engines prepared for takeoff.

Once the plane reached cruising altitude, Joe battled to make his way through the mysteries of the rosary. As he looked down at the scar on the side of his right hand, he fell into a sleepless trance. He stared at it for close to thirty seconds. Suddenly he was transported back to what was one of his most dangerous yet defining missions. It was the one that spelled out his toughness and gave him a certain cult status with his brothers in the corps. Throughout training, Joe had proven himself a marine who performed extraordinarily well under pressure situations. He worked his way up in the 1st Marine Division from a simple enlisted to become what is known as a “Mustanger,” or someone who rose up from the ranks to become an officer. His skill and physical framework as well as his ability to communicate and lead his units were well noted by his CO’s. Joe soon found his niche in training all comms and noncomms in hand-to-hand combat. He loved this part of his job. Soon he was training the best of the best, and eventually he was commissioned to work across “branches.” The Army Rangers, Navy Seals, the Air Force AFSOC, and his own Marine Raiders and Force RECON utilized his talents to turn his fellow soldiers into killing machines. Joe tried to communicate how taking someone’s life should be precise and detached from emotion and should not be done indiscriminately. He always contemplated the taking of an enemy's life very seriously and almost with respect. He didn’t relish or enjoy it but looked at it as his job. Also, it was kill or be killed...very simple logic. Joe wanted to make sure that he did

everything he could to bring his brothers home alive.

After close to two years of training he felt like he needed a change. It was already made known to him that a promotion was forthcoming, and eventually a non-combat job awaited him. Joe wasn't ready to sit behind a desk, so he put in for some upcoming missions. Eventually word got out about Joe, and a Brigadier General McConnor, who knew Joe, had a special mission that needed extra attention, and talent. In the city of Fallujah, a very high-level resource was being held by Al Qaeda, and it was Joe's task to extract this asset (alive) and take out the enemy stronghold. Usually on missions they shared only minimal information, so Joe was given a picture, nationality, and a high-level background. This mission would entail a team of six doing a HALO jump (High Altitude, Low Opening). This prevented radar detection but required team members to wear oxygen and high-altitude equipment. Each marine donned night vision goggles and a specially-designed jumpsuit with master and back-up parachute. They each had close to 1000 rounds of ammunition, LAWs Rockets, as well as grenades and small mortars. They were prepared for shock and awe in close quarter combat.

It was an unusually windy night with low visibility as they prepared to jump into a remote section outside the city of Fallujah. They completed one more quick run through of the checklist, and they prepared to exit the C-17 Globemaster III. Joe liked to insert a little classical music with his jumps: Gustav Holst's Jupiter, and Dvorak's New

World Symphony No. 9 in E minor. These always got his juices flowing. Tonight would be a Dvorak night. Two of the six special operators would be stationed with lasers and sniper rifles at high vantage points to allow them to paint targets to guide their armaments, and to give cover on evacuation. The other four were prepared for direct engagement. A stealth chopper was positioned outside of enemy radar 20 minutes out. The mission was precise, and the men were prepared for almost every contingency except one: an ambush.

As Joe and his team dropped within 150 yards of their target, they quickly shed their unnecessary gear and prepared to move into formation. They had rehearsed this engagement over and over, and with the use of satellite imagery they knew their surroundings fairly well. Before they took two steps, flood lights temporarily blinded them in their night vision glasses. Temporarily dazed, the team ripped off their goggles in unison. Joe knew that their cover was blown and yelled for his team to find cover. He positioned himself and his team behind several larger rock formations typical in the Afghan region. Immediately after the lights flashed, what looked like twenty to thirty muzzles started to flash in the distance, up a slight hill. AK-47's and grenade launchers unloaded on Joe and his team. He screamed into his radio, "Stay down!" as he and his team were pinned down. He yelled to his spotters up high, "A little help guys!" He also radioed to the base, "Drop zone kinetic! Mission compromised! CASEVAC STAT!"

The first order was getting those lights, but it was raining bullets and shrapnel, and no one dared even move. After what seemed an eternity, his snipers took out the lights, one at a time. With precision shots, each light exploded, and the team's exposure became less and less. Joe poked his head up and saw a large movement on his left flank. There were close to twenty enemy soldiers approaching, AK's blazing. He had to act quickly; otherwise, they would never make it out. He yelled out, "Left flank!" His two snipers read it before he even called it out and put headshots on the first two. The darkness hid the brutality of each headshot, but the sound of the thud was unmistakable.

This temporarily halted the enemy's approach; this was their chance. Joe motioned with his hand. Two in his team directed grenade launchers toward the first attackers to slow the blaze of bullets coming from up the hill. The exploding grenades' deafening booms let out concussions in the air, spraying shrapnel like rain. Two on his team pointed their M240 machine guns to their left and sprayed out hell on the approaching enemy. They immobilized the threat on their left, and an uneasy calm ensued. Every Marine experienced an overwhelming rush of adrenaline. With hearts pounding they attempted to catch their breath, and their heightened sense of awareness caused them to start at the slightest movement. Joe thought he heard a chopper in the distance and immediately fresh gunfire erupted behind. Joe turned to engage and was hit five times in rapid succession, all in his body armor. The force knocked him off his feet. He fought off a dizzying spell, immediately reached for

the grenades at his side and released three, one after the other. He covered the best he could. Bullets continued to rain, and suddenly he heard, "I'm hit!" by one of the two who were engaged with their first frontal attack. Then, not more than fifteen seconds later, he heard the hideous sound of bullet penetrating helmet and witnessed the slow arc backwards of his comrade as he took a lethal headshot.

Joe radioed, "We have two down, one deceased...I need backup, stat!"

He yelled to his snipers, "Paint a target! We're running out of time!"

He instantly saw the lasers pinpointing the areas where JDAM bombs would soon be wreaking havoc. Amidst the chaos, Joe tried to make sense of how this mission could have been compromised from the very beginning. Someone had to have betrayed his team. He heard in his ear, "Hang tight. Stealth chopper on the way. Fireworks ten seconds out."

After receiving the coordinates, he turned to communicate that they would attempt a tactical retreat as soon as the fireworks started. He radioed for his partner to help the injured marine in 5-4-3-2-1. He grabbed his fallen comrade by his belt with his left hand, and the M240 with the other. As he did, a bullet tore through the flesh of his left shoulder, and as he was spun back, bullets pounded him again and again in the upper part of his body armor, 4, 5, 6 shots sending him backwards. A stray bullet grazed the side of his right hand, neatly cutting the skin and even more shots hit him in his armor. The snipers were doing everything they

could to fend off the attackers, unloading 50 cal rounds as quickly as they could, but there were too many. Like ants exiting their hill, the enemy kept coming. The wound on his shoulder was not life threatening, so when Joe gained his balance, he reached down again. This time, with his bloody right hand, grabbed the deceased marine and waited for the missiles and chopper to arrive.

He looked down at the fallen marine and time stood still. They had trained for weeks together, shared laughs, drinks, and rigorous training. He remembered pictures of his two daughters, 9 and 11, and his brunette wife, Lynn. His daughters, not 48 hours ago, were on a Zoom call, showing their dad pictures from their trip to the zoo. Joe said a prayer amidst the buzzing chaos for his teammates' soul as he snapped back into reality.

The missiles arrived with deafening precision, one after another. For the next 10 minutes the ground shook and kept the assault at bay. Soon thereafter, a stealth Blackhawk chopper arrived thirty yards to their right. Amidst the retreat, Joe provided as much cover as he could, letting out bursts of fire from the M240 he picked up from the fallen Marine. When soldiers, and casualties were loaded, he turned to enter, and took several more shots to the armor on his back. A fourth caught the top of his left calf. He grimaced in pain and rolled onto the chopper. The leg shot hit an artery and he was losing blood fast. A medic applied a proper tourniquet and immediately inserted an IV. Joe slowly faded and lost consciousness.

The next day, in a fog, he found himself in the hospital. He was awakened by alarms and tubes and

wires were coming out of his body. He heard whispers and talk from staff nearby. One of the orderlies mentioned to another, "This is one tough son of a b*tch, took over fifteen shots in his armor, covered with bruises..."

Another mentioned, "Lucky as hell none of those killed him." He shook his head, "Man... yeah tough mother!"

Joe lay still, within the shell of his body, his mind and soul taking in everything that happened: his fallen comrade, the other injured soldier, how they and he had miraculously survived. He contemplated and thought, "God, why me? Why'd you save me? Why not him?" He thought of Lynn and the two daughters he would be contacting to deliver the flag...the flag that represents so much.

Before long, Joe was roused from his thoughts to wheels playing "*erch, erch*" on the concrete runway. Joe shook off this haunted memory that was seared in his soul, and shifted back to the conversation he had with his brother Vinny the night before. He prayed for his brother, and he prayed for himself, for wisdom, patience, he didn't know how he would respond. Many years earlier, many a confrontation did not end well for Vinny, who had a temper to match his wit. Vinny was probably the smartest of all the children and had made quite a fortune in the information technology space. He recently sold his company for a nine-figure payday, with incentives to manage for a minimum two years. Vinny was as sharp as they came, but money, wealth, or even charisma would not help him today.

Joe took a deep breath and exited the plane. His buddy Richie had a car and driver waiting, Joe thought to himself, *I love these guys*. Nothing was left undone with his Marine Corps buddies. They were like another family to him. The driver, a young Lance Corporal, sprinted out to get the door and snapped off a salute with an intensity and adoration that Joe loved. He returned the salute and said, “At ease, Marine.”

After Joe slid into the back seat and some small talk, the driver asked Joe, “What brings you to Las Vegas?”

Joe looked out the side window and his eyes wandered far in the distance. “I’m not quite sure, let’s just say this is a special mission that has yet to be determined.”

Joe rattled off the address and the car made its way into the night.