

Film Review: *Equalizer: The Final Chapter*

by Earl P. Holt III

Robert McCall (Denzel Washington) is a retired CIA operative, who has killed a lot of bad guys during his career. He is a devout Roman Catholic, so he harbors corrosive guilt for what he's done in the past. In an earlier *Equalizer* film in this series -- *Man on Fire* (2004) -- *McCall* turned to heavy drinking to quiet his demons. At one point in *Man on Fire*, he asks his former partner, *"Do you think God will forgive us for what we've done?"* His partner answers no and shakes his head. *McCall* can't seem to forgive himself, either.

Equalizer: The Final Chapter opens at a Sicilian winery that camouflages the safehouse of a ruthless *camorra* ("mafia") unit engaged in massive cyber theft. Its villa also serves as a safehouse for Syrian drug-smugglers to store their poison and launder their drug money. *McCall* is there on an altruistic mission to benefit someone he barely knows. To gain entry to the villa's money room, he must kill at least a dozen members of the *camorra*, as well as the organization's leader. Afterward, as he exits the blood-soaked villa, *McCall* refrains from shooting the leader's 12 year-old grandson, who promptly reciprocates that act of consideration by shooting *McCall* in the back as he walks by.

Badly wounded and losing blood, *McCall* is later found by a policeman ("carabinieri") in his car on the Italian Mainland, parked on the shoulder of a road outside Altomonte. The latter is a small but picturesque town on the Amalfi Coast and nestled into a hillside. Instead of arresting *McCall* or taking him to a hospital, the *carabinieri* brings him to an elderly physician who serves the town and who delivered most of its inhabitants. The only question the *Good Samaritan* asks this stranger is, *"Are you a good man or a bad man?"* *McCall* answers that he doesn't know. Later, the doctor tells him *"Only a good man would say that."*



Altomonte's Good Samaritan

While McCall is recovering from his wound and regaining his strength, he acquaints himself with Altomonte and its friendly and welcoming citizens. Its view of the Amalfi Coast is gorgeous, and everyone he meets makes him feel welcome. However, his walks unexpectedly introduce him to the town's one malignancy: the local *camorra*, who routinely shake-down and terrorize Altomonte's small businesses with a ruthlessness that would make the *Gambinos* look like Mother Theresa.

When *McCall* finds that Altomonte's camorra are peddling the identical drugs found at the Sicilian winery, he anonymously calls the CIA to report the winery's location and illicit activities. The woman who answers is skeptical and asks who he is. When McCall replies that he's just a concerned citizen, she hangs up on him, but he calls back. He then prompts the CIA official to ask, ***"Why would a Sicilian winery be importing large quantities of wine from Syria?"*** After the CIA inserts a ***physical access team***, it finds that the imported Syrian *"wine bottles"* actually contain Methamphetamine.

In another, earlier ***Equalizer*** film in this series, *McCall's* former boss at the CIA asks him why he risks his life to help people he doesn't even know. He answers, ***"One day someone does something unspeakable to***

someone else, and you do something about it because you can." She replies, *"That's who you are and you've always been."* This is a recurring theme in all the ***Equalizer*** films, that of this devoutly Christian man seeking redemption and forgiveness from God (and himself) through purely altruistic acts. Although McCall doesn't recognize his own decency and humanity, those in Altomonte do.

Since his retirement from the CIA, Robert McCall has felt alienated from nearly everyone and everything. He never felt welcome or comfortable until he found himself in Altomonte. Although he never actually says so, it's implied that he believes God has brought him there for a reason. He sometimes states that *"In the end, we all end up where we're supposed to be,"* which can have a variety of interpretations, but for *McCall* that seems to imply retiring in Altomonte. At one point he offers his own life to the camorra's leader in exchange for that of the young *carabinieri* who saved him, and is about to be executed in front of his wife and daughter.



Welcomed and Accepted by the Locals

It doesn't take *McCall* long to find himself at war with the local camorra. He informs the leader's brother that he really likes Altomonte and believes that he belongs there. He asks the brother to take their criminal

activities elsewhere and leave these good people alone. When they laugh at him, it quickly becomes "***Game On,***" and he soon kills the leader's brother and several more of the most vicious ones. Like most revenge films, this produces a *catharsis* when many bad guys -- who literally have gotten away with murder -- finally get the justice they deserve.

Throughout the film, several of *McCall's* actions seem mysterious and befuddling, prompting nagging questions for viewers. For example, why did he end up at that Sicilian winery, and what was his purpose in going there? Why did he anonymously call a young woman at the CIA to report the activities of the Sicilian winery, rather than veteran officers with whom he was familiar and with whom he had served? I don't want to spoil the plot, but in the end, all is revealed.

This may be the best of the ***Equalizer*** films, not just because *McCall* kills a lot of very bad guys in some very creative ways -- 26 by my count -- but also because Altomonte is so picturesque and its view of the Med is so beautiful, it makes one want to visit. Yet, this "*Altomonte*" is fictitious, and most of the film's scenes were actually shot in Amalfi and Atrani.



"Altomonte," Italy

As with most fiction, we must occasionally *suspend disbelief* here, as well. Denzell Washington was 69 years old when this film was released. Its technicians were clearly forced to speed up certain scenes where *McCall's* reflexes would have required those of a world-class athlete in his teens or 20s to execute. Nevertheless, its recurring Christian themes and the sophistication of its plot have made this among the very best of revenge films.