

When the Past Returns

ALSO BY C. J. ENGLE

Finding Strength

When the Past Returns

by

C. J. Engle

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WHEN THE PAST RETURNS
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*In loving memory of
Luther M. Meekins.*

*Heroes are what heroes do.
He did a hero's work.*

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Chapter 8: *Assembly Down Memory Lane*

The entrance to the assembly hall was massive. Giant hardwood doors etched with ornamental scrollwork swung open easily under Mrs. Yern's hands, dividing the famous proverbial words carved down their center in fanciful lettering:

*"It is not the Destination
But the Journey that Enlightens."*

Mrs. Yern did not go in but gestured impatiently for the boys to enter. Jamie and Lee crossed the threshold together and started when the doors abruptly closed behind them, resounding with a *boom*.

All eyes were drawn to the noise. Michael Treymark, standing alone on the dais in the room's hub, paused mid-sentence to look up at the latecomers.

"So much for a quiet entrance," Lee mused.

"Glad you could join us," Treymark said. His voice was unreadable. The two boys had no way of gauging his level of irritation. "Come down, take a

seat with the rest of the students.”

The assembly hall was vast and circular, topped with a high, domed ceiling. Rows upon rows of surrounding seats, broken only by intermittent aisles, gradually descended to a central stage-sized platform. The seats were empty, with the exception of a small cluster of students before the platform and an even smaller cluster of adults across the way.

Jamie and Lee had no trouble finding empty seats; the assembly hall could easily hold a few thousand. They walked as quietly as they could and sat behind the last row of students. A few heads turned at the sound their seats made, but they turned back to Michael Trey mark a second later.

“As I was saying,” the retired kickboxer said, “this school is not solely about competition, or even *Tae Kwon Do*, for that matter. You are here to make yourselves better, both as individuals and as useful members of society. You are here, first and foremost, to learn. If your academic requirements are not met, you will be sent home, regardless of your martial arts abilities. . . .”

Jamie felt tiny in the vast room and slouched, wishing to be even smaller. It was not just the size of the room and its high, cathedral-like ceiling. He heard kids whispering. They appeared to be listening to Trey mark, but he caught their furtive glances, peeking his way like a flock of birds eyeing a nearby cat from a safe distance.

Heat flushed his face—he couldn’t stop it. A

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mixture of embarrassment and anger suffused his mind with an unhealthy pouring of paranoia to complete the recipe. He sensed it happening again. He had just arrived, yet it was already happening again.

Summer vacation with his family and friends had made him forget.

The stares. The whispers.

Now, somehow, these kids knew. He hadn't thought it likely. But they knew.

After the night of the junior prom, Jamie had returned to Culver Valley Academy and Central School only to realize his status had undergone a dramatic alteration.

People never used to talk about him, at least not that he knew of. He hadn't been part of the "in" crowd, so he hadn't been an important topic of hallway gossip.

But everything had changed.



"Go!" David shouted, gesturing madly with the pistol.

John started to leave, but Jamie saw his eyes, and he saw the intent hidden within. It was a look that summed up John's life philosophy: Why not? You haven't lived until you've given the dice a good firm shake and roll.

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"No, don't!" Jamie cried, knowing even as the words left his mouth that they were futile.

The gun went off like the crack of lightning. John never had a chance to reach David. The muzzle flashed and the bullet fragment ricocheted, ripping into John's thigh and lodging against his femur, where it chipped bone and felled him as easily as the pebble had felled Goliath. John collapsed to the graveled stone layering the school's rooftop, his face a contorted mask of agony.

Terrified and alone, Jamie knew he was all that stood between David and suicide. He talked and pleaded, argued and cajoled in any way he could to persuade David to drop the gun, all the while fervently praying. But David didn't want to listen, didn't even seem to hear what was being said, but in the end he released the clip from the pistol, unable to follow through with his intentions.

However, any relief was short-lived. Whether David knew it or not, there was still a bullet in the chamber waiting to be discharged.

Time slowed to a crawl as David raised the barrel of the gun to

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his temple. Jamie lurched forward, desperately straining for the weapon but feeling as if he were wading through molasses.

Then his fingers found a hold on the gun, and on David's hand. He pulled and twisted, overextending David's arm and nearly breaking his elbow in an attempt to dislodge the gun, but David's grip was tenacious. He pulled back fiercely.

Then the world blew up in Jamie's face. The gun went off. He didn't feel a thing, not at first, but when feeling did return, he wished it hadn't. It felt as though the Jaws of Life were pulling his skull open. His ears rang. His sight closed down to fine points, almost completely blacking out.

Jamie felt more than saw David tumbling backwards over the barrier that delimited the roof. He had been praying furiously throughout the unfolding situation and could only attribute what happened next to the reality of God's power in the world.

He thrust his hurting body forward, blindly reaching for a hand or clothing—anything to grab hold of. His mind told him that it was already

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too late, but his heart didn't listen and wouldn't give up without trying. Then his right palm came into contact with cloth and clamped down. His other hand quickly joined the first.

He heard David's screams, sounding miles away. Moments earlier his friend had wanted to die. Now he didn't want to fall.

David's weight jerked Jamie forward. His sternum slammed painfully into the barrier and he started to slide over, helpless against the much larger boy's weight and momentum. Miraculously, though, his grip held and he refused to let go. Even when he felt his feet leave the rooftop, Jamie clung tightly to David's arm. . . .

☆☆☆

"Jamie!" Lee whispered. Jamie turned his head toward him. "You okay?"

Jamie looked away. The heat he had felt was gone, replaced by a cold sweat. He had never told anyone, but for a long time after the junior prom he'd dreamed bad dreams, dreams where he was unable to save David, dreams where John received a fatal wound instead of a flesh wound, dreams where the police officer was too slow to catch him

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and David before gravity won out. . . .

"I'm . . . fine," he said. Lee didn't believe it but left him his peace. On stage, Michael Treymark was still talking. Jamie heard none of it.

Jamie remembered his return to Culver Valley after missing nearly a week of classes. The students, even the older ones, stared at him openly. Teachers too. Some tried to avert their eyes. Most didn't care to hide it, like he was a monkey in a zoo or a bearded lady. There were some who candidly approached him about the night's events, but mostly the kids grew quiet when he was near.

That was when he first heard the whispers.



Jamie knelt by his open locker door. He dug through his books, looking for the right one.

"That's not what I heard. I heard David tried to kill him. Fired point blank at Jamie's face."

Jamie turned his head, shocked at hearing his name. The speaker had his finger pointed at his friend's face, thumb cocked back like the pistol's hammer. Jamie quickly turned back, wishing there were room in his locker to hide.

"But he must have used some of those weird ninja skills," the classmate

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continued, “cause he still moved his head outta the way in the nick of time. Then he kicked him so hard, David flipped over the wall and would have died if a police officer hadn’t caught him—”

“No, no! It wasn’t a gun at all!” said a second student. “It was a knife, and David slashed him across the face, but when he tried to cut him again, Jamie grabbed his arm and, like, did one of those Steven Seagal throws—”

A third voice interrupted, “Shhhhh! He’s right over there!”

Jamie found the book he needed and hurried off, anxious to leave the voices behind.

But they were never that far away.

☆☆☆

Jamie shifted uncomfortably, fighting to leave the cruel memories in the past. There were more memories, more than he cared to recall, and some of those memories included friends. The only people that had treated him the same were Natalie, John, Andy, and Milton. Just four out of an entire school, the same four who had been in the center of everything with him. But of them all, only John had received a similar fate and similar attention, but he

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also handled it better. Jamie had his suspicions that John even enjoyed the attention.

“. . . demonstration, one time only, to give you a taste of my instructors' worthiness," Michael Treymark was saying, still standing in the midst of the circular auditorium. "This will not happen again. After today, it is you who will have to prove yourselves to them. I insist that you respect each and every one of these men and women before you. They are your teachers, not your friends. They are why you are here. They will make you into the finest martial artists in the world, if you allow them to."

Michael Treymark wrapped up his speech and left the platform, choosing to sit off to one side rather than join either of the groups. The men and women behind the far side of the dais were preparing for the promised demonstration. Each was dressed in a unique uniform—in design and color—from any of the others. They were stretching and warming up even as the first took her place on the platform.

Jamie corralled his mind to the best of his ability, trying to focus his attention forward. He was relieved when the hum from the other students died down. He hoped to find a moment's peace from his lingering thoughts.

Chapter 9: *What You See, What You Get*

The first instructor separated herself from the rest and virtually floated up the stairs to the center of the platform. She was among the youngest, late twenties to early thirties, wearing a drab blue *Kung Fu* style uniform. She bowed to the assembly. “My name is Cherri Newman. To you, I am Mrs. Newman or ma’am.”

“Why is she wearing that getup?” a boy in front of Jamie whispered to his neighbor. “I thought this was a *Tae Kwon Do* school.”

“I am a twelve-year student of *Soo Bok Do* and a seven-year student of *Wing Chun*,” Mrs. Newman informed the audience. She bowed again to the assembled students then began a slow, graceful form—not *Tai Chi* slow, but slow for what Jamie was used to. Her techniques were flawless to the eye, and she flowed from one technique to the next with the grace of a cat, always in perfect balance. When she finished, she bowed and stepped back without another word.

The students clapped as the next instructor came forward. It was clear to Jamie that not everyone was impressed. But he was. Mrs.

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Newman didn't do anything fancy, but what she did showed a mastery of movement. He understood the details. Master Reanold often had his advanced students perform basic forms in front of the class and then critiqued them. There was always something—a shaky stance, a slight hesitation—and he would catch it and help the student modify it.

After four years of such instruction, Jamie had learned to see many imperfections in his own forms, but as much as he tried to correct them, his forms were never perfect. He'd be slightly off balance, or he'd miss a hand position by some minute amount, or he'd overturn just a hair—there were just too many things to watch out for. Mrs. Newman was good, very good, and Jamie found himself hoping she could provide him with enough guidance to reach a similar skill level. And more importantly, while watching her, his mind had not returned to his memories.

“I am Master Kaine,” the next instructor said. He was a huge, broad shouldered man in his late forties, carrying more weight in his belly than was generally expected of a martial artist. He must have been halfway between six and seven feet tall. A thick, almost cartoonish mustache filled the space between his nose and upper lip, and his parted black hair was neatly combed over to the right, with just a few silver flecks mixed in.

“I like my name, and you will use it often,” Master Kaine said. “I am a reformed street fighter.

I know what works and what doesn't work in real situations. And I have spent twenty-plus years practicing *Tae Kwon Do*."

Master Kaine motioned without looking and two other instructors joined him on the platform. They picked up two-inch thick lengths of wood and, without warning, one swung hard for the side of Master Kaine's head. No one thought it possible that he could get out of the way in time, not from the casual stance he was in, nor from his size. And he didn't. The length of wood shattered on his forearm with a *CRACK!* that echoed on and on. Splinters sprayed across the platform. The broken end of the board rebounded off the stage and flipped over once before lying still.

Master Kaine turned toward the other instructor immediately, the other two-by-two already swinging for his unprotected side. He lifted his knee, and the board snapped in two over his shin. Then, with amazing dexterity, he spun and used the foot he'd been standing on to hammer into the torso of the second assailant. The man went flying backwards and landed hard.

Master Kaine, however, had already disregarded him the moment his foot struck its target. The first assailant was lunging forward, using the broken end of the board like a knife. Master Kaine leaned out of the way and blocked across his body, deftly guiding the attack by with his palm. His fingers closed tightly over his attacker's hand, even as his other hand rose to join

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the first. Together his hands twisted, applying torque to the assailant's wrist. Then a leg sweep finished the maneuver and tossed the man onto his back. In a flash, Master Kaine was kneeling on his attacker's right biceps with the splintered two-by-two in his fist, diving for his attacker's chest and stopping a hairsbreadth away.

His final *ki-hap* rang in the stillness of the assembly hall, interrupted only by the heavy breathing of his two assailants. There was a brief pause, then the board dropped from his hand to clink on the raised dais as he walked away, not even offering to help the other instructor stand. Off stage, his massive bulk lowered into a chair barely able to contain him.

The students erupted. A few shouts took the name of God in vain and a couple of others began with "Holy—" and finished with a variety of choice words, but most students kept their praise respectable as they had been taught by their home schools.

Everyone stood, including Jamie, but he didn't clap with the rest. He was one of the few who remained silent. Many of the kids clearly respected Master Kaine's brute force much more than the carefully controlled proficiency of Mrs. Newman. Master Reanold had taught Jamie better than that.

Jamie was standing to see over the crowd. His eyes fixated on the instructor who had received Master Kaine's kick in the midsection. The man slowly got up with the aid of another instructor. A

thick pad was taken out from beneath his clothing. It had been far from enough protection; the injured man couldn't fully straighten. He swayed on his feet, only remaining upright by sheer willpower and the aiding hand of his fellow instructor.

Once the students realized he was waiting to speak, they quieted and settled into their seats. The injured man spoke softly. "I am Andy Kline. . . . I have studied several styles . . . in the past ten years. . . . I have won . . . numerous national titles and . . . hope to . . . make you better competitors . . . on the ICUMA national circuit."

Mr. Kline slowly left the platform, one arm tightly pressed across his middle and the other draped across the shoulders of the other instructor. The pair ascended the aisle together and left through a side door. Master Kaine never even glanced their way.



The last of the teachers was an old man. He had a long white goatee but no other visible hair besides bushy eyebrows. Age spots dotted his skin where it went uncovered. A dark, twisted cane extended below one of his palms; it curled into a simple knot on the top and tapered to a rounded-off point where it touched the dais. The old man used it to lift himself up each step and onto the rise, moving slowly and deliberately toward the edge of the platform.

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He glared at the students with deep-set eyes. It was almost comical. Hunched over as he was, he barely reached five feet and could not have looked frailer. The old man wasn't even dressed in a uniform. He wore old-man clothes, complete with hiked up trousers, a bowtie, and a set of suspenders over a white dress shirt.

"I will instruct you on proper breaking techniques as well as oversee all of your training." The old man's voice was high and scratchy, carrying a heavy Eastern accent. "I have a lifetime of experience to impart to willing listeners."

Several students laughed, though most tried to contain it.

The old man's nostrils flared. He jabbed at a boy in the front row. "Name!" he commanded.

The boy stuttered, "It's, uh . . . my, uh, name is, uh—"

"Mr. Uh My Uh, why don't you join me up here." It was not a question. No one was laughing anymore. The boy rose, his seat left to flap vacantly behind him. He hesitated at the base of the steps and looked back at his chair before moving up.

"Sam Johnson," Jamie breathed in disbelief.

"Who's that?" Lee whispered.

"He—he's the one that beat me in the December tournament last year. He wasn't there in February . . . when I won."

The other instructors passed boards and bricks onto the dais. The old man knocked a single board off one of the stacks with his cane and said,

“Break it.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. He snorted in contempt. He towered over the stooped old man. “One board? Yeah, okay, that’s almost tough.” He picked up the board and held it out for the old man to hold for him, but even as his arm was straightening, the old man’s fingertips speared forward, splitting the board in two. Sam dropped the piece left in his hand like it had burned him.

“I told *you* to break it! Now break it!” The old man knocked the next board off the stack.

Shifting his feet, Sam looked at the board then back at the instructor. This time there was no hint of mockery. “I have to hold it myself?” he inquired apprehensively.

In answer, the old man slapped the pointy end of his cane onto the edge of the board, flipping it over the end of his walking stick. When he pulled up, the board jumped into the air. Again his fingertips lashed out and the board fell in separate pieces.

“Perhaps this is too challenging for you,” the old man taunted.

Sam’s face contorted in anger, but if he wanted to say something, he bit it back. Instead, he knocked over the stack of remaining pine and took the board with the biggest knot. With a loud shout, Sam raised the piece of wood in both hands and slammed it over his forehead. “How’s that?” he said defiantly, throwing down the halves of pine board.

The old man responded by flipping up another board. He caught it in his empty hand and

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whacked it over Sam's unsuspecting head. It happened too fast for the boy to brace for the blow.

Stumbling backward, Sam yelled, "Hey!" He rubbed his head with the heel of his hand. "Are you nuts?"

He was answered with a grin of rotten, decaying teeth. "Do you want to try again?" the old man asked.

Sam cursed.

The instructor's face darkened. His deep-set eyes became black pools of anger. Sam swallowed but did not back down. His thoughts were written on his face. What did he have to fear from an old man? Big deal, he could break a board with his fingers. So what?

"Go back to your seat, little boy. Your pride makes you impossible to teach."

Sam obeyed. Before he sat down, he made a face in the direction of the other students, careful, though, to conceal it from the gathered instructors. A few kids laughed softly, not wanting to draw the old man's attention.

Four instructors joined the old man on stage. They set up a stand made out of concrete blocks, then set five two-inch thick gray bricks on top, dividing them with thin metallic spacers. The setup took a few minutes. Each brick had to be centered and properly balanced.

The old man watched passively from a corner of the platform until, finally, the assisting instructors were ready. Divided into pairs, they

stood a couple of paces behind and to either side of the stacked bricks. Each pair held a brick between them.

Hobbling to his place in the center, the aged instructor looked at the setup and nodded. Then he looked to either side before facing forward again and giving the student body a long-suffering smile. Without looking, he motioned upward with his hands. The assistants raised the bricks higher. To the old man's right, the brick was held flat out at shoulder height; to his left, the brick was vertical and over his head.

The cane tipped forward, but the clink as it hit the stage was never heard. The old man bent his knees and thrust himself into the air. The brick to his left exploded as his heel drove through it in a powerful sidekick, his *ki-hap* bursting from his lungs. The instructors, though braced for the impact, reeled backward. Their faces were wisely turned away from the dust and brick fragments that sprayed into the air and landed about their heads, shoulders, and feet.

The second brick broke a heartbeat later. Leaping immediately in the other direction, the old man spun, bringing his leg around and dropping his heel through his target with an axe kick. The brick-halves clapped together too slowly to catch his foot in between.

He turned to the stack of five and, without hesitation, hammered it with the heel of his hand. The stack broke with a *crunch*, but again, his

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thunderous *ki-hap* drowned out all other noise. The pile split unevenly down the middle and tumbled to the sides of the powerful palm-heel strike.

The old man shuffled backward, almost losing his balance, but another instructor was there to catch him and hold him up. He looked frail again, like Yoda after battling Count Dooku, and so much more so now than he had before. Jamie and Lee could hear his labored breathing from behind the last row of students.

“See . . . see what may be accomplished . . . when . . . when the mind is stronger than . . . the body! . . . Even an old man . . . like me . . . can still achieve . . . great things . . . when he has to.” The old man’s legs buckled. He fell against the body of the instructor helping him stand, his head collapsing to his chest.

Several gasps were heard throughout the student body, and more than a few stood in disbelief. Jamie sat still, and Lee with him, seeing the bizarreness of it all but unable to understand it. Jamie felt as though his mind were running on overload anyway. There had been too much to take in today without a weak old man miraculously breaking bricks then collapsing moments later. He rubbed his eyes and glanced Lee’s way. He was looking on incredulously.

“Is he . . . is he dead?” a girl dared to ask from the fourth row. “Dead” came out in a barely audible squeak.

The old man was splayed out on the

platform. Cherri Newman, the traditional forms instructor, came over and put her ear over his mouth. "He's still breathing," she said, "but it's very shallow." Then the old man surprised everyone by pushing her away from him, albeit weakly. Mrs. Newman leaned back on her heels, frowning, as the old man turned and tried to lever himself up. After a moment of struggling, the instructor who had caught him started to help him rise, but he too was pushed away.

Eventually the old man staggered to his feet, moaning. He grabbed at his face with his hands, his arms and body tensing as if racked with pain. "Ahhhhhhh . . ." His fingers dug into his skin and his head jerked back. "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh . . ." He balled up in a sudden spasm over his knees, still clawing painfully at his face.

"What's wrong with him!?" the girl in the fourth row shouted. "Someone help him!"

". . . Ahhhhhhhhhhh-HAAAAAAA!" The old man stood up straight, no longer old. He smiled broadly with real, perfectly white teeth. His discarded face and teeth were in his hands. Bits of glue that had held the mask in place still clung to a face that resembled a younger Michael Treymark. "What do you think of me now?" he asked.

"Lame," a kid in front of Jamie said. Jamie only heard him because he'd been leaning forward. No one else seemed to take notice. For the most part, it seemed to go over well with the students; Jamie, however, doubted that Sam was too thrilled

about it.

The worried girl from the fourth row wasn't very happy either. "Why'd you trick us like that?" she demanded. "We thought you were really hurt!"

The man raised his hands and waited for silence to ensue. "Because you must learn to see, not with your eyes, not with your heart, God forbid," he finally answered, "but with . . . intuition. For that, it must be developed. Learning to see things clearly means discovering, then understanding, what your first perceptions miss. As you strengthen your mind, as you add wisdom and knowledge to your skills, you will develop this intuition—how to know something by instinct before knowing it rationally. We can teach you proper technique. We can teach you how to spar and how to fight. We can teach you weapons, forms, meditation, breathing, and many other things besides—yet the most important things cannot be taught outright. Experience is the only worthy teacher.

"Likely, you cannot fully grasp what I am talking about. You probably think this is some mysterious philosophy of the martial arts—if you don't think I'm crazy," he added with a grin.

As the no-longer-old man spoke, Michael Treymark himself climbed onto the dais and put an arm around him. "My brother, Vince Newman!"

Mr. Newman bowed extravagantly to polite applause.

"He puts on an impressive show, yes?" A few

heads nodded in agreement before Trey mark continued. “What do *I* want you to get from this? I want you to get the point I made earlier. These instructors were chosen for their teaching skills, not for their appearances. I don’t care what you think of them. You will not question their tactics of instructing as you questioned the old man’s abilities. You will do as they say without question. They are fit for their jobs. You have my guarantee, and that is all you need and all you will get.”

Michael Trey mark smiled widely. “You are my dream,” he said. “This is the completion of a lifelong goal. I have no doubt that you will make me proud, but it is still up to you to make this school great. Put your hearts into what you do in life, here and wherever the future may take you, and you will always succeed when it matters.

“I believe in each and every one of you.”