

# The Re-education of Senator X

A short story

by C.L. Wells

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## Chapter 1

When Senator Xavier Sanford woke up, the first thing he noticed was the pounding inside of his head. He didn't think he'd had *that* much to drink last night at the fourth-of-July celebration.

*A glass of water would be a godsend right now.*

He opened his eyes slowly, but the morning light that would normally seep in around the closed curtains of his bedroom was absent. It must still be the middle of the night. Reaching over to the bedside table for his phone to see what time it was, he felt nothing but air.

*Where am I?*

A horrible thought briefly passed through his mind. Had he had far too much to drink last night, possibly made a complete fool of himself at the party and been too wasted even to catch a cab home? He tried to recall if Bob Guthrie – one of his biggest supporters, and the man who had hosted last night's party – had offered to let him sleep it off in one of the guest bedrooms, but the thoughts just weren't coming back. The last thing he remembered was that cute intern he'd come to the party with, Shareese, smiling at him as fireworks went off in the background.

*Please, God, no!*

He slowly moved his left hand towards the opposite edge of the bed, hoping he didn't feel another body lying next to him. A stupid move like that could end his career. He was old enough to be her father, for goodness' sake. Relief washed over him as he felt no one.

Details concerning his current whereabouts unknown, he still needed that glass of water, and the pressure on his bladder was becoming more pronounced by the minute. He steeled himself against the throbbing inside of his head as he raised himself to an upright position. Still nothing but pitch blackness. He waited for his eyes to adjust, to see something... anything, but the scene before his eyes remained unchanged.

He threw back the covers and slowly placed his feet on the floor. As he did so, a small night-light came on at the far end of the room.

*Where is this place?*

When he stood up, he was temporarily blinded as several overhead fluorescent lights came on, illuminating the entire room. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he observed his surroundings. It was obviously not a bedroom in Bob's house. The room was about eight feet wide by around thirty feet long. The ceiling was approximately twelve feet high, and everything – floor, walls, and ceiling – was covered in rough plywood.

He spied the outline of a door and began walking briskly toward it. He searched in vain for a doorknob or latch of some kind. Panic began to set in. He was trapped. There were no windows, and no way to open the only door he could see.

Looking around again, he quickly catalogued everything in the room. The bed, a table and chair in the middle of the room. A large-screen TV mounted to the wall just to the left of the door, and a toilet in the corner.

He backed away from the door, searching for anything that would give him hope that he wasn't actually being held prisoner. He bumped up against the table, and it didn't budge. Looking down on the floor, he saw that it was bolted in place. A quick scan confirmed that the chair and bed were bolted down as well.

Turning around and looking up at the TV, he then began scanning the area where the wall met the ceiling, finally spying a small black object in the corner, which he assumed was a camera that his captors were using to watch him. He addressed the camera as he cried out.

*"What am I doing here?! What do you want with me?!"*

He waited for a reply, but nothing happened.

*My cell phone.*

He began feeling around the pockets of his clothing for his phone. Maybe his captors had missed it. A quick pat-down, however, revealed no cell phone, as well as the fact that his wallet and keys were also missing.

“Good morning, Senator,” said a deep computer-altered voice.

“What in God’s name am I doing here?”

“Sit down, Senator.”

“What?!”

“Sit down in the chair.”

The voice was calm, almost emotionless. He turned to look at the chair in question.

“Okay,” he said as he walked around the table and sat down, looking back up at the camera expectantly.

“Good. You see how this works. I knew you were a smart man.”

“I did what you asked. Now, will you tell me what you want from me?”

A picture flashed up on the screen, and fear gripped Senator Xavier Sanford’s heart. It was a picture of his daughter, Camilla.

“What have you done to Cam?! Please, whatever it is that you want from me, leave her out of it.”

“Your daughter has been having trouble with a stalker for about a year – a man by the name of Joshua Pendleton,” the voice said. “You’ve moved your daughter to a high-security apartment building and even had a restraining order put on the stalker, but he’s still free. In six weeks’ time, if you don’t do exactly as I say, that same stalker is going to break into her apartment and strangle her to death.

“And just in case you have any doubts that we can make that happen, I have a little demonstration prepared for you.”

The image on the screen changed. It now showed his daughter’s apartment. Her bedroom, in fact. He recognized a lamp that he had bought her as a house-warming present. He watched as a man came into the empty bedroom and turned towards the camera, smiling as he waved.

As he came closer to the camera, Xavier could see who the man was.

It was Joshua Pendleton.

## Chapter 2

“Why are you doing this?”

“How does it feel, Senator, to be powerless to protect someone you love?”

“What do you want from me? Just tell me what you want me to do.”

An image of a middle-aged African-American woman flashed onto the screen.

“This woman’s name is Chantrel Jones. She lives in a low-income area of Chesterton. She has an abusive ex-boyfriend who now stalks her. He’s physically abused her in the past and threatened to kill her. The ex has a restraining order issued against him, but he continues to harass her. Chantrel has applied for a concealed carry permit so that she can protect herself from him as she walks the three miles to work every morning.

“Chesterton, as you know, has very restrictive gun laws and requires all concealed carry permit holders to prove they have a legitimate need for a weapon before being issued a permit. So far, Chantrel has been unable to obtain a permit. You will help her obtain one within six weeks’ time. If you succeed, your daughter won’t be harmed.”

“Okay. Look, if you’ll give me some paper and a pen, I’ll write a letter to the chief of police there. He’s a personal friend of mine. I can help get her a permit by the end of the week.”

The voice laughed.

“But that would be too easy, Senator. You won’t be allowed to use your influence to get the permit. You won’t be allowed to do anything as yourself. You will work with Chantrel to help advise her on how to fill out the forms and how to use the existing legal framework to move the process along. However, you won’t have any advantage that isn’t already available to Ms. Jones.”

*How did this happen to me? How did I end up here? What in the world is going on?*



The Senator pushed the questions out of his mind and forced himself to focus on the task at hand. There would be time to plan his escape later, but for now, he needed to make sure he did exactly what they asked him to – for his daughter’s sake.

“I’ll need to have access to the forms she’s filled out either online or hard-copy. And, can I communicate with her? I’ll need to ask her some questions, too, at some point.”

“You’ll have everything you need to begin in the envelope. Ms. Jones’ initial application was denied. That’s been included along with the instructions on the appeals process. There’s a slot in the door through which you can put any forms, as well as written notes, with any requests or questions you might have. You’ll be allowed to talk to Ms. Jones once a week at precisely 12:15 p.m. Today will be your first call. The video screen will display the date and time for the remainder of your stay.”

Just then, a slot not much bigger than a small briefcase opened at the base of the door. A manila envelope was shoved through, along with a bottle of water and a small plastic bag containing what appeared to be a sandwich. The access door quickly closed again, and the Senator heard the clicking of a lock on the other side.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xavier greedily drank down three-quarters of the water, saving the rest for later. Putting the sandwich aside, he forced himself to focus on the material in the packet before him, but he wasn’t able to completely ignore the questions running through his mind about his captivity. Why him? They must know he helped craft the legislation that made Chesterton a veritable fortress against gun ownership. It was that success that helped propel him to become a senator, where he promised to do the same for the entire state. Was the NRA behind this, or was it some other gun-crazy right-wing group? Whoever it was, they were obviously very serious and had the means to carry out their threat against his daughter, so he better deliver.

As he reviewed the case, he felt hopeful. The restraining order Chantrel had successfully taken out against Brad Thompson – the ex-boyfriend turned stalker – provided some excellent details of his violent behavior that should definitely serve in her favor in the appeal. The woman seemed likeable from the photograph and handwritten material she had provided detailing her experiences with said ex-boyfriend. Being likeable would help her in front of the appeals board, which met once a quarter.

A knot formed in the pit of his stomach. Once a quarter.... If they met on the same schedule they used to when he was a councilman, that would be the fourth Thursday of the first month of the quarter. He did the calculation in his head – the 25<sup>th</sup> of July. Counting today, the six weeks would be up on Friday, the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, which meant that almost three of his allotted six weeks would be spent waiting for that appeals board meeting. They would only get one shot at this. The appeals board had the final say. If they turned the application down, it would take a court battle to overturn their decision, and that was time his daughter didn't have.

He felt somewhat better after reading the response in the permit denial letter. It said that Chantrel had “failed to prove that your life is endangered or that your circumstances put you in life-threatening situations on a regular basis.” It went on to explain that the ex-boyfriend had never actually been arrested for assault and that the neighborhood in which she lived and worked had an average crime rate, failing to justify any unique threat to her that the rest of the general population was not exposed to. There was blather at the end about the great success of the gun-control process and how it actually made the whole city safer, and that, in reality, she was now less likely to be the victim of violent crime as a result.

Xavier picked up a picture of Chantrel that had been taken after her ex-boyfriend had hit her. Her lip was split open and slightly swollen where she had been hit. Despite his own dire circumstances, the Senator felt sorry for her.

According to the information in the envelope he had just received, the appeals process was still straight-forward. After filling out a simple online form, Chantrel would be put on a list of people appealing that day. The board would hear each appeal,

in the order which the applicants had signed up. The applicant would present their case, answer follow-up questions that might be asked by the board, and then be sent to wait in the foyer as the board discussed their case in closed session. The applicant could be called back in if the board had additional questions. This would continue until all appeals had been heard. If you didn't want to wait for the official ruling letter to arrive in the mail, you could find out the final decision of the board the following Monday by calling the city police station headquarters.

Xavier read over everything in the packet three times, making notes on a legal pad outlining what he thought would be a winning strategy for their appeal. The whole process took slightly more than an hour, after which he ate the sandwich. A BLT on wheat. Not his favorite, but the tomatoes were fresh. At least it didn't appear they were planning to starve him while he was here.

He looked at the time. It was 10 a.m. With nothing to do but think between now and when it was time to talk with Chantrel, he began running through everything he could remember from the night before. He tried to recall anything that might give him some insight into who had abducted him.

He'd arrived at Bob Guthrie's house around 9 p.m. with Shareese. They'd found Bob on the back veranda. After talking with him for a few minutes, they had begun to mingle with the other guests. At some point, Xavier had spied Richard Brown, a fellow-senator who was on the Ways and Means Committee. He had been trying to corner Richard for a month to discuss a road-widening project for Xavier's district that was dangerously close to going unfunded. After telling Shareese he had some business to discuss with Richard, they split up, agreeing to meet by the fountain in the back yard just before the fireworks were scheduled to begin.

He remembered making it back to the fountain and seeing Shareese. He also recalled the fireworks starting. But after that, things became a bit fuzzy. He tried to remember if he'd seen the grand finale or not. Did he and Shareese go anywhere afterwards? Did they make it back to his car? If so, he certainly wouldn't have been in any shape to drive. Somehow, his captors must have put something in one of the

drinks he had consumed. But how had they spirited him away from the party without anyone noticing? Had they taken Shareese, too? Surely it would have made a scene if they had carried his unconscious body across the lawn. There were dozens of people who would have seen. The more he thought about it, the more questions he had.

The next two hours passed slowly, torturously even. He couldn't remember when he had last spent this much time completely alone with no distractions. Under other circumstances, it might have been an opportunity for some healthy relaxation – a chance to unplug and decompress. But with his daughter's life on the line, all he could do was obsess over the predicament he was in and worry for her safety. How had they gained access to her apartment? How wide was the conspiracy of people who had to be involved to pull off something like this? Was there any possibility of escape? Would his kidnappers keep their word and spare his daughter's life if he succeeded at what they had asked him to do? Would they really let him go when this was all over?

He was relieved when, at twelve o'clock, the silence was broken by the sound of his abductor's voice.

"Are you ready for your phone call with Ms. Jones, Senator?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good. Let's go over some guidelines. Rule number one – she doesn't know who you are, and if you want your daughter to remain safe, you'll make sure it stays that way. As a precaution, you won't be allowed to speak to her directly. You'll hear and see Ms. Jones, but one of my associates will repeat anything you say to Ms. Jones on a separate audio channel. Do you understand?"

"Yes, that's clear enough."

"Good. You'll have fifteen minutes to discuss the appeal and ask any questions you might have – no more. And remember, your daughter is counting on you."

Several minutes later, the sound of a phone ringing brought the Senator's attention back to the video screen. Chantrel's face appeared on the screen. From the angle of the video feed, it appeared she must be using her cell phone to make the call.

A red brick wall was behind her, and some sort of advertisement was off to the left. He assumed she was probably out behind her workplace on break.

"Hello?" Chantrel asked.

"Hello, Ms. Jones, this is... I'm here to help you with your gun permit appeal," he said. He heard another man's voice immediately following his own say, "Hello, Ms. Jones. This is Jeremy Thornson. I'm here to help you with your gun permit appeal."

"Thanks," she replied.

"First, have you already filled out the form to request a hearing with the appeal's board?"

"Yes, I filled out that online form last week."

"Good. Now, when you get there, you'll have about ten minutes to present your case to the board." He waited for the other man to repeat his words to Chantrel before he continued. "I've read your file and the denial letter. I think our best strategy is to try and convince them that Mr. Thompson is a credible threat to your safety."

"Okay."

"I want you to get a large color copy of that photo showing the bruises on your face from when he beat you before. The one you sent to me."

"Okay."

"When your turn comes to present your case, I want you to give them that photo and tell them exactly what happened during that altercation."

"Okay, I can do that."

"Good. We want them to feel exactly what you felt that day."

"Right."

"I want you to imagine you're sitting there right now, and it's your turn to speak to the appeals board. You've just handed them the photograph. Now tell them your story."

"Okay... It was morning-time, just after Keisha had left for school..."

Xavier looked down at the portfolio spread out before him on the table and found the photograph of the cute, cherubic little girl that had been included in the materials he had been given. She appeared to be about five or six years old.

“Brad – my ex – got up late, which was unusual for him. He’d asked me to make him some eggs and toast for breakfast while he took a shower to get ready for work. He came into the kitchen, and I could tell he was on edge. He hated to be late, especially to work. I’d started making his breakfast just after Keisha left, but the eggs still weren’t done.

“When he saw that his breakfast wasn’t ready... he just lost it. He yelled at me, ‘Why can’t you do anything right?! Didn’t I tell you I was late for work?! How long does it take to cook a couple of eggs and some toast?!’ He’d been physical before... grabbing my arm, mostly. But this time was different. He back-handed me across the face. Then he shoved me hard up against the refrigerator.”

Her voice was shaking as she continued. “I was scared, you know? I didn’t know what he was gonna do next.”

She reached up and brushed a tear away before continuing.

“Anyways, he looked at his watch, and I guess he saw he had to leave right then or he’d be late for work. Then he said, ‘You’re good for nothin’, you know that? Good for nothin’...’ And then he left.”

“And that was the day you filed the restraining order against him?”

“Yeah...”

“Do you think he might hurt you and your daughter? Is that why you want a permit to carry a gun?”

“Yeah, it is,” she said, nodding her head. “Every day, I just pray she gets home okay,” she said, her voice shaking. “She stays with a neighbor once she gets off the bus until I get off work. I call every day, holding my breath until my neighbor picks up the phone and tells me she’s there... that she’s safe.

“And I walk to work. It’s not a really bad neighborhood, but after I kicked Brad out, he started following me when I walked home sometimes. He’d yell at me, call me

names, that sort of stuff. Once, he even threw a beer bottle at me. I figured he'd get tired of it and stop eventually, but he still does it about once a week. Last week, he drove by when Keisha and I were at the playground near where we stay, and just glared at me as he drove by real slow. The look in his eyes.... I need to be able to protect myself and my daughter. That's why I want the gun."

Xavier thought of his own daughter and how he would do anything to protect her, too. He could identify with the woman's feelings of helplessness and her desire to defend the one she loved. If his abductors wanted to make him empathize with the woman, they had succeeded.

"That's good, Chantrel. You did well."

## Chapter 3

The routine for the next few weeks was the same. The communication from his captors was minimal. He was allowed to communicate by writing to Chantrel once a day, and he usually received a note back from her the following day. They worked on her presentation, honing it to make it the most effective it could be. At Xavier's suggestion, they added a picture of Keisha from the previous school year in addition to the picture of Chantrel after Brad had beaten her. He hoped to influence the board in Chantrel's favor by driving home the point that the safety of a child, as well as her sole caregiver, was at stake. Xavier also encouraged Chantrel to write down her presentation and gave her pointers on remembering certain key points. When she ran through the whole performance during their video call on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, he was feeling good about their chances to win the appeal.

All in all, his captivity hadn't been physically harsh. He received three meals a day, plenty of water, and the bed was comfortable enough. But it was emotional torture knowing that, if he failed in his task, his daughter could lose her life. He spent the first few days plotting escape, but he could find no weakness in the windowless cell he'd been sequestered in, no matter how desperate he was.

The days were maddeningly boring. He'd asked for some reading material or to listen to the radio, even, but his captors didn't oblige. He'd always felt pity for characters in movies or books whenever they marked the days by scratching marks on the wall to record the number of days they had been in captivity, but now he was doing the same thing, using a pencil to etch another line recording the passing of each new day. He made sure to do so in a location where he was certain the camera couldn't see, just to spite his captors.

The worst part of the whole ordeal – besides the fear for his daughter's safety – was being deprived of virtually all stimulus except for what was in his room. He never



realized how important it was to a person's mental health to hear someone else's voice, or see a bird land on a branch in a tree and sing its song. He'd started talking to himself, playing psycho-analyst to his current situation, debating whether he had been a good father, wondering when his colleagues would realize he wasn't, in fact, on an extended vacation somewhere. Surely they had to have called the police by now. Surely.

He'd grown a beard. It itched like crazy sometimes, but his abductors wouldn't provide a razor. They had given him water, a bowl, and soap so he could bathe, and had even supplied a toothbrush and toothpaste. He had taken to working out three times a day to combat the sheer boredom. The workouts, combined with the considerably lower caloric content of his current diet, were beginning to have a positive effect. His abdominal muscles hadn't been this defined since he was in college.

He'd continued to add notes on the legal pad about any details he remembered from the night he was abducted, which wasn't much. He vaguely recalled being helped into a car, and then two voices, but he couldn't remember what they said, or even if they were men or women. He was beginning to think he might never recall anything else.

He was in the middle of a set of twenty-five sit-ups when a picture flashed onto the video screen. It was Chantrel. She had a gash on her forehead and a busted lip. Xavier stopped and stared at the screen, concerned.

"We've had a set-back, Senator," the familiar voice said. "It seems Chantrel's ex-boyfriend isn't sitting idly by while we wait for the appeals board meeting. Yesterday, on her way home from work, Brad pushed her down an embankment. She sprained her ankle and sustained other minor injuries."

"Can't this guy be arrested now?" Xavier asked.

"He's a smart guy. He made sure there were no witnesses. The police are questioning him now, but he'll likely be let go by the end of the day."

The voice paused briefly, before continuing.

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