

# HOW SWEET IT IS

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*Defending  
the American Dream*

WINSOME  
EARLE-SEARS



CENTER  
STREET

NASHVILLE • NEW YORK

## PROLOGUE

“Winsome! Winsome! Winsome! Winsome!” the crowd chanted.

We were in a hotel ballroom in Chantilly, Virginia, part of the vast Northern Virginia suburban sprawl. The hour was so late it was actually the morning after election day. Our newly elected governor’s team had planned the order of show with my team.

You will speak for a certain amount of time.

You’ll move to stage right.

The governor will follow.

What do you want for your entrance music?

Yes, we’ll cue it up.

They were very professional. Extremely organized.

But it’s election night! Nothing goes as planned. You can throw the script away because that crowd is going to take you where it takes you.

I gazed out at those gathered. The room was packed, and then in the back was a large riser jampacked with cameras. The media was out in force tonight. Most of them had probably thought they were going to broadcast a series of concession speeches, since the governor and I are elected separately, but we were about to give them a different story.

“I am at a loss for words—for the first time in my life,” I began.

“We love you,” called a female voice from the crowd.

“I love you, too.” I raised my arms in the air trying to hug the crowd somehow in a metaphoric way, or at least show my equal excitement.

“Oorah!” a male voice shouted. My husband, Terry, who was

standing beside me, echoed it. I recognized the meaning of the shout immediately, of course, and up went one of my fists to bump the air.

“Oorah!” I called back. “Marine Corps!” More cheers from the crowd. “Motivated! Dedicated!”

Then it was time to get back to the task at hand. I was standing on this stage for a victory speech. I had on this evening been elected the lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia in the good, old U.S.A. It was a night of firsts. I was Virginia’s first female lieutenant governor. I was the first *Black* female elected statewide. I was the first female immigrant lieutenant governor. I was the first female veteran. But as much as I appreciated achieving these milestones in my home state—my chosen and much-beloved Commonwealth—I was not here to exult in accomplishments. I was not on that stage for me.

I was on the stage first for God, for the Lord and Savior who had guided me for so long, shored me up, shown me the way, answered so many prayers, given me the occasional sign, and, just as importantly, had told me, “No, child”—“no” in the most certain, undeniable manner. I was here for my God, and because of my God first and foremost.

But I was also here for the people of Virginia. You see, I had not been elected to be the lieutenant governor of the Republicans in Virginia, of the Independents and Democrats who had voted for me. No, I had been elected to be the lieutenant governor for *all* Virginians. My two reasons for being on the stage were joined hand in hand.

I had been presented with victory by the Lord so that I could assume that responsibility. That was what *He* required of *me*. Nothing less than my best for the people I was elected to represent.

Virginia has the oldest legislature in the New World. It is the birthplace of George Washington. James Madison put forward the Bill of Rights based on the *Virginia* constitution. Virginia had also been a slave state. Yet here I was, a Black woman elected to be second in command in the former capital of the Confederacy, and an immigrant at that. Washington, Jefferson, and Madison might not have envisioned

this could happen—but I think they did. Those documents they left behind proclaim as much. The Constitution, conceived and shepherded by a Virginia boy. The Declaration of Independence, written by a Virginia boy. The father of our nation, a Virginia boy.

I am proud to stand among them.

I am a Virginian.

“I’m here because of you, Virginia,” I continued. “I’m here because you put your trust in me. That’s the only reason I’m here. Thank you! Thank you!”

I took a folded piece of paper from where I’d stashed it under the red dress jacket I was wearing. I opened up the paper. “Got my speech!”

The truth was, there was not much written on the paper my friend had thrust into my hand and on which I’d scribbled notes. I hadn’t planned on this. After all the effort, all the trials, all the hope, the truth was that I had not expected to win. Yet, I also didn’t expect to lose.

I knew that this was the first time many who were watching would have seen me or had any idea who I was or where I’d come from. Standing alongside me were the dearest people in my life—people who sustained me and helped make me who I am. Of course, I wanted to talk about them first.

“Let me introduce the people behind me. I’ve got my husband, Terence. He’s another Marine.” More cheers from the crowd at this. I gestured to my right. “My daughter Katia.” I nodded to my left. “And my other daughter, Janel.” My girls smiled and waved.

“I’m telling you that what you’re looking at is the American Dream.” I repeated the point. “The American Dream.”

Cheers and oorahs. I let the uproar die down a bit and continued.

“When my father came to this country August eleventh of 1963, he came from Jamaica at the height of the U.S. civil rights movement. He came—and it was such a bad time for us—but I asked him ‘Why did you come?’ and he answered that he came because America was

where the jobs and the opportunity were. And he only came with a dollar seventy-five. One dollar and seventy-five cents. He took any job he could find, and he put himself through school and started his American Dream. Now he's comfortably retired.

"Then he came and got me when I was six years old. And when I stepped on that Pan-Am Boeing 727 and landed at JFK, I landed in a new world. So let me tell you this: I am not even first-generation American. When I joined the Marine Corps, I was still a Jamaican. But this country had done so much for me that I was willing—willing—to die for this country." Behind me, I knew Terry would be nodding in agreement to this. He felt the same. I raised my right arm.

"U.S.A.!" I called out. It only took that one prompt for the crowd to join in.

"U.S.A.! U.S.A.!"

I couldn't help myself, but gesticulated to them like an ecstatic minister of music or orchestra director. There was no need to do this, of course. They were already in perfect harmony, and the chants were music uniting us all. This went on for a while until I had to signal I needed to go on. After all, the governor had yet to speak! I began to feel the tick of the clock, and that weight of responsibility mixed with deep gratitude returned, as well.

"And so I say to you . . . victory, indeed, yes. But I say to you, there are some who want to divide us and we must not let that happen. They would like us to believe we are back in 1963 when my father came. But we can live where we want. We can eat where we want. *We own* the water fountains. We have had a Black president elected not once, but twice, and here I am, living proof! In case you haven't noticed, I am Black, and I have been Black all my life. But that's not what this is about. We are going to be about the business of the Commonwealth. We have things to tend to. We are going to fully fund our historically Black colleges and universities. You're going to hear from your

governor-elect, Glenn Youngkin, and he's got a day-one plan that I'm already tired about."

This may have sounded a bit confusing, but I'd momentarily reflected what we were dedicated to accomplishing. It was quite a list. The people of Virginia were counting on us to implement it. "Don't know how we're going to make it to day two."

"But he's going to make sure we keep more of our money in our pockets, because he's going to get rid of all kinds of taxes. We're going to have safer neighborhoods, safer communities." I raised a fist in emphasis, talking about the issue closest to my heart. "And our children are going to get a good education! Because education lifted my father out of poverty. Education lifted me out of poverty. Education will lift us all out of poverty because we must have marketable skills so that our children can not only survive, but they will thrive. They will create generational wealth. That's what this is about."

More calls of excitement and appreciation from the gathered crowd.

"It's a historic night. Yes, it is. But I didn't run to make history. I just wanted to leave it better than I found it. And with your help, we're going to do that. We're going to have transparent government. And as I used to say when we were on the trail, hold on Virginia, help is on the way! The cavalry has arrived!"

More cheers.

"Thank you. God bless you! And finally..."

"Winsome! Winsome! Winsome!" the crowd called out. This was getting a bit embarrassing, and the governor needed to make his announcement. Time to wind it up!

"Want to thank my staff, because I couldn't have done it without them. We were a rag-tag bunch of people. We ran an impossible, improbable campaign..."

"God was with us," someone shouted from the audience.

"God was exactly with us, otherwise we would never have made it."

I gestured upward with my open palm. “And so I want to finish up by thanking you, Jesus!”

I finished with what had become not merely my slogan, the slogan of my campaign staff, but of this extraordinary election filled with echoes that would reverberate throughout America in the coming years. The back of the room was filled with a veritable bandstand of national media aiming their cameras and microphones toward me. We had fought back and won against a dark shadow that had covered our Commonwealth. It was a Goliath of idiotic politics, of insane school policies that sought to indoctrinate children in family-destroying propaganda, and the collapse of education due to institutions exercising raw and corrupt power during a nationwide pandemic. Virginia could indeed be a harbinger for change in America. We were David going up against Goliath. I was aware of it. Governor-elect Youngkin knew it, too. Our newly elected attorney general knew it. We’d felt it in the campaign as a rising tide turning our dim prospects first into hope, and then into determined certainty. Virginia had elected us because the Commonwealth needed saving. No wonder I felt such responsibility.

But tonight was for celebrating, for catching our breath to take on the challenges ahead. Tonight was victory against opponents with ludicrously high amounts of funding, with a tremendous assortment of institutions backing them. Tonight was victory against all odds. So I cried out with joy the feeling that rose in my heart.

“How sweet it is!”

YOU HAVE REACHED THE  
END OF THIS EXCERPT OF  
*HOW SWEET IT IS*

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