

# **The Coldest Winter Ever Study Guide**

## **The Coldest Winter Ever by Sister Souljah**

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## Plot Summary

On one of the coldest and snowiest days in New York City, Winter Santiago is born to a fourteen-year old mother and drug kingpin father, Ricky Santiago. She grows up in the projects of Brooklyn, along with three younger siblings, insulated from her father's "business" and indulged in every way. With a mother who was more a sister than an appropriate mother role model, Winter came into adolescence a shallow, self-centered, amoral individual, motivated solely by material possessions, physical attractiveness, and the desire to attract as many men as possible, preferably with plenty of money. Even a move to a mansion in Long Island does not remove Winter from her ghetto culture and principles, for there is not positive, active parenting on the part of either parent. When her father's "empire" collapses, he is arrested for a variety of felonies, and all family possessions are seized, leaving the five females in the family to fend for themselves.

Interested only in her own well-being, Winter virtually abandons her mother and sisters, to embark upon an all out effort to find a means to regain her former lifestyle. This quest involves a great deal of creative thought and action and a wild ride of criminal activity. When she is finally turned into the child welfare authorities and sent to an adolescent home for girls, Winter continues her "hustles," taking advantage of the other girls. In her selfishness, she betrays old friends from the projects and is then taken in by Sister Souljah, a crusader for change in the ghetto. Uninterested in Souljah's goals for her, Winter rejects the encouragement to think beyond the next twenty-four hours and to pursue a productive career and moral behavior. Instead, she attempts to use Souljah's connections to continue her "hustles" and pursuit of men with money. Leaving Souljah's home and attempting to travel to Maryland to find Midnight, former lieutenant of her father who has gone "straight," her impulsiveness thwarts this final opportunity for change. Bullet, a drug dealer from the projects, now wealthy himself, swoops her up, gaining total control of her actions and movements. In the end, she is betrayed by Bullet, who leaves her to take the "fall" for his crimes, and she lands a fifteen year prison sentence. Even in prison, Winter fails to take any opportunity for self-improvement, so that she might look forward to some productivity upon release, and accepts her fate as a "normal" part of life. The tragedy, which Winter will never understand, is that she had opportunities at certain junctures to make the right choices and to take positive assistance, but rejected them all in favor of a lifestyle and culture which continues to perpetuate itself.

All characters in this finely woven story, represent the very individuals one finds in every urban slum in America, from drug lords to foot soldiers, from young children, growing up too fast in a culture of violence and moral decay, to adolescents and young adults who have developed no moral foundation for their lives, to adult men and women who, because of their lack of solid values, perpetuate this same destructive and criminal environment into the next generation.



# Chapters 1-6

## Chapters 1-6 Summary

Winter Santiago is a thirteen-year old ghetto princess, born when her mother, the wife of drug kingpin Ricky Santiago, was fourteen. The family lives in the projects of Brooklyn but has every luxury available. "Moms," as Winter calls her mother, is a "bad bitch," who has the best of both worlds - a husband who provides material wealth, as well as sexual satisfaction. Most women in the projects need two men to be so satisfied. "Pops" began his drug career as a lookout but was so street smart that he quickly rose to the top and now runs his own operation. He does not bring his "business" home but, rather, transforms himself into a loving indulgent husband and father when he enters their apartment. Strict security measures are in place for the family, to include double steel doors with multiple locks and restrictions regarding movement around Brooklyn, especially at night.

Ricky Santiago is faced with two problems. First, he has to deal with the younger "wannabee" drug dealers, defeating them by force as they rise up to challenge his power and empire. Second, because Winter is now thirteen, he must watch for all the "niggas" who are watching her, sometimes cutting up those who are lustful. Their scarred faces serve as a reminder to others. He keeps Winter occupied with tasks of watching her younger siblings, Porsche and the twins, Mercedes and Lexus, a responsibility she dislikes and views as a major interruption of her lifestyle. Winter has little interest in school and attends only when she has new clothing or jewelry to present to jealous "friends." She is determined to be a "bad bitch," and pursues "niggas" regularly, looking for those who will spend money and for those who will bring sexual pleasure. Her first "sugar daddy" is Sterling, a grocery store clerk who regularly spends a fourth of his paycheck on her. "Pops" is unaware of her antics.

On Winter's sixteenth birthday, Ricky surprises the family with the news that he has bought a home in Long Island, stating that the move is to insulate his family from the drug empire and the consistent "warring" among drug lords in the projects. Winter hates the neighborhood and her new school; there are no men to pick up at the local mall, and she is determined to get back to Brooklyn as often as possible. Her mother does not discourage her. Winter manages to obtain a ride into Brooklyn, ostensibly to stay at her aunt's home, but intending to go "clubbing" and find Midnight, the man she has coveted for quite some time. She finds him, only to discover that he has been commissioned by her father to bring her home to Long Island. There, she is given a stern lecture by "pops," who indicates that Brooklyn is not safe for her. Winter, however, has no intention of following her father's commands and knows that if she can manage the transportation, she will continue to pursue her Brooklyn life.

The transportation issue may be resolved, as "moms" is pressuring Ricky for a car. She, too, hates Long Island and needs the freedom of movement a car will provide. Ricky has promised a Mercedes for her birthday, and takes her with him to conduct some



"business" before going car shopping. Six hours later, Midnight appears and picks up the children. Moms has been shot in the face and is in the hospital. On the drive to the hospital, Winter notices that Midnight is not listening to the typical hip-hop music, but, rather, to a radio talk by Sister Souljah, encouraging black men to adopt positive, responsible behaviors in order to achieve positive results in their lives. Winter thinks she is ridiculous. In her opinion, people who do good get taken advantage of.

Ricky wants the children safe and instructs Midnight to check them into a Marriott Hotel for three days. Winter tries her best to seduce Midnight but to no avail. He takes such charge of all four of them and is so committed to their safety and well being, however, that Winter begins to appreciate the nobler qualities in this man. Her appreciation does not, however, extend to a flier he has, advertising a Sister Souljah speaking event. When the children are returned home, Ricky has a serious discussion with Winter about her future. He directs her to stay out of Brooklyn, to finish school and to marry a professional man. Winter is not receptive.

"Moms" face is disfigured by the wound, and she returns home to convalesce prior to undergoing plastic surgery. The Long Island home has become a fortress, surrounded by Ricky's "lieutenants," who now act as armed bodyguards. Winter feels trapped but does have access to mom's red Mercedes, which she plans to use in order to celebrate her upcoming birthday. Telling her parents that she is attending a party at Hofstra University, she picks up friend Natalie and two young men, taking them to the Marriott for a wild night of drink, drugs, and sex. Upon her return home, she learns that her father and all of his "lieutenants" have been arrested on drug charges.

Events occur rapidly. "Moms" is arrested as a possible accessory to crimes; the house and all of its possessions are seized; the three younger children are taken by child welfare; and Winter is left to fend for herself, while Santiago's lawyer begins work on the many legal issues.

## Chapters 1-6 Analysis

Winter Santiago is depicted as a typical ghetto female, with values that are both shallow and selfish. Her world revolves around her physical appearance and the men she hopes to attract, who can provide her with both money and sexual satisfaction. Like most females in the projects, she grows up too fast, obviously sexually active by the age of thirteen. She is atypical in that her family has wealth and great prestige in the neighborhood, because her father controls the drug trade. The family dynamic is dysfunctional and, ultimately, destructive. Ricky Santiago is protective and autocratic but takes no time to rear his children in values which will guide their lives. He sees his role as protector and provider, thoroughly ignoring the far more important role that a parent must play in the lives of his children. "Moms" is not equipped to provide parenting. A product of poverty and ghetto life herself, she gives birth to her first child at age fourteen and behaves more as Winter's sister than her mother. She has counseled Winter to be the same as she is, to establish a relationship with men that controls them while

allowing them to think they are in control. As well, she is the teacher of the selfish and shallow values that Winter has internalized.

The life of a drug lord is clearly revealed in this section. Ricky is never able to simply relax and enjoy life, for there are always others intent upon his destruction, attempting to usurp his position. Like any organized crime figure, he controls by violence, often maiming and killing those who would be his competitors. While he attempts to keep his family insulated from his "business," ultimately his wife and children are horribly impacted by it, losing their home and possessions, and failing to have the life skills to become productive individuals on their own.

Sister Souljah is introduced by way of a broadcast talk, heard on Midnight's car radio. Her encouragement to black men to become the responsible productive individuals they must in order to change the social order in the ghetto is obviously important to Midnight but rejected completely by Winter. To her, being good means being poor, or at least a wage slave, and this is a lifestyle for the stupid, not for those with her kind of cunning and desires.

Winter's shallowness is further confirmed when her mother arrives home from the hospital, disfigured and distraught about her appearance. There is no true empathy on Winter's part, nor any desire to truly assist her mother's recovery. Instead, Winter is thrilled that she will now have use of the new Mercedes sitting in the driveway. The nanny can take care of her siblings, "moms" will not want to be seen in public, thus Winter has the opportunity to take the car for a wild night of partying with Natalie.



# Chapters 7 - 11

## Chapters 7 - 11 Summary

Winter must develop a plan for survival, with a total of \$1,400, which she has taken from her mother, and her diamond jewelry. Sterling, long-time admirer, is only too happy to give her a place to stay along with the use of his car. "Moms" is released from jail and immediately addresses the issues of retrieving the children and finding a place to stay. She is met with the Bureau of Child Welfare bureaucracy and its regulations. Unemployed and homeless, she is unable to have her children, and places herself on a waiting list for emergency housing, while she moves in with Winter's aunt.

A visit to their attorney yields additional bad news. He has retrieved \$50,000 from Santiago's safety deposit box but requires \$65,000 to begin his work on their legal issues. Winter knows that Midnight is holding some of her father's money and makes arrangements to meet him. Winter's additional plan is to "hook up" with Midnight in order to run her father's business while he is in jail. Midnight, however, is not receptive to Winter and informs her that her night at the Marriott with Natalie and two "niggas" was a set up. The man she was with, named Bullet, is a drug runner for her father's competition, and the videotape of her antics is being shown all over the neighborhood. Winter agrees to meet him the following Monday in order to retrieve the money Midnight is ostensibly holding for Santiago. Unfortunately, the money is gone, the details of its disappearance not clear, and Winter is virtually broke.

Winter and "moms" visit Ricky in prison, only to discover that another woman, Dulce Tristemente, is there to visit him as well. Dulce has a baby boy, Ricky's son, and Winter is livid, aware now that this woman probably has all of her possessions intact. Moms is in denial as they leave. A few days later, moms and Winter have a supervised visit with Porsche, who has been placed in a juvenile center by Child Welfare. Winter pretends to be mom's sister, so as not to be taken herself, and Porsche is furious about being in the center. Moms seems to be deteriorating, having shaved her head, perhaps in some act of anger, depression, or defiance against the entire situation. She looks horrible, and Winter is embarrassed.

Another meeting with Midnight is the final blow. There is no stash of money from Santiago, and Midnight is leaving town, explaining to her that he knew this day would arrive and that he had made plans for it long ago. While he worked for her father, he maintained a low profile and never stored money or drugs at his place. The police and federal agents have nothing on him, and he is escaping the entire mess. He informs Winter that she is just a dumb kid who has never educated herself beyond ghetto life, and that he has no interest in dumb women. With that, he hands her an envelope and leaves. In the envelope, Winter finds \$3,000 and Sister Souljah's card. On the back, Midnight has written "I know you don't like her, but she can help you get your head together" (p. 145).



Winter attempts to rent an apartment, pretending to be a college student, but discovers that the security deposit plus rent will consume almost all that she has. Giving up, she returns to Sterling's apartment, only to find that his more permanent "relationship" has packed her things. She has no choice but to go to Aunt B's apartment and share a room with cousin Bianca. She then hooks up with her old girlfriends at Natalie's apartment and seems happy to be back with her old friends, shopping, learning about shoplifting, and partying. The girls attend a hip-hop concert in new outfits purchased or stolen earlier in the day. Winter has spent \$500 and has only \$2,500 remaining. Natalie has found a rich "sugar daddy," Will, and is in a box seat with him, causing Winter to fume with jealousy and with anger toward Santiago. Following the concert, the girls go to a restaurant with Natalie and Will. Will makes a move on Winter, is caught by Natalie, and the friendship between Natalie and Winter comes loudly to an end. Will is clearly a "player" with lots of money to throw around, and Natalie is not going to allow Winter to move in on her action. Winter, however, is interested in Will for only one purpose - as a partner in her business plan.

Winter meets Will the next evening, in order to offer a \$2,500 investment, if he will allow her into his drug operation. He laughs at the small amount, and Winter must artfully spurn his sexual advances. She realizes that she needs advice from her father and determines to visit him in jail immediately. She is clearly on her own now, as mom has deteriorated into a crack addict prostitute and her sisters are in the "system." Returning to Aunt B's, Winter is met with Child Welfare agents, who take her into custody. Her \$2,500 is gone, taken by Aunt B, and either Natalie or Aunt B has been responsible for her seizure.

Child Welfare places Winter in the House of Success, a group residence for teenage girls. Winter will remain here until she turns eighteen. Following a thirty-day probationary period, the girls are allowed privileges, including evenings out. Many of the girls have part-time jobs, but all are given \$60 a week in allowance. Winter certainly cannot see herself working fast-food and quickly devises a plan to make money on the inside, using what talents she has. Beginning with a waif from Haiti, Winter begins to do makeovers for the other girls. She enlists her friend Simone to assist by stealing clothes and other items, which are then sold to the girls at discounted prices. Because she does not yet have outside privileges, Winter uses other girls in the House as "runners" between herself and Simone. Within twenty-one days, Winter has \$2,500, never having left the House. On her first day out, Winter meets with Simone, now pregnant, and receives news from the neighborhood. Her mother and Aunt B are both prostituting, Natalie is still with Will, and the word on the street is that Santiago will never get out of prison.

Because Simone is now seven months pregnant, Winter's current operation will suffer, and she wants to "invest" in crack dealing. No one knows the business better than Santiago, and she travels to the prison to discuss it. Santiago, however, refuses to see her, and Winter goes into a tailspin of depression for three days. Rallying, she tells herself to think of her family as dead and to get on with the business of satisfying her makeover customers. She receives a letter from Pops, who is obviously having a difficult time in prison. He asks a favor of her, to locate Midnight and ask him to visit. He





needs Midnight to take of some business for him on the outside. Winter attempts to get news of Midnight through Rashida, a girl in the House who is connected to Sister Souljah. Rashida has a small amount of information, specifically that Sister Souljah says that Midnight is doing "much better," but no location is disclosed. As well, Winter receives a call from Simone, stating that she is in jail for attempting to steal clothing for Winter. She wants Winter to cough up the bail. Winter disconnects the call and refuses to take subsequent calls from Simone.

Still believing that getting into the drug business is her best option, Winter purchases items for her father and heads for Rikers. There, she discovers that he has killed two fellow prisoners and has been "shipped" to another facility, the guard being unable to give her any specifics. Winter leaves the prison and sits through two feature movies before heading back to the House. As she rounds the corner, however, Simone and friends are lying in wait, and she narrowly escapes by hopping on a subway. She calls Lashay at the House, giving her instructions to bring clothing from her suitcase to Penn Station the following day at noon. Winter spends the night in a Korean doughnut shop and is at Macy's when they open for the day, in order to purchase new clean clothing. Suspected of shoplifting, she leaves and arrives at Penn Station, to find Rashida instead of Lashay. Lashay, it seems, has betrayed Winter, given all of her clothes away and befriended Simone. Rashida realizes that Winter has no safety net and convinces her to visit Sister Souljah's home for assistance.

## Chapters 7 - 11 Analysis

Winter has become a victim rather than a beneficiary of the drug world. She demonstrates her basic mentality as she rails against the police for imposing their rules upon her family and her father's business. Her sociopathic tendencies now become clear, as she cannot criticize her father's involvement in the ruination of the lives of all those whose addictions and crimes are the results of his criminal activity. To her, whatever is necessary to run a business must be done, without care or concern for injury to others. At the same time, she demonstrates an ability to cunningly plan her moves in order to save herself and, indeed, to set herself up in the drug business. The revelation that Ricky Santiago has another family devastates "moms." Winter, however, is not concerned for her mother or even that her father has been unfaithful. Her anger stems from the fact that Dulce has not been impacted in the least from the legal seizures, and that her life goes on as normal, probably with a bunch of her father's money.

Winter is getting plenty of lessons about the real world. Never has she had to "hustle," and, while she is bright enough to plan and manipulate, she is ultimately not able to outwit the system. She is placed in a home for teenage girls, but, again, cunningly plans her own business, using Simone and Lashay as her "runners." It is not drugs this time, but, nevertheless, still involves crime, specifically, the shoplifting. It does not enter Winter's mind that her talents for makeovers and decorating could be used in legitimate ways to earn a living. To her, criminal activity produces the best results in the shortest amount of time. This mentality, then, is shown as a major factor within the urban poor

social system. There is an inability to see cause-effect relationships, and this inability leads, ultimately, to impulsion and criminal behavior. The impulsive behavior of Will results in the end of a lifelong friendship between Winter and Natalie, and further revelation of Winter's sociopathic nature is borne out when she abandons pregnant Simone, who has been arrested for shoplifting. Simone's impulsive response is to attack Winter, losing her baby in the fray. The one individual who appears to have overcome this social system is Midnight. We learn that he has carefully planned for the day when Santiago's empire would fall, and has managed to keep himself free of entanglement. He now has the means to leave town a free man and to move forward with a healthier lifestyle.



# Chapters 12-16

## Chapters 12-16 Summary

Sister Souljah lives on the fifth floor of a large brownstone in Harlem. She takes Winter in, allowing her to share a room with Lauren, Souljah's younger sister. Winter's response is that Souljah must be running some type of action, and she decides to get in on it, especially since hip-hop stars seem to frequent the place. Lauren explains the house rules to Winter, including no smoking, the requirement to leave when all others in the house will be gone, and the inability to possess a key to the house. Lauren is not a strict follower of the rules herself. She tells Winter that Souljah, after a series of bad relationships in the past, is now celibate and maintains strong relationships with many men, including hip-hop stars, who perform in her charity concerts. She teaches classes for men and women two nights a week, and Winter will be expected to give these a try.

As Lauren and Winter strengthen their friendship, more of Souljah's persona is revealed. She rents space in churches and halls for concerts, speeches, etc., and does not worry about finances. She dresses commonly in Winter's opinion, is not particularly sexy, and yet seems to have wealthy black men and women who support her. A female doctor (Doc) owns the building and has her practice on the first floor. She obviously supports Souljah, willing to go without rent when finances are difficult. Winter believes that Souljah must have some other "hustle" going on. Her men's meetings are packed; she seems to be respected and loved by lots of people; hip hop stars visit her personally. When she and Lauren accompany Souljah to a women's prison, Winter learns that Souljah gives talks in prisons, high schools and community centers for free. Colleges, however, pay her well. Winter believes that she could do the same thing, given her experiences, but Souljah informs her that one is not credible without study, hard work and positive interaction with people. At the prison, Souljah addresses about one hundred women who suffer from AIDS. Souljah's speech is empathetic but tough, reminding the women that they are mothers and that, until the day they die, they need to be the best mothers they can be, so that their children will not grow up hating themselves too. Winter is upset by Souljah's words, but cannot specifically determine why.

Souljah invites Winter into her bedroom to talk about Winter's future. When asked about her goals, Winter states only that she wants to be rich. Souljah suggests that Winter study a career book sitting on one of her file cabinets and, as well, invites Winter to go with her to a few college speeches. Winter, of course, is not interested. Instead, experiencing anxiety over her dwindling cash, she visits the doctor in her first floor office, engaging "Doc" in conversation while scoping out the location of the cash strong box.

The women's meetings are held on Sunday evenings, and Winter is expected to attend. Souljah's theme for these is that the adolescents and young adults have to have a plan for their future and assist one another in meeting their goals. Black women must work



on who they are and what values they hold first. These two things will guide their actions and careers, and provide a foundation for the rest of their lives. As Souljah asks each attendee what she believes in, Winter quietly slips out, so as to avoid answering.

Winter spends \$300 on a dress at Saks Fifth Avenue, in order to go to hip-hop star GS's birthday in style. She considers the expenditure an investment, intending to find a new man with money. She is shocked to run into Bullet, who obviously wants to "hook up" for the night. Remembering that he is in business with her father's enemies, she thwarts his advances and, instead, travels with Lauren and a caravan to GS's mansion for a private after-party. Winter is "selected" by the guards to be GS's girl for the night. She enters his dark bedroom, makes love to him, wakes up alone, and is sent away by a female security guard, who tells her that the house is actually a rental, to be used for filming a video. Lauren does not return to Souljah's for two days, and Winter must do her office work. This gives Winter the opportunity to check out Souljah's files, but she finds nothing about herself or Midnight.

At the next womanhood meeting, Souljah asks the questions, "What do you believe in? What do you live for? What would you die for?" Winter's answers are, "I live for me; I die for me." She is unable to state what she believes in. The larger issue of the meeting is the concept of women as a community, however, as Souljah attempts to explain how women should treat one another, speak to one another and develop trust among themselves. In a later conversation with Winter, Souljah discusses her standards relative to a potential husband and is clear that GS does not meet those standards, though they are friends. Winter cannot understand how any woman would turn GS away, and determines that she will find him. She convinces Lauren to telephone Frankie, one of GS's guards, in order to locate GS. During the conversation, Lauren discovers that the man Winter slept with at the mansion was not GS but, rather, one of the guards. Winter is angry and mortified.

Needing to replenish her cash, Winter first accompanies Lauren to Doc's office and steals \$300 while Lauren is assisting Doc with clerical work. She then attends an AIDS convention, sponsored by Souljah, and pockets \$7000 of the entry fee money. Feigning illness, she heads for home to pack her bag and make a hasty exit. Lauren is suspicious. Souljah has also informed Winter that Midnight has called and, in so doing, mentions his real name, Bidal. Going into Souljah's file cabinet, Winter locates Bidal's file, the full name being Bidal Ode. On the way out, she is commandeered by Lauren to carry some boxes into Doc's office, which she quickly does before hopping in a cab, bound for the Marriott Hotel in Jersey.

Upon arrival at the Marriott, Winter discovers that Lauren has switched purses on her, and her money and diamond jewelry are gone. Broke and alone, Winter heads for the hotel bar. There is no one she can call for help, so a theft plan has to be devised. The victim is an older woman who is drinking alone at the bar. Waiting for her to leave, Winter strikes up a casual conversation, walks with the woman to her car and then jugs her, stealing \$200, a credit card, and diamond rings. Catching a bus, Winter lands at a much cheaper Holiday Inn and settles in to read Bilal's file, filled with correspondence between Souljah and him.



Through the letters, Winter learns of Bidal's background. He was born in the Sudan but came to America with his pregnant mother at age seven, following the murder of his father. As a teenager, he spent five years in prison for killing a man who attempted to rape his little sister. Shortly after his release, his mother died, and he discovered that his little sister, Efe, had been adopted by a white family. He was taken in by Ricky Santiago and owed him loyalty. Souljah refused to have a relationship with him because he was involved in drugs, the primary cause of pain, suffering, and crime among urban blacks. The final letter from Bidal is postmarked from Silver Spring, Maryland, and Winter is determined to travel there in order to stay with Bidal. While waiting at the Greyhound Bus station, Winter's beeper sounds, and she borrows a cell phone to make her call. It is Bullet, who calls to wish her happy birthday and to offer a vacation to Key West, Florida. Winter's plans change immediately.

## Chapters 12-16 Analysis

Winter continues to demonstrate both her shallowness and narcissism. She wants men with money, nice clothes and good bodies. Instead of placing herself in a position to be influenced and taught by Sister Souljah, she sees this new phase of her life, living at Souljah's home, as a means to "hook up" with hip-hop stars and their associates. When she observes the number of men who visit Souljah and who come to her meetings, Winter concludes that Souljah must have some type of "hustle" going, which, in Winter's world, means that Souljah is using these men for money and sex.

When Winter accompanies Souljah to the women's prison, she is upset by the talk given. Perhaps Winter sees herself in these women who hate themselves so much that they have turned to sex, alcohol and drugs, believing somehow that, if men will find them attractive, they will somehow be validated. Though she is yet unwilling to consciously admit that she shares their beliefs and lifestyles, this talk has profoundly affected her. This could be a turning point in Winter's life, and certainly the reader is hoping that it is. Attending the women's meetings at Souljah's home, Winter is confronted with basic questions which every individual must answer in order to have a productive life - what she believes in, what does she live for, and what would she die for. Her only answer is to live for herself, and one realizes that Winter is probably incapable of some basic human qualities, such as empathy and concern for others. Indeed, she begins to look like a sociopath, whose amorality is the product of her upbringing and her environment.

Impulsivity and amorality continue to be factors in Winter's choices. Needing money, she looks for the most rapid means, that is, stealing, from Doc, from the entry fee basket at the AIDS convention, and from the unsuspecting woman at the bar. She is motivated solely by what she needs at the moment, not by any longer-term goals. Even her decision to travel to Silver Spring to find Midnight is an impulsive decision, although, given Midnight's self-removal from the drug scene in Brooklyn, this move might indeed be a good choice. Just as rapidly, however, she alters her plans in favor of a trip to Key West with Bullet, for that is the option which will bring her immediate pleasure, and, after all, Bullet must have money.



# Chapters 17-20

## Chapters 17-20 Summary

Bullet's business has made him wealthy, and the trip to Florida is strictly first class. Winter remembers that Bullet was an enemy of her father's and demands that he tell her the story of Santiago's fall from power. Bullet explains that a crew called Young Heads robbed one of Santiago's drug spots, and word went out that he was vulnerable. Then one powerful police official, whom Santiago had in his pocket, retired. One by one, the little pieces of Santiago's empire began to crumble. His soldiers began to give information to federal officials in exchange for amnesty, and dirty cops moved over to the Young Heads. Santiago was arrested based upon information from his own "niggas," and, according to Bullet, he will be in prison forever.

Winter returns to Brooklyn with Bullet and hides out in his apartment while he makes his rounds and conducts his business. His largest profit comes from supplying hip hop stars, but he works for the Young Heads as well. Winter wants an apartment in lower Manhattan, in order to avoid Brooklyn and the girls who now hate her. Bankrolled by Bullet, she finds a one-bedroom apartment and sets about decorating it. Bullet, however, is very tight with cash, using it to control her. He involves Winter in his guns and drug trade, and she attempts to design plans to get her hands on some of his money. Unfortunately, she discovers she is pregnant, and, given the time frame, it cannot be Bullet's. The ensuing abortion is not a pleasant experience, and Winter is suffering depression.

Winter begins a search for her father, only to discover that he has been at Rikers all along, simply moved to a different building after killing two fellow prisoners. While she wants to visit him, Bullet, in further attempts to control her movements, plants two Rottweilers in the living room, preventing her from leaving. After leaving her there for two days, Bullet returns and informs her that she will be assisting him in a delivery to Baltimore. Winter is to rent an older car for the trip, and they will dress conservatively, pretending to be church people headed for revival. They drive to Brooklyn and switch into the rental. Confronted by her mother, Winter leaves the car and is immediately attacked by Simone, who slashes her face with a broken bottle. Back in the car, bleeding and in pain, Winter hears the police sirens, as Bullet walks calmly away. The car is filled with guns and drugs, has been rented in Winter's name, and she is now charged with several crimes. Unfortunately, the apartment has also been rented in her name, and a raid there reveals more contraband.

Winter's prison life is about as expected. She runs a few hustles, doing makeovers for commissary items, and other women she knew in Brooklyn are also imprisoned there. Bullet, she learns, has moved into a new business, selling illegal music tapes. Her mother has died, and she is allowed to attend the funeral in Queens. There, she sees her father, with whom she has been corresponding. Midnight arrives with his wife and Winter's twin sisters, whom he has adopted. They appear to be a normal, loving family,



Midnight now owning a barber shop and obviously not involved in drugs anymore. A Mercedes pulls up to the cemetery grounds, and out steps Porsche, Winter's other sister. She has obviously followed in Winter's earlier footsteps. Winter considers warning Porsche about "certain things in life" but decides otherwise. Porsche will simply have to learn life's lessons on her own.

## Chapters 17-20 Analysis

Winter's lack of any firm foundation of values and her complete focus on material gain again cause poor choices to be made. In hooking up with Bullet, she has merely returned to the lifestyle modeled by her mother and internalized so well by herself. As well, she has become virtually a prisoner of drug lord Bullet, who controls her moves and, in fact, makes certain that both the apartment and the car are in her name, ensuring that he is not legally liable for what any police raid might discover. Winter is not savvy enough to figure this out and therefore takes the "fall" for everything. She has adjusted to prison life, without remorse for anything other than having been used by Bullet and having gotten caught by the police. The rest of her life will not be any better, for she makes no attempt to pursue changes in thinking or in pursuing education. She will eventually be released to the same destructive environment from which she came. She does not see Midnight's life as attractive and appears to feel only jealousy toward Porsche, whom she will leave to her own devices. There is no happy ending for Winter Santiago.



# Characters

## Winter Santiago

True to the title of the book, Winter Santiago is a "cold" unfeeling individual, whose early life was spent in luxury and comfort. Born to a beautiful fourteen year old mother and a drug kingpin father, Winter is indulged with the best that money can buy. She grows into a selfish, amoral individual, who seeks immediate gratification through impulsive and completely ego-centric behavior. It is clear that she cares not for other family members, unhappy that she has to watch her younger siblings and care for her mother, once her mother is shot by father's competitors. When her father is arrested and all property seized, Winter is thrown into a world in which she has little skill to survive and is presented with a multitude of choices in pursuit of her future. Unfortunately, Winter chooses the more rapid methods of survival, to include theft, unsavory relationships, and betrayal of her childhood friends and mother, and embarks upon a destructive path of immediate gain.

Despite the efforts of counselors at her residential youth home and Sister Souljah, who attempts to influence her to pursue productive goals, Winter is stuck in the same impulsive pattern of behavior. She destroys her relationship with Souljah by stealing from her and leaves the more protected environment of that home to enjoy the fruits of that theft. Again making an impulsive choice, she hooks up with Bullet, another drug dealer, who betrays her in the end and leaves her to take the "fall" for his illegal activities. In prison for the next fifteen years, Winter is shown again as an individual who does not have the moral fiber or the long-range thinking to improve herself in any way. She runs a few "hustles" to get what she wants, and the reader is left with the impression that, once released, nothing will change for her. Winter typifies many girls who grow up in urban ghetto settings, whose culture of poverty results in shallow, self-absorbed, risky and completely unproductive lives.

## Ricky Santiago

A smart product of the ghetto, Ricky moves up within the drug culture to become a kingpin, controlling a large operation in the ghetto of Brooklyn. Financially successful, he indulges his wife and four children, attempting to protect them with extra locks and restrictions upon their movements. Anticipating that life may become too dangerous for his family if they remain in Brooklyn, he purchases a mansion on Long Island and moves his family into it, assuming that protection will now be assured. When his wife is shot in the face, he surrounds his home with security but cannot protect himself or his family from federal agents who raid his house, arresting him and seizing all property. His empire has crumbled, and Ricky sits in jail, broke and unable to protect his family any further. In jail, he murders two fellow drug dealers whom he believes to have participated in his downfall and seals his fate of life in prison. Ricky Santiago is typical of most drug lords, rising to the top, spending all of his time protecting his empire, and, in





the end, doomed to ruin, as younger, violent individuals challenge him and, ultimately, win.

## Moms

The only character who is not given a first name, "moms" is the wife of Ricky. Giving birth to their first child at age fourteen, she is the envy of all ghetto women, the beneficiary of the wealth and sexiness of Ricky Santiago. When the family is moved to Long Island, "moms" is not happy with her environment and determines to get back to Brooklyn as often as possible. She is so young that her daughter, Winter, is more a sister than a child, and she is incapable of developing a typical mother-child relationship with Winter or any of the other three children she has. The downfall of her husband is hers as well. First, she is shot in the face and must anticipate plastic surgery to repair her looks, the only thing that has mattered to her. When Ricky is arrested and all of his property seized, however, she is unable to cope with the desperate situation into which she has fallen. When she learns that Ricky has another "family," specifically a mistress and son, her back is broken. She falls into mental illness and crack addiction, living in Brooklyn with a sister, and prostituting herself for each fix. In the end, she dies, a broken and sick individual.

## Sister Souljah

Sister Souljah is a black woman, living in Harlem, who has dedicated her life to improving the conditions of black men and women in the ghetto. She works tirelessly giving talks and holding group sessions, in an attempt to alter the thinking and lives of those she hopes to save. To Souljah, the only solution to the problems of the ghetto is to rid the environment of drug addiction and dealing, and to promote healthy, productive lifestyles among adolescents and young adults. To this end, she sponsors conventions and music events, the proceeds of which support her causes. Souljah takes Winter in, hoping to make a positive impact on her life, but, in the end, is unable to save her from herself. As the author of this book, Souljah speaks from experience and uses the characters to typify the realities of the ghetto.

## Midnight

Born Bidal Ode in the Sudan, Midnight came to America with his pregnant mother, after his father was killed in their homeland of the Sudan. He has grown up in the projects of Brooklyn and has been taken in by Ricky Santiago, almost as the son Ricky did not have. Midnight is completely loyal to Ricky but is smart enough not to have ever housed any contraband or evidence in his own dwelling. Thus, when Santiago and many of his soldiers are arrested, Midnight is free from suspicion and prosecution. He has a long-term relationship with Sister Souljah and ultimately takes her advice and wisdom to heart. He moves to Maryland, opens a barber shop and becomes a productive, honest man, marrying and adopting Ricky's young twin girls.



## Bullet

An original enemy of Winter's father, Bullet is deeply involved in the trade of guns and drugs, having built his own empire. He attracts Winter because he has money, and happily lures her into his lifestyle, controlling her and ultimately using her as the "fall guy" when a gun and drug operation goes awry. He walks away while Winter goes to prison. By the end of the story, Bullet has set himself up in the business of marketing of illegal music tapes, never looking back to assist Winter in any way. He is typical of the amoral ghetto male, consumed with personal promotion at the expense of anyone.

## Simone

A friend of Winter's from the projects, Simone is an adept shoplifter. When Winter ends up a ward of the Bureau of Child Welfare and is placed in a group home for adolescent girls, Simone is the "outside" assistant for Winter's "hustle." Simone steals clothing and other articles which Winter then sells to her house-mates at discounted prices. When pregnant Simone is arrested for shoplifting, Winter deserts her. Eventually, Simone catches up with Winter and slashes her face with a broken bottle.

## Lauren

Younger sister of Souljah, Lauren lives in Souljah's rented apartment and shares a bedroom with Winter, once she arrives. Lauren is still steeped in the ghetto mentality, even though Souljah has worked hard to change her lifestyle. Lauren befriends Winter, and they attend hip hop concerts together. When Lauren suspects that Winter has stolen from Doc and from the entry fee basket at an AIDS convention, she switches purses with Winter, obtaining the money and Winter's diamond jewelry. It is unclear what Lauren's future will hold, but she does not appear to be buying into Souljah's teachings.

## Porsche

A younger sister of Winter's, Porsche is not a frequent character in the novel. At the end of the story, however, Porsche has followed in Winter's footsteps, obviously the woman of a drug dealer, as she arrives in style to their mother's funeral. Porsche will obviously have to play out the same life story as Winter, and it seems clear that her end will be either death or prison.

## Doc

A female doctor who owns the Harlem brownstone in which Souljah lives, Doc treats patients on the first floor of the building. Doc appears committed to Souljah's cause and often forgives the monthly rent if finances are tight for Souljah. She is also a regular



contributor to Souljah's activities. She is the victim of theft when Winter gains access to her office and manages to steal \$400 from the cash strong box there.

## **Natalie**

A childhood friend of Winter's, Natalie end their friendship when she believes that Winter is attempting to "move in" on Will, current wealthy boyfriend of Natalie's. Natalie and Simone, along with several other girls from the neighborhood plan an attack on Winter while she is staying at the group home for adolescent girls.

## **GS**

A hip hop star and friend of Souljah, GS visits the Harlem residence often and participates in Souljah's charity concerts. Winter is convinced she can snare GS but is spurned by him.

## **Dulce Tristamente**

Mistress of Ricky Santiago and mother of his only male child

## **Young Heads**

Group of violent drug dealers who war against Ricky Santiago and win.

## **Claudette, Lashay, Rashida**

Three roommates of Winter in the House for Success.



# Objects/Places

## Brooklyn

In New York City, Brooklyn is the site of ghetto projects in which most of the characters live.

## Long Island

Suburb of New York City into which Ricky Santiago moves his family.

## Rikers

Prison in which Ricky Santiago is housed.

## Moes

Night club in Brooklyn and frequent haunt of Winter and her friends.

## Sudan

African country and birthplace of Midnight.

## Booster

Slang term for shoplifter.

## House of Success

Group home for adolescent girls who are wards of the Bureau of Child Welfare in New York City.

## Harlem

Section of New York City in which Sister Souljah lives.

## Silver Spring

Town in Maryland to which Midnight has moved.

## Lower Manhattan

Section of New York City into which Winter moves with Bullet.



# Themes

## The Power of Drugs in the Ghetto

If the reader looks at the socio-cultural issues presented in this book, he/she cannot overlook the serious and ever-increasing impact of drugs, particularly crack cocaine, on the minority poor. In this work, the drug trade is portrayed as a "business," in which local individuals rise among the ranks to become managers and directors of distribution and sale within their own neighborhoods. The message is quite clear: Amoral individuals prey upon their own cultural groups, encouraging and contributing to addiction for personal gain. Ricky Santiago, though he loved his family, was completely willing to increase his wealth at the expense of his community, members of which either became a part of his empire or addicts, completely destroyed by that addiction. Neither the dealers or the addicts are willing to accept the responsibilities of parenthood and productive lifestyles, and, of course serve to perpetuate the same lifestyle in the next generation. The crime and addiction often result, of course, in imprisonment or violent death; those who survive can expect to remain on the same treadmill, abdicating personal and familial responsibilities in order to satisfy the monetary and emotional costs of the drug culture. Violent disruption to the community occurs repeatedly, as competitors within the drug trade war with one another for control. The collusion of law enforcement, thought bribes and payoffs, further compounds the crisis, and it appears that white society is not particularly committed to a "clean up," for the money which the drug trade generates is poured into the legitimate economy. The fact that the ghetto community is wallowing in poverty, crime and violence appears to be of little concern.

## Black Female Identity

Through the life of Winter Santiago, author Souljah attempts to depict the lifestyle and values of typical minority, ghetto females. Modeling the behavior and values of their mothers and grandmothers, young black women grow into adulthood too rapidly and too steeped in the shallow values of living for the moment, flashing clothing and jewelry, and coveting men who have nice cars and money to spend. Competition among females results in violence, destruction of friendships, and neglect of parenting responsibilities. Through the character of Sister Souljah, black females are confronted with questions about their values and urged to develop goals which will result in productive, responsible lives and, as well, sustain them in times of adversity. They are asked to develop a set of principles by which they will live and die and which they will use to parent their children, in order to break the cycle of crime and dysfunction. They are asked to alter their identity as a community of women and to alter their communities by positive action. Women must spurn shallow, self-centered behavior and establish a common identity as a group committed to improvement of life and institutions in their neighborhoods. In this way, only, states Souljah, can the cycle of ghetto consciousness be broken. While much of the focus of the novel is on a new female identity, men are not free from the same directives. Souljah insists that they too must build their identities



as positive, responsible adults and parents, building solid relationships with their women and with God.

## Choices and Consequences

The consequences of one's choices is a dominant theme, portrayed primarily through the lives of Ricky Santiago, Winter, and Midnight. The concept is ancient, but it is important to Souljah to drive it into twenty-first century urban black culture. Ricky Santiago made the choice to enter the drug "business," first as a foot soldier but ultimately as head of his own "empire," feeding upon the weaknesses of his own neighbors to line his pockets. Ultimately, however, his choice led to the need to violently defend his empire and to suffer the results of his fall from power, including imprisonment and the destruction of his family. Winter, too, made conscious choices, though these were obviously influenced by her parents' value systems. Her rejection of education in favor of material style, sex and partying meant that she had no foundation for adulthood. When her privileged existence comes to an abrupt halt, she chooses to rely upon the same shallow immoral values, rather than to opt for the assistance offered through social service programs and Sister Souljah. Rejecting these choices, Winter seals for herself the same consequences her father reaped. Midnight represents the dichotomy and conflict within an individual who chooses immoral and criminal activity, almost out of necessity but who, as well, realizes that these choices can only result in pain and destruction. Because he has an inner moral compass, however, and because he is able to see the destructive consequences of continued poor choices, he opts instead to flee and establish himself as a productive citizen in a legitimate, albeit less financially rewarding, business. As well, he adopts the two "salvageable" Santiago's and will raise them with his own stronger healthier values.



# Style

## Point of View

First person point of view is absolutely essential for the credibility of both the story line and the general tone. The tale of Winter Santiago, as told by Winter Santiago, is a compelling and tragic one, but the reader could not have grasped the complete picture of Winter without the intimate view of her innermost thoughts, as she grew into adulthood and made choices which ultimately led to her fall and imprisonment. The ability to "see" her thought processes as she moved from an affluent and indulged childhood, to street-smart adolescent homelessness, to havens which she rejected, provide the reader an understanding of the culture of ghetto poverty. While Winter was removed from the ghetto, the ghetto was never removed from her, and it is in her thought processes and the clear view of her inner values that her story rings true. When the family property is seized, for example, Winter has the option of care through the child welfare system or attempting to hide from the bureaucracy in order to set up her own "hustles" and make money. She chooses the latter because that is the value system she has internalized. When Sister Souljah speaks to her about pursuing a creative career, either in personal makeovers or designing, Winter rejects the suggestion, for it does not fit with the basic mentality of making a "fast" buck, by illegal means if necessary. Only by revealing Winter's thoughts on these issues does the author allow the reader to understand why it is difficult for a typical woman of the ghetto culture to discard generational value systems and adopt a more middle class operational thought and behavior.

## Setting

Except for a few days in Key West, Florida, the entire novel is set within and about New York City. It begins in Brooklyn, where winter lives as a child with her parents and sisters in project housing, although their apartment is filled with every luxury possible. As Winter becomes a teenager, and as her father's position in the drug world becomes more dangerous for the family, they are moved to a mansion in Long Island, in an attempt at insulation from father's "business." Once federal agents have seized all of Santiago's property, however, Winter, "moms," and the three younger girls are thrown back into the projects or into the child welfare system. The rapid decline of "moms" is inevitable, given her return to the ghetto environment without any resources. Winter, however, is provided resources, through the adolescent group home and then through Sister Souljah, who takes Winter into her home in Harlem. Unable to respond positively to the choices she is given, however, Winter continues to surround herself with the culture of the ghetto, and is ultimately arrested in the very Brooklyn project setting in which her story began. While the location of the prison in which Winter resides is not given, that setting is unimportant to the novel's purpose. Because issues and conditions of the urban poor form the basis for the work, setting becomes critical, and the projects of New York City are those with which the author has greatest familiarity





## Language and Meaning

Once author Souljah determined that the novel would be presented in the first person, she knew that the language had to be realistic and credible to the reader. Fortunately, Souljah has obvious background and experience in the language of typical urban and minority poverty, and thus Winter speaks and thinks in this language. While not difficult to understand, Winter's language is typical contemporary slang. Thus a "booster" is a shoplifter; "fly" refers to stylish clothing and accessories; a "cock-blocker" is someone who prevents a girl from hooking up with a man; to be "caked up" is to have a lot of money. In addition to the terms, the sentence structure, both of conversations and thoughts, is realistic for a minority poverty setting. Statements such as, "I'm tryna get back to the city," "Our spot was phatter than the designs in the magazine ads," and "Let's bounce from here" are authentic and natural for the cultural background of the characters. Remaining in the language of the ghetto, even as Winter's thoughts are written, serves to lend greater authenticity and credibility to the author's depth of understanding.

## Structure

Though the book is divided into twenty chronological and progressive chapters, it can be divided into four major segments of the life of Winter Santiago. The first section, chapters 1-6, treats winter's early life into adolescence, during which time she lives with her family in the projects of Brooklyn. The reader is given a basic introduction to the world of ghetto culture, survival, and crime, even though Winter's family is fairly well insulated from the "streets," under the protective and indulgent behavior of father Ricky. The second section, chapters 7-11, cover Winter's life following her father's arrest and the seizure of all of their property. Winter must now assume the "street" style of her old friends in Brooklyn and develop "hustles," in order to survive in her new environment. The final part of this section is her life at The House For Success, a place she dislikes but which allows pursuit of creative means to money. Chapters 12-16 describe a late teen who has been taken in by Sister Souljah and given a chance to alter her lifestyle in order to pursue a productive honest career. Rejecting this opportunity, Winter throws herself back into the world she has always known and, as is so often the case, is ultimately arrested and jailed. The final section of the work, Chapters 17-20, describe Winter's prison life, an environment which she hates but in which she has some comfort, given that several of her old friends from the projects are there as well. The final section shows a Winter who has not changed, who is unwilling to place herself in a position to improve herself, and who, tragically, will eventually leave prison just as she entered.



## Quotes

But my policy was to go to school just enough so the authorities wouldn't kick me out. If I had a new outfit to show off or some new jewels I knew I'd get sweated for, fine, but I wasn't gonna report to school every day like it was some type of job when they weren't even paying me for it. (Chapter 1, p. 9)

He pulled off his shirt. On his shoulder was a gun dispensing a bullet, and the heat is me went up a notch. (Chapter 5, p. 84)

Besides, the drug dealers helped America to be rich. If it wasn't for us, who would buy the fly cars, butter leathers, and the jewelry? (Chapter 7, p. 118)

'Who'da ever known that Santiaga's daughter was sipping bubbly with a nigga who's a worker for the other side! While your daddy was being raided by the feds you were having drinks butt naked with the enemy.' (Chapter 7, p. 121)

When I looked at the baby seated on her lap with the jet black curly hair, those big brown eyes, those clothes, and especially that bracelet, I knew it was my father's son. I wondered how much money Dulce got away with? (Chapter 7, p. 131)

The feds is listening in, clocking niggas, recording shit, straight up snooping. Niggas running around buying too much shit with no reasonable cover to explain where it came from, flashing, making a scene. (Chapter 7, p. 141)

A smart man never chooses a dumb woman. All she can do is make demands, spend his money, and bring him down. (Chapter 7, p. 142)

He had all the right stuff and I'd give him some pussy to get it from him, but only if I could be sure I was gonna get exactly what I wanted. I seen plenty a niggas who will flash their jewels, cars, and gear, run through pussy and leave the girl with rug burns on her back and nothing else. (Chapter 9, p. 173)

This building was set up like a house. Somehow somebody thought they would take a whole bunch of anonymous females, put 'em in a building set up like a house and have them pretend they was like family. (Chapter 10, p. 184)

My pops was a major player for a long time and with the benefit of his knowledge I could make the world kiss my ass, but better than he did 'cause he could now teach me about the mistakes. Let's compre it, ten years of good living and twenty years of high living versus sixty years of scraping to get by. (Chapter 10, p. 202)

'You have to study, read, watch, work, and interact with people. When you master a particular field, then your words, knowledge, and insight become valuable.' (Chapter 12, p. 269) (Sister Souljah speaking to Winter)



'What will a community of motherless children be like? Killers, haters, evil, negative, mad at the world, unable to love, hug, and live because they hate themselves, because they needed you to teach them how to feel, how to love, how to just be.' (Chapter 12, p. 273) (Sister Souljah speaking to women prisoners)

'Now if we could work on who we are, what we stand for, getting to know each other, and what we believe, then we can make better decisions. For example, if everybody in here received a thousand dollars each and we believed in unity, we could have fifty thousand to buy a piece of property or put a down payment on a house, or we could open up a business and all become shareholders.' (Chapter 13, p. 289) (Sister Souljah speaking to her women's group)

'I watch closely. Most things are not what they seem to be in this life; most people are not what they seem to be in this life; and most people find it extremely hard to tell the truth about themselves.' (Chapter 15, p. 322) (Sister Souljah speaking to Winter)

'You traded everyone else's life for yours. I traded my life for everyone else's. We don't belong together.' (Chapter 16, p. 354) (Sister Souljah writing to Midnight)



## Topics for Discussion

It is posited that true change in urban ghetto culture must come from within that culture itself. What specific steps might constitute a beginning?

Winter can be described as amoral, that is, one who has not developed a conscience, or a sense of right and wrong. Do you believe she is immoral or amoral? Support your opinion with specific examples from the book.

During the course of her young life, Winter has some opportunities to make positive choices. Cite these opportunities and her justifications for not taking advantage of them.

Midnight can be seen as the symbol of hope for the black male. Develop this concept through Midnight's life as depicted in the story. How realistic is his change, and is it realistic to think that a majority of young black men can do as he did?

"Moms" is the symbol of an incomplete black woman who has developed no internal or external resources to cope with adversity. What internal and external resources does she lack?

In the culture of drugs and poverty, what characteristics or qualities of men and women are most admired? Which are least admired?

Discuss the mother-daughter relationship between Winter and "moms." How does it change as their life circumstances change?