

## Excerpt from Chapter one : *A Better Life*

There is only one sport in the world that generates a massive surge of adrenaline unlike no other. That surge is not only felt by its participants, but it can also be felt by the millions of spectators who watch from afar. Only one sport thrives on a savage brutality where grown men hurl their bodies into one another without any regard for their own safety. It is a game that has grown to epitomize the culture of American sports. It is also a game that has become a way of life for more than just its players. It is a game that interrupts the monotonous routines of people who do not make their living wearing a football helmet. And for a short time each week, people can take a break from their ordinary lives and lose themselves in the luster, exhilaration and intrigue that is the National Football League.

Throughout the entire football season, millions of people remain glued to their televisions watching human specimens perform at the most optimum levels. Prior to those games, those same people anxiously count down the seconds until kickoff. And when the football season is over, those people long for the return of that barbaric yet elegant game. However, for those extraordinary young men looking to make a career for themselves in the NFL, the most important season of their lives takes place while no other games are scheduled. Once those players have played the final down of their college careers, they immediately move on to the draft season.

For Florida Atlantic middle linebacker Frantz Joseph, that final moment came one day after Christmas. He looked up at the scoreboard at Ford Field in Detroit as his Florida Atlantic Owls held on to defeat Central Michigan by a score of 27-24 in the 12<sup>th</sup> annual Motor City Bowl. Frantz took off his helmet and allowed his dreadlocks to breathe a little easier. His bearded face widened into a smile, knowing full well he was a major part of that victory. Frantz registered thirteen tackles and instilled fear into every Central Michigan player who touched the football. Frantz finished the season with the second-most tackles in the country and hoped that his college résumé would be adequate enough to land him a job somewhere in the NFL.

A job in the NFL would take Frantz down a road very different from the path that led him to this point in his life. Frantz was born and raised in one of the most dangerous and violent neighborhoods in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Just making it this far had already been a monumental accomplishment within itself, but Frantz was looking to go even farther.

“My life is riding on making it to the NFL,” said Frantz. “For me, it’s now or never. If I don’t make it now, I’m going back to the hood. And that means one of the most violent, drug-filled, non-opportunistic neighborhoods there is. There’s no second chance and I’m going to do

everything it takes to get where I need to be.”

Frantz’s journey to the NFL began long before he was named the MVP of the Motor City Bowl. At a very early age, Frantz was intrigued by the game of football, but wasn’t always able to play.

“My mother never really had the money to put me into Pop Warner football,” he explained. “I used to just hang out around the parks, looking and watching everybody else play.”

So while other boys played the game of football, Frantz could only hope for the chance to join in. Frantz silently wished that he too could experience the same grandeur he saw spread across their faces. He wanted to feel what it was like to lower his shoulder and send a ball carrier to the ground with a bone-jarring thud. And he often wondered what it would feel like to cross the goal line with the football in his hands and a gang of defenders lagging a few steps behind.

But being able to afford football equipment was not his family’s top concern. His single mother had struggled to make ends meet ever since Frantz could remember. His father had abandoned the family when Frantz was only three years old, leaving behind only faded memories of a few piggy-back rides that now seemed more like a distant dream. Frantz’s mother was a Haitian immigrant who fled her native land in search of a better life. But what Marie Clercius found in America was a constant struggle where five children depended solely upon her.

That struggle often left the family without enough money to afford some of life’s bare essentials. Inside Frantz’s home, there were many nights when candles took the place of light bulbs because an electric bill went unpaid. Frantz’s homework was often done by candlelight and occasionally he had to keep wax from spilling onto his copybook. There were plenty of mornings when Frantz woke up and couldn’t savor the luxury of a shower. Without enough money to pay the water bill, Frantz’s mother would step outside and fill a bucket with water from a nearby hose. Frantz would then use that bucket of water to brush his teeth and wash himself as best as he could before going off to school.

“When I was a kid, I was embarrassed because I didn’t have all the other things that other kids had,” said Frantz. “They all had better stuff than I did. And I often wondered what it was like not to go to sleep with my stomach growling because there was no food in the house. It’s very embarrassing when people know you’re struggling and the lights are off and you can’t pay the rent. But as you get older, you start to understand that life is different for everybody. You just have to understand your situation and live with it.”