

## [ BLACKWATER IN NEON ]

The first thing Wade Moor notices is the line.

It wraps around the block a crooked, shimmering, desperate thing, pulsing against a building that has no earthly business drawing this many people toward it. Beautiful people. Rich people. Women in dresses that cost more than Wade's first truck. Men in jackets some dead eyed stylist told them made them look dangerous. Influencers. Models. Trust fund philosophers. Every poor bastard pretending they are not begging to be chosen.

Wade stands across the street and watches them.

He wears a black Hawaiian shirt with pale flowers stitched into the fabric, faded jeans, boots with swamp mud still clinging to the soles, and the CWF Tag Team Championship over one shoulder like it has always belonged there. The rain has stopped, but the pavement still shines slick and black beneath the sign above the entrance.

THE HOUSE OF BALLOONS.

Wade looks up at it. Then at the line. Then at the door.

He laughs.

"Well," he mutters, "this is out of pocket."

A young man near the end of the line turns toward him. Silver sunglasses, a shirt made of material that should not be trusted near an open flame, and the haunted expression of someone wondering if his bone structure passes inspection.

"You waiting too?" the kid asks.

Wade turns his head slightly.

The kid's eyes drop to the championship belt. Then back up. Recognition tries to ignite behind them and fails.

That makes Wade smile.

"Nah," Wade answers. "I don't wait outside."

Before the kid can decide whether to be offended, impressed, or afraid, Wade crosses the street.

The doorman sees him coming. More importantly, the doorman sees the belt. The man at the rope is built like a brick shit house. Broad shoulders. Cropped hair. Earpiece. Black suit. He looks Wade up and down, taking in the shirt, the boots, the beard, the easy smile, and the swamp still dried along the edges of him.

For one second, the doorman considers doing his job.

Wade can see it happen.

That is his favorite part. People always have that nanosecond where they think about making the wrong decision.

"Name?" the doorman asks.

He must be new. Wade shifts the title on his shoulder and leans in close enough that the man can smell coffee, rain, and something metallic beneath both.

"Brother," Wade says softly, "I believe you already know."

And in that moment, the doorman does.

The rope opens.

Behind Wade, the line stirs with wounded disbelief. A few phones come up, a few mouths open, and someone whispers his name like a curse. Wade does not look back. He steps inside the House of Balloons and lets the door close behind him.

The first few steps are almost disappointing. A narrow hallway. Dark walls. Soft floor. Somewhere far away, bass thumps slow enough to feel less like music and more like a heartbeat. The air smells like perfume, chlorine, champagne, and something sweet enough to rot your teeth.

Then the hallway bends where it should not bend, and the House opens.

Wade stops.

Not because he is scared, but because even a man who has seen some truly wild shit should occasionally pause to appreciate craftsmanship.

The room beyond him stretches too wide for the building outside. Water covers the floor ankle deep, rippling beneath vaporwave light in shades of pink, blue, green, and gold. Archways lead

into more archways. Staircases begin where no staircase should fit. The walls carry the garish nonsense of a Cheesecake Factory designed by someone on a three day bender. Balloons gather near the ceiling in impossible clusters, bright and obscene and childlike.

People move everywhere. Dancing. Laughing. Whispering. Drinking. Floating.

Some look like they stepped out of 2026. Some do not. Wade sees a bartender in a silver vest staring at a touchscreen register like it insulted his mother. He sees a man in a powder blue suit whispering the same date to himself over and over.

Nobody else seems to notice.

Or maybe they notice and decide that noticing is bad vibes.

Wade looks around, then smiles a comfortable smile.

That is the funniest part.

Any reasonable man would walk into this place, see the broken laws of architecture and time, hear laughter echoing from rooms that do not appear attached to anything, feel the water moving around his boots even when nobody nearby has stepped, and start asking serious questions.

Wade has never claimed to be reasonable.

He has been a monster. A champion. A warning. A villain in some stories, but a survivor...in spite of himself. He has seen the inside of his own darkness and found his teeth there. He has looked at impossible things long enough to learn the truth most people spend their whole lives avoiding.

The world is weird, and it always fucking has been. The only difference between a sane man and everybody else is how hard he lies about it.

So Wade steps into the water. It is warm. Of course it is.

"Fuck," he laughs, looking down. "He even made the floor pretentious."

A woman drifting past him in a translucent gold robe laughs like she has known him for years. Maybe she has, or maybe she will.

Wade keeps walking.

This is what they do not understand. The locker room. The fans. Caledonia. MJ Flair. Every set of eyes that looked at the card and saw Jared Holmes first. The Peacock King. The spectacle. The House. The mask. The title. The Neon fucking Nightmare.

Then they saw Wade Moor listed beside him and tried to decide what that meant.

Old friend? Heavy? Decoration? Some washed up old dog Jared dragged out of whatever swamp he'd been hiding in? An old folk horror story that walked in wearing gold before earning it?

Wade understands the doubt. Hell, he respects it. If some outsider came walking into his house with a championship belt he hadn't watched him win, Wade would have leaned back, smiled, and wondered how long it took to make him bleed.

Doubt is healthy. Doubt keeps people sharp.

The problem is, doubt can make fools feel brave.

That is the part people always get wrong about him. They think quiet means uncertainty. They think smiling means softness. They think peace means the axes edge got dull.

Peace did not make Wade Moor harmless.

Peace made him selective.

A man who hates himself will fight anyone because pain feels like home. A man who likes himself chooses carefully.

He waits.

He watches.

He lets people come close enough to make a mistake.

That's just the Florida Man in him.

Everything dangerous down there knows better than to waste energy. Gators do not chase the swamp. They sit still. They watch the ripples. They let the careless thing convince itself the water is safe.

Then there is a splash...then nothing.

Wade reaches a quieter corner where the bass dulls to a pulse behind the walls. The water is darker here, less neon, more black mirror. He can see his reflection in it. Older now, gray in the

beard, and lines near the eyes. A little more weight in the shoulders. The kind of face a young wrestler might mistake for a “has been”.

He hopes they do.

Caledonia probably will not.

That is what makes her interesting.

Wade knows enough to know she is not some bright eyed hometown hero with inspirational music and a clean dream. Former World Champion. Former Tag Team Champion. Time traveler, if the internet is telling the truth. Married to Dan Highlander, which means she has either patience beyond human measurement or a tolerance for punishment that ought to be studied by science. She burned bright, beat Mariella Jade Flair for the World Title, went undefeated, and vanished into a war bigger than wrestling.

Wade can respect that.

He can respect anybody who walked away from the easy applause because something louder was screaming their name.

But respect is not mercy.

Respect is looking at someone’s resume and hitting them like you believe every word on it.

“Caledonia,” Wade says, his voice low enough that it feels like he is speaking to the water, or your very soul, “I looked into you. One of those names folks say with a little weight in their mouth. You built yourself a hell of a story here before I got my boots through the door, and I ain’t gonna insult you by pretending otherwise.”

He runs his thumb along the edge of the tag title.

“But there’s a difference between respect and concern. I respect you. I ain’t concerned about you.”

A smile. Small. Mean.

“I looked into you. Not just the wins. Not just the championships. Anybody can read a trophy case if they squint hard enough. I’m talking about the rest. The cards. The book. The prophecy. The part where the world stopped asking you to be a wrestler and started asking you to be a symbol.”

He smiles faintly.

“I know a little something about that.”

A pause hangs there.

"I know what it's like when people stop seeing a person and start seeing a shape they need you to fill. Monster. Savior. Champion. Warning. Hope. Hell, after a while it all starts sounding the same. Folks dress it up in destiny, trauma, magic, faith, whatever pretty word makes them feel better about stacking another brick on your back."

Wade shifts the CWF Tag Team Championship higher on his shoulder.

"But here's where you and I split, Caledonia. You still sound like a woman trying to answer the call."

His smile turns mean.

"I stopped answering mine. That kind of determinations real good against folks who need to prove something every thirty seconds."

He looks into your eyes.

"I don't."

The House seems to breathe behind him.

"I don't need to rush you, Caledonia. I don't need to out flash you. I don't need to drag you into deep water kicking and screaming. You've already been there. You know what deep water feels like, and that's what makes this fun."

Wade tilts his head slightly.

"But I also know you. That temper. That little crack in the foundation. That thing inside you that knows better and still wants to swing anyway. You can be riled up. You can be pulled off center. And sister, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but I have made a pretty decent living out of finding where good wrestlers make bad decisions."

A laugh moves somewhere in the House behind him, traveling too slowly down the hall like it is dragging fingernails through the water.

Wade ignores it.

"And then there's MJ Flair."

He lets that sit.

"The Second Coming."

Wade's smile widens.

"That is a big damn name to carry into the ring with the first one."

He shifts the belt higher on his shoulder.

"Mariella Jade Flurstein. Daughter of legacy. Built out of pressure. Explosive risk. Low blow into a DDT borrowed from her father, which tells me two things right away. One, you understand the value of tradition. Two, you ain't above punching someone in the nuts if it gets a pop from the family tree."

He chuckles.

"I can work with that. You've got fire, MJ. That young person engine. Stamina for days, pride for weeks, and just enough impatience to get yourself hurt if somebody smiles at you the wrong way. They say you match energy. They say you don't cheat first unless the hate is there. That's cute."

His eyes harden slightly, even as the smile remains.

"Real cute."

A pause.

"But I need you to understand something before that bell rings. I am not coming into this match to be your measuring stick. I am not giving you some test you can overcome so everybody in the back claps and says the kid's got heart. I am coming in as one half of the CWF Tag Team Champions, and if you take that as disrespect because I haven't been here long enough for your liking...good. Hold onto that. Feed it. Let it sit behind your eyes. Come at me like you think I stole something from you."

He leans in.

"That'll make it more honest when I put you down."

The neon catches his eyes for a moment and turns them green, then gold, then blue. The House cannot decide what color they should be. Wade does not help it.

"See, that's what this whole thing is really about, ain't it? It's about doubt. Wade Moor walks into CWF with Jared Holmes, already wearing gold and suddenly people start whispering. Maybe Jared did the heavy lifting. Maybe Wade's just the old friend. Maybe he's a passenger. Maybe the Peacock King wanted a little nostalgia bump with his bottle service."

Wade's smile disappears.

Not dramatically.

Just gone.

“And that is where you dumb bitches are going to get hurt.”

For the first time, the House feels quiet around him.

Not silent. Never silent.

Just listening.

“I didn’t come here to stand in Jared’s shadow. I didn’t come here to explain him. I didn’t come here to save him, stop him, translate him, excuse him, or apologize for him. Jared Holmes is a grown man, whatever else he may be, and if y’all have a problem with him, take it up with him.”

The grin returns, slower this time.

“But if you think I’m the easier half of this team?”

A soft laugh.

“Oh, shit.”

Wade looks down at the water again. Something moves beneath the surface near his boot. He does not move away.

“You got fooled by the quiet.”

He taps the faceplate of the championship belt.

“These titles ain’t costumes. They ain’t party favors. They ain’t neon props for whatever the hell this place is supposed to be. This belt sits on my shoulder because when the bell rings, I know who I am. I know where my feet are. I know how to take a person apart without raising my voice.”

He looks back to the camera.

“Caledonia, MJ, y’all are walking into the opening match with a chance to make a statement against the champions. That’s opportunity. That’s the kind of thing people pretend not to care about until they’re lying awake at night imagining how it could change everything.”

A pause.

“And I hope you do care.”

The smile becomes warm for half a second.

Almost sincere.

“I hope you come in sharp. I hope you come in angry. I hope you come in proud. I hope Caledonia brings every bit of that World Champion polish. I hope MJ brings every ounce of that pressure. I hope you hit us hard enough to make the whole building lean forward.”

Then the warmth drains out.

“Because I did not come all this way to be bored.”

The bass returns all at once, heavier now, thumping through the walls like something waking beneath the foundation. Somewhere nearby a cheer rises from a room Wade cannot see.

Someone screams. Someone laughs. Glass breaks. Applause follows. Wade finally begins walking again, slow through the warm black water.

“First match of the night,” he says. “First time in a CWF ring. First time a whole lot of you get to see me up close.”

He glances over his shoulder.

“And the first lesson is real simple.”

He starts to disappear deeper into the impossible architecture, the championship gold catching neon with every step.

“You don’t have to know who I am.”

A final smile.

“You just have to survive finding out.”

◇ THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT YOU, BOY ◇  
◇ BUT YOU'RE STILL THE SAME ◇