

# UNCLE SCRATCH'S CHRISTMAS PARTY BY LAWRENCE ALLAN

A full moon glowed on a corn stalked, snow crusted field around a farmhouse and barn in the boonies of McClean County, Illinois. No one was home at the farmhouse because all the action was inside the barn.

Multicolored Christmas lights wrapped around the aged timbers of the barn while a cornfed DJ, right out of high school spun tunes on his laptop. At that moment, it was a heavy metal rap/rock version of the “Twelve Days of Christmas” for a mixed crowd of thieves, bastards, and dealers. Uncle Scratch’s Christmas Party was lit.

Uncle Scratch — who owned the farmhouse, the barn and the acres — was a man whose fingers were in everyone’s pie, taking a percentage of all of the illicit work in the county because he could offer protection. This made him king. And sometimes a king had to be benevolent and put out a spread.

And what a spread. Sitting on sawhorse tables were ribs and burgers, candy and chips, while another table was dedicated to bottles and bottles of liquor next to a keg of Schlitz being worshipped by two young Romeo and Juliet’s with red solo cups.

Next to them, Billy Boy held a wall up, with a drink in his hand. He was twenty-eight, blonde and carried himself like he was two dollars when he was really more like 2.25 and should've spent more time at the gym lifting weights than Miller Lights.

A kid named Tweak — hot, sweaty and shirtless — had cornered Billy and was flapping his mouth. “You gotta go for it, man. This is your *chance*.”

Tweak took a slug from his Solo Cup, and nodded, agreeing with his own advice. Tweak's tattoo of Tupac on his chest stared at Billy Boy with a pink nipple eye. Tweak loved and adored Tupac, a man who had been dead years before he was even a twinkle in his mom's eye.

Billy Boy shook his head. Tweak was in his crew, always had crazy ideas and was best ignored.

Tweak pointed toward the center of the barn. “This shit only comes around once a year.”

This shit, of course, was the redistribution of territory that was a part of a holiday tradition that Uncle Scratch started a decade ago. Two men, stripped to the waist, stood in the middle of the barn slugging it out. A fire plug of a Black man named Big Mike was facing off with Lee, a long lean White guy. Mike had already lost a tooth while Lee had broken a couple of ribs. The crowd loved it. The winner got the losers territory and Big Mike was after Lee's part of the southside of Bloomington.

Upon a platform made from bales of hay, Uncle Scratch watched from on high in his Laz-E-Boy, his tongue running along his bottom lip, eyes narrow. No one knew how old he was and everyone had a guess. A dirty, red stocking cap covered his matted ash hair, and his beard was heavy with seat. A well-worn flannel clung to his body. A finger tapped a glass of whiskey with a

sharpened fingernail. Standing just behind was his second in command, Dookie, who cheered on Big Mike.

Billy Boy loathed Uncle Scratch. It has started last summer when Scratch took more than what Billy thought was a fair share of a five thousand dollar windfall. Truth be told, he had never liked him. Coming into the life, Billy Boy always thought Scratch was small time. Lacked imagination. Why control just a county when you could control all of Central Illinois, all the way up to Chicago? Scratch was insulated, burnt out and a fucking problem to Billy Boy's ambition. "Maybe," he said to Tweak.

"Maybe? Yo, you kidding' me?"

"Shut up, Tweak." Billy Boy had to think. He got where he got because of his grit. He picked his targets, used his brains. He wasn't dumb to risk it all on a fight that could go sideways. But then, Billy had been counting how many drinks Scratch had downed and he was on to his second hand. Could be Tweak was on to something and tonight... well, all things were possible at Christmas, right?

The fight ended when Big Mike broke Lee's leg. Applause, cheers and Uncle Scratch rose to bestow Big Mike his boon while Dookie and a couple of others pulled a weeping Lee off the floor.

Tweak and Tupac leaned closer. Billie Boy could smell the weed. "*No one* is gonna see this coming. You could have it all."

"For once in your God damn life," he said, turning to Tweak, "...you're actually right about something."

Tweak grinned like a fool.

The music dropped and Dookie took center stage snorting to keep the chunk of Adderol up his nose. “All right, all right, all right. The hits just keep on coming.” The crowd howled at that. “Who’s next, who’s next? Who wants their Christmas dreams to come true?”

Billy Boy stepped forward and said, “Me!” He handed his cup to Tweak. “I’m next.”

The crowd ooooo’d as Billy Boy wasn’t known for his participation in these reindeer games.

Dookie turned to him. “And who, Billy Boy, do you have your eye on?” he said, laughing. Everyone was having a grand old time.

“Him,” He said, pointing up at Uncle Scratch.

The crowd got real quiet.

Dookie paused, unsure. “Who?”

“Uncle Scratch.”

Billy pulled off his Chicago Bears sweatshirt and tossed it to the side. He popped his neck and fisted up.

“I don’t think so,” said Dookie, shaking his head, putting up a cautionary hand. “You’re small time. Why don’t go after after someone more your size?” He pointed to the crowd around him.

“Dookie.” Uncle Scratch’s voice was of a thousand cigarettes and long nights.

All eyes turned to Uncle Scratch.

“Who am I to say no during this special season?” He stood up, wavered, drained his drink, and pulled at the buttons of his flannel. He slipped it off revealing long thin arms, a bony chest and a round, plump stomach that fell over his jeans. He stepped down from his baled hay

throne and almost missed finding the floor. He stood tall and through his beard, sneered and waved Billy on. The crowd roared, the DJ dropped the needle and “Carol of the Bells” blasted.

Dookie was barely out of the way when Billy charged in. His plan was to end this quick and decisively. His right fist connected with Scratch’s teeth. Scratch’s head snapped back, the red cap flew and he stumbled. Recovering, he faced Billy and grinned. Blood stained his teeth and dribbled onto his lips. Laughing, he wiped it with his hand, leaving a smudge of blood in his beard.

Billy sniffed and swung again. Left, right, left, right. Scratch zig, zagged, zig and zagged again. Winded, Billy watched as Scratch skipped around the circle. “It’s like fighting Baby Jesus!”

The audience roared.

The younger man shook off the taunt and focused on the old fat man in front of him. He feinted with his right, and connected with his left, right in Scratch’s rib. A grunt, and Billy’s right hit Scratch’s nose. A burst of blood and another stumble, but Billy Boy had him by the arm and wasn’t going to let go. He hammered away at Uncle Scratch’s head.

Lightning bolts of pain, as Uncle Scratch scrapped his sharpened nails across Billy’s exposed belly. Slick with blood and sweat, it was enough for him to slip from Billy’s grip. The crowd went crazy as Uncle Scratch whooped and danced.

Billy licked his lips, snuck a glance at his own wounds, and gasped for air as he watched his target circle the floor.

Scratch turned and pointed. “Looks like you came to win!” He played to the crowd, chanting. “Bil-ly! Bil-ly! Bil-ly!”

And they joined in, the whole barn was filled with Billy's name. Scratch conducted, turning his back.

Tweak nodded to Billy, giving him a thumbs up.

Billy Boy swallowed, nodded. He charged and grabbed Uncle Scratch from behind, their sweaty bodies sliding against each other. He got an arm around Scratch's throat and squeezed. Everything else dropped out. This was Billy's moment. His David versus Goliath. Once he was on top, all of these fuckers, he would show them, he would show them what they've been missing. He'll lead them to prosperity like they've never seen. It'll be him sitting on that recliner next year.

Scratch heaved his legs up, dropped them and twisted, tossing Billy over onto the ground with a thud.

The crowd OOOOOOOH'D, eyes wide, drinks in the air.

Uncle Scratch straddled Billy Boy, pinning his arms with his knees. He was heavy and the blood and sweat was sliding down his belly onto Billy's chest. Scratch looked up to the heavens and gulped a couple of deep breaths. He looked down. His eyes were wild. "I am a legend, Billy Boy. And legends don't die easy!"

Billy nodded, hoping this was it and could slink out of here.

Scratch leaned down low to Billie's ear and the crowd went silent, hoping to hear.

He whispered, "I never did like how you looked at me." Moving quickly, he pressed his thumbs to Billy's eyes and pushed. "Ho, ho, ho," he said as Billy screamed.

Everyone gasped as Scratch got off and headed back to his throne leaving Billy alone on the floor, blinded.

Dookie waved for some men to take Billy to someone who could tend to his wounds then signaled the DJ to start playing something, anything.

Tweak stepped outside as Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas" started. His skin goosed in the cold air as his body steamed, turning him into a ghost. He inhaled the crisp air, feeling the burn in his nose. He dug out his vape and took a pull. He smiled. It worked out better than he hoped. He had loathed Billy Boy. He was a condescending fuck, never listening and was in Tweak's way up the ladder. He snorted. Well, not anymore. He sighed, enjoying the buzz and thinking how Christmas wishes do come true.