

# What You Wish For

a novel

Aaron S Gallagher

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## Dedication

To Jennie Rosenblum, who took a chance on this book.

And to The Band

If you know, you know. If you don't, well, then, you don't.

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# **Book I**

February 1965



# Chapter One

*Big Bill Broonzy - Blues - 8/15/1958*

Memories of you fade from my mind  
The slow sweet smile begins as  
I came upon you from behind  
Standing at the edge of Chorus Bridge

Always the same and yet brand new  
We started out with a smile as  
We began every single thing we'd do  
Standing in the middle of Chorus Bridge

Holding you for just one day  
Not wanting to let you go as  
I can see you fading away  
At the far end of Chorus Bridge

It ends too soon, our sweet song  
That single note fades away as  
I stand there watching you  
Walk away from Chorus Bridge

## Chapter Two

*Son Sims - Blues - 12/23/1958*

For years after, everyone talked about the last time Richie Stillwater played in Lannigan's.

The house band nailed the tone like a bulls-eye. Despite the bitter weather of February, the temperature in the small club topped ninety as everyone moved, danced, and sweated. The blues poured hard off the stage. The guitar wailed like a cat in heat, the kick drum felt like a punch in the gut. Richie's bass guitar felt like the voice of God reverberating almost below the range of hearing; something felt more than heard.

Stillwater hadn't even come to play that night. He only came to Lannigan's looking for a fix. His regular guy got six months for trying to sell to a cop. That didn't matter to Stillwater except that he didn't have a backup dealer. Lannigan's could usually be found full of record-company types, jazz players, and good-timers so he knew that he would find what he needed.

He was thirty and had been a fixture in Lannigan's for going on fifteen years. He started hanging out in the bar in high school, listening to the bands that he never seemed to find on the radio or in the record stores. Players with no names would get up every night and go for hours, getting drunker and drunker, or higher and higher. The air would be thick with smoke of several sorts and the noise would be like a religious revival. The music was at the same time old and yet all new. Elvis invented rock and roll and it had grown from there. The roots were there for anyone to see. Jazz, blues, funk, folk, rock. He gave it a name and dragged it into the light, but it didn't matter. It sometimes seemed like everyone played. Anyone played. Anyone who played, played at Lannigan's. *Everyone* who played, played at Lannigan's.

Richie Stillwater picked up his first guitar in fifth grade. He learned to play decently but soon switched to bass because he liked the longer neck and low end sound. Within two years he lugged a black fretless bass of uncertain pedigree with him wherever he could, along with a small amplifier that he would set up and play through for hours either out loud on the streets or in his room. He began playing along with the radio but picked up the skills quickly that allowed him to start freestyling. His grades dipped lower and lower as he spent more time playing. His parents argued and cajoled and managed to keep him in school for a while. At sixteen, Stillwater began to sneak out of his house nightly to prowl the bars in South Philly looking for good places to hear music. He found Lannigan's Pub, a run-down squat building standing alone between two empty lots, and knew he was home.

Lannigan's Pub showcased local talent during the week. Richie became a regular. He'd sneak out at 11 after his parents were asleep and walk down past the El towers

and into the bad side of the worst part of town. Lannigan's existed in the no-man's-land of the thin strip of land between bad and worse. It didn't matter that he sometimes didn't get there till 12. The music didn't really start to kick up its heels until then anyhow.

One night on a lark he brought his guitar. Sitting in a wooden chair two feet from the lip of the stage he watched the players pouring their hearts out, his fingers unconsciously picking along. The bass player for that night noticed the skinny kid twitching in time to the music, bird-dogged the guitar in a cheap pressboard case beside him, and at the set break sauntered over and picked it up.

Richie didn't say anything. The player opened the case, looked at the guitar, and looked at Richie.

"Y'all play this axe, bo?" the man asked in a southern-fried voice rough from cigarettes and screaming.

Richie grinned. "Yeah, I play."

With a smirk the bass player grabbed his amp chord, plugged it into Stillwater's guitar and wrenched the volume knobs up to full. The feedback startled the band, who were busy taking a drink-and-toke break. The bassist, a circuit player named Greeves, handed Richie his guitar and said over his shoulder in a loud voice, "Hey, guys. Let him play."

He gestured to the miniscule stage and shoved Richie up. He sat in Richie's chair, drained the glass of Iron City beer Richie had left, and waited for the show with a snide look on his face.

Richie looked out at the crowd, whose temper at the best of times was short, and swallowed hard. He looked at the band, at angry dark faces. Angry, but not impatient. Richie never thought much about skin color, but he knew other people did. Most of the crowd at Lannigan's that night, and most nights, was black. While Richie had never had a problem, he had also never been so intrusive or obvious before.

He said in a low voice, "Uh... can I get a beat? It's a blues riff in B."

The band all grinned at him at once, startingly white smiles against the dark skin. Then he sealed his fate, because it was Richie Stillwater's nature to push it.

"And try to keep up, huh?"

The kick drum pounded so loudly that at first Richie thought someone had taken a shot at him. But it happened again and again. Then the lead guitar came in, clear and sweet, with a high riff that just about tore the top off Richie's head. The sax player started in and then Richie pounded the crap out of his hand, jumping on the beat before it could fly by him. His eyes closed as his hands began to hammer out an intricate rhythm.

Richie had started playing bass plucking. He'd never used a pick. He liked the feel of his hands on the strings. He soon discovered the rare joys of slap, which changed the voice and style of the instrument completely. The bounce and hop of the rhythm spoke to him. It felt to him like his heartbeat came out of the amp if he played just right.

He just let himself float along, always a half-step in front of the guitar. His bass line bounced along the room like a rubber ball and the last thing Richie heard before

he fell into the music was Greeves' exclamation. "Boy can *play*."

And that was that.

Richie dropped out of school shortly after and began playing at Lannigan's every second he could. The owner, Allan Lannigan, got tired of Richie hanging around the stage every night waiting for an opportunity to play. In a burst of inspiration, he decided to build a house band. It was one thing to let anyone who could play have the stage, but on more than one occasion the acts had fallen through, or the players were dreadful, and he had to close down the stage. He lost half his revenue for the night.

Lannigan knew his eye for talent was lacking, but he thought he could start a moneymaker showcasing the kid. He offered Richie the spot. The house band consisted mostly of a forgettable collection of local players. They played covers and show tunes, lively enough, but mostly filler. The traveling bands were what people wanted to see. Although he sat out most of the gigs at first when a band came through, enough of the road players came in early to hear the house band and size up the crowds that Richie started getting a reputation as a player. They let him sit in, tentatively at first, but soon he was being asked to sit in with the travelers.

One of these many nameless bands, passing through but showcasing all weekend at Lannigan's, took Richie on a whirlwind tour through the bars and honkytonks of the darker parts of Philly. Places Richie had never even *heard* of. They took turns getting him drunk, which he was used to, stoned, which he was acquiring a taste for, and finally introducing him to the needle.

His first taste of heroin wasn't anything to write home about. Just a few grains, really, and stepped on enough times to make it almost milk. But it hit like an explosion behind Richie's eyes and he was solidly hooked.

Heroin was a killer. Always had been. Musicians, actors, writers, dock workers, bums... no one was immune, no matter how good they were, or rich they were, or famous they were. He vowed that it wouldn't happen to him. He set elaborate rules for his personal use and stuck to them rigidly.

Soon he had a reputation as a functioning addict as well as a great bass player. He picked up a few connections in town and was soon being courted by a dozen people a night all asking if he had any to sell, just a little, just a taste.

He managed to keep such people away from him by claiming not to be holding either and mostly he told the truth. He bought sparingly and only enough to get by. He kept a small balloon behind the backplate on his guitar. That balloon, filled with twenty dollars of premium-grade, turned out to be his ticket into the rarified circle of professional players.

One night after playing a set with a forgettable road band, Richie went to the bar for a shot and a beer. While he leaned there sweating through his silk shirt, a weasel-looking short guy with the world's thinnest pencil moustache came up to him. "I hear you're a guy I can see about a horse," he said in a thick Scouse brogue.

"Is that so?" Richie asked. He knocked back a shot of cheap whiskey and sipped the beer with a wince and shudder.

"That's so."

"Well, 'they', whoever they are, were wrong. No idea what you're talking about.

Excuse me.”

The weasel nodded amiably. “Copper, yeah?”

Richie frowned at him. “What?”

“You think I’m a copper, I’m out to do you for it.” The weasel nodded his head in time to a beat only he could hear.

“Uh, sure. Right. Whatever you say.”

“Listen, mate, you want to go see a show?”

Richie eyed him. “I... don’t even know what you’re talking about. I’ve got another set in like five. Nice talking to you.” He turned to leave, but the weasel grabbed his arm.

“Look, mate,” he said. “You know who I am?”

“Couldn’t tell you,” Richie said. “Nor could I care less.”

The weasel said, “Dolby. Dolby Kinter. Nice to meet you.”

Richie stopped in his tracks. Dolby Kinter, manager for the Spots. Richie had all three of their records.

“Are you shitting me?”

Kinter laughed. “Not even, old son. Now, *right* now, I have a studio rigged to blow. I have Manfred Thomas ready to lay down some tracks. He wants to record tonight. He sent me for a taste. He can’t play without a taste. And lo, I find not only what he needs, but what *I* need. All in one package.”

“Look man, you a fag?”

Kinter looked blank. He laughed. “I getcha. I getcha. No, son. Not even. But what I am is short a player. Graham Knox passed out, back around 9. So I’m in dire need of a bass player, yeah? And also a taste of the sweet for Manny. So what do you say? Am I barking up the wrong tree, mate?”

“Barking—” Richie gaped. “Are you asking me to play? You want *me* to play with the Spots?”

“I’ve been kicking back, waiting for you to get off that stage for an hour,” Kinter said. “All I needed was some product for Manny. But I’ve been watching you play, mate. You’re good. We’re putting a couple tracks down tonight. Graham passed out. His loss. Business marches on. I need a ringer. I need some H. You’re both. So what do you say, old son? Are you up for this?”

Some decisions should be pondered and considered carefully, and taken in their own time. Some don’t take that long.

“Allan!” Richie called to the manager, behind the bar serving drinks. “I’m out. Sorry.”

“What the hell, Stillwater! Get your ass up—”

Allan Lannigan knew everyone important that came into his place because he’d been booking musicians for years. He knew the managers, and he knew the producers, and he knew the players. He saw Richie with an arm around Kinter’s shoulders and skidded to a halt. He knew why people came to Lannigan’s and it wasn’t for the beer and the décor. It was good to keep what he considered the talent happy.

“Kick their ass, kid!” he yelled.

Richie stopped only long enough to grab his guitar and he was gone.

## Chapter Three

*Buddy Holly - Rock - 2/3/1959*

The Spots, a rhythm and blues band out of Mississippi, waited at the studio exactly as Kinter promised. The Spots had taken a break from their whirlwind tour of Jersey, Pennsylvania, and parts of Kentucky to record their fourth album. Manfred Thomas, all two hundred sixty pounds of him, stalked back and forth in the studio like a caged animal with his golden sax hanging from the strap around his neck, bouncing off his prodigious belly. Sweat gleamed on his dark skin as he paced. Digger Brahm, the drummer, lay face down over his stool, slowly spinning on his belly. His hair hung over his face and swayed like a curtain in the breeze. Alfred Catt, affectionately known as Alley, sat in the corner sullenly picked bluegrass notes out on an old abandoned acoustic Hohner that looked like it had been left out in the rain. It sounded like a dream, though, and Alley had decided it was his by squatter's rights.

Manfred looked up at the sound of the booth door opening.

"Well? Well? Fuckin Kinter. What'd you find, you pale little fuck?"

Kinter said soothingly, "Relax, Manny. I got what you need. When do I not?"

Manfred looked Richie up and down. "What's with white bread here?"

Richie laughed. Manfred's face thundered over.

"Problem, white boy?"

"Nope," Richie said. "I just think that it's an honor to be insulted by someone whose playing I admire. I think it's funny."

The comment caught Manny just right and he laughed. "You seem like an okay cat," he said. "What do you do?"

"I lay down bass," Richie agreed, "and lines, too."

Manny looked interested now. "You holding?"

Richie reached into his pocket and pulled out the balloon.

"My own private stock," he said. Manny reached for it. Richie pulled it away.

"Man, I'm going to warn you. This is fifty percent," Richie said. Most street dope got cut eight ways to Sunday, with everything from powdered milk to rat poison to baby laxative. Richie had bought a hundred dollars pure. The purity ensured his buys were small, so he wouldn't be tempted. He cut it himself using his personal favorite additive, malt powder. He thought it gave the high a weird aftertaste.

"Fifty?" Manny looked stunned. "You a dealer?"

"Nope," Richie said. "I'm a connoisseur."

Kinter reached back under the console and pulled out Manny's works: needle, spoon, rubber strap. Manny hungrily stared at his tools. Richie thought abstractedly that here was a man with no rules. It wouldn't end pretty.

“How much, man?” Manfred said. “My man Kinter’ll hook you up.”

Richie made a fist around the balloon.

“Are you trying to fucking insult me, you asshole?” Richie snarled. Manny and Kinter both gaped at him.

“I... what?” Manny stammered. His face clouded over. Kinter looked worriedly from one to the other.

Richie said, “This is a gift, man. I’m offering to share. Fucking money. Fuck you.”

Manny cracked up and Kinter looked starkly relieved.

“You’re all right, man,” Manfred said. He looked at the bass. “You play that thing? Really play?”

“Yeah,” Richie said. “I play.”

Manny looked down at the prostrate Graham Knox. He kicked Graham in the ribs. The man groaned and rolled over, clutching an empty rye bottle.

“Welcome to the Spots, man,” Thomas said. He stuck out a huge hand. Richie grabbed it and wrung it. Richie poured a small amount onto the mirror Kinter handed him. He divvied up a small portion of the powder, a miniscule amount for each of them.

“What, you a lightweight?” Digger asked from the drum stool. He watched them carefully. He didn’t use but he was the group’s babysitter and liked to be around whenever they took anything. He hated dealing with people, he often said, but he could deal with whatever they put in their bodies. He knew the personality of a hundred drugs.

“No, man. Rule One. Never use more than you need. I don’t need to blast off, just get my wheels rolling,” Richie said.

Manny snorted. “Rules. Cook that shit, man.”

Richie didn’t argue, he merely prepped the fix. He used the edge of a long fingernail to scrape the grains into the bowl of the spoon. Holding a match under Manny’s spoon, he watched the powder liquefy. He took the needle and drew the plunger back, watching the liquid slowly fill up the syringe.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Richie said.

Manny took the needle. “Warn *me*. Shit.”

Richie shrugged and opened his own works and prepped his own fix. He never shared his tools. He couldn’t stand the idea of sharing anyone else’s works. His own fix was much smaller. He didn’t want to blow his chance of running with the big boys by nodding off at the wrong moment. He needed to see the headlights, not smash into the windshield.

He slowly pushed his spike home. He closed his eyes, let the rubber tube snap off, and waited for the slow rush. He felt it like a wave of warm water, lapping from the base of his skull around the front, covering his face and spreading down his chest to envelop his body.

He opened his eyes to see Manny crying, tears spilling down his cheeks. Kinter, alarmed, grabbed the big man. “Manny? Manny? What’s wrong, big guy?”

Manny elbowed Kinter out of the way. “You’re beautiful,” Manny said to Richie. He grabbed Richie by the cheeks and kissed him.

Richie laughed it off. Manny swayed in time to the beat of his own heart. Digger looked interested, like he was ready to go. He sat down at the drums and picked up his sticks. Alley and Richie picked up their instruments. Kinter tossed a jack to Richie, who plugged in and tuned. Then he started running scales to limber his fingers. The sound seemed to emulate from the air itself, and he could see it pulsing. Manny rocked on his heels.

Kinter called from inside the booth over the intercom. "Manny, you ready to put something down?"

"Too right," Manny said, and spit out his reed. He assembled the mouthpiece of his King Super 20 alto. He adjusted the neck, clicked his valves and said, "Give me a beat, Digger."

Digger started him off slow, with a couple of snare rolls, and jumped into a freeform jazz beat.

And Manfred Thomas started blowing sax.

Richie stood transfixed. An alto sax is a fearsome noise in close proximity, raw and primal and urgent. An acknowledged up-and-coming master of the instrument, Manfred had twenty years behind him, and the casual way with which he could raise his voice scared some players right into the background.

Suddenly behind that angelic horn, a rough and tumble roadhouse guitar started. Richie looked over and saw that Alley was lying on his back, his fucking back, on the floor and playing a Fender Jazzmaster like the thing was attacking him. It looked like he picked a fistfight with the instrument, but at least he was winning.

Digger watched Richie with curiosity while he drummed. Alley stared into nothing. Manny seemed deeply into his own little world where nothing mattered, and he prayed to Orpheus using the voice of the instrument that now seemed to be a part of him.

Through the glass wall Kinter rolled his hand at him as if to say, "You're walking with giants now. Prove you can keep up."

Richie took a deep breath and reached for the tempo. He began to slap the strings, giving the line a huge bombastic pounding feel, almost reggae, almost island, almost... almost rock. Almost jazz. Almost everything. Funk. Soul. Heaven.

He began to play.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have always loved music. Loved it with a single-minded passion that still fills me with a driving need to express myself. I can't play guitar or bass well, but I play them with enthusiasm, which is what I have.

Astute readers will understand why each chapter begins with a musician's date of death, rather than any other date in their life. Thematically, death is more prevalent than any other topic in music except maybe sex. Each artist mentioned in this book (either as a chapter leader or as a *fictional* version of themselves) touched my life in some way, large or small, and made my day better at some point.

Every name in this book is taken from the music world in some manner or another, either players, or artists, or sound engineers. You'll find a lot of references if you know where to look and have the type of deep, encyclopedic, obsessive knowledge of the recording industry that inevitably comes with fervent fandom. Not just names, obviously. For those real people with whose likenesses I've absconded, please understand that I hold you in the highest regard and mean what I do as an homage only.

Finally, I'd like to take this space to acknowledge every musician out there trying to inspire someone else. This is what it looks like when you inspire someone who can't play, but *wants* to.

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Aaron S Gallagher  
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