

NOIR NOTES

Original Screenplay

by Marc Serhan

Rough/First Draft

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EXT. "NUGGETS" JAZZ BAR - NIGHT (1992)

The flickering neon sign of the "NUGGETS" casts a jagged reflection on the wet pavement.

Patrons huddle under the canopy, conversations muffled by the rain. Posters from the 1992 presidential campaign plaster the walls and trees around the club.

INT. "NUGGETS" - NIGHT

On the walls, color and B&W photos of jazz legends, past and present ('90s), silently witness the night.

The SAXOPHONIST concludes a provocative solo; in response, the PIANIST, a sultry redhead, dives into her keys with passion. The BASSIST adds deep undertones. It's a dialogue between instruments.

VINCENT MORELLO, "VINNIE", mid-50s, ruggedly handsome with weary eyes, sits alone at the bar corner, engrossed in the performance, drink untouched. There's a weight to him, an air of contemplation. He seems distant, lost in thoughts.

Every so often, his fingers subconsciously tap on the counter, as if pressing the keys of an instrument.

The female BARTENDER, mid-30s, confident with a playful edge, pours drinks. She steals glances at Vinnie, then finally musters the courage to approach.

BARTENDER
Another drink?

VINNIE
Haven't even started that one!

BARTENDER
Just trying.

VINNIE
(points to the band)
Just listening.

The 'musical duel' ends to the applause of delighted patrons.

Vinnie's eyes momentarily meet the bartender's, then shift back to the stage. She pivots away, provocative.

BARTENDER
(eying him)
Gimme a holler if you want me.
I mean... a drink!

INT. VINNIE'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The apartment is neat but lonely.

Against the wall by a closed door, a set of Ikea style floating shelves support photos of Vinnie's late wife, Elsa, singing on stage, himself playing the sax, both as a duo, a younger Vinnie in his police uniform. A few photos with and of their daughter, ELENA, at various ages. This feels like a candleless altar.

A vintage reel player sits on a gueridon by the sofa.

Vinnie hangs his coat, pours a drink, and moves to the window. His cat, CLUE, follows, meowing. Vinnie stands against the city lights, a man with a burdened past and an uncertain future.

Clue sits and watches, meowing.

VINNIE

One minute, Clue. One minute.

INT. VINNIE'S OFFICE LANDING - DAY

A plaque on the door reads: "Vincent Morello - Private Investigations".

INT. VINNIE'S OFFICE - DAY

Morning sunlight seeps through the blinds. A lazy ceiling fan hums monotonously.

Stacks of case files and papers crowd a desk with a push-button phone and an answering machine.

An old rotary phone with a tangled cord sits above a bulky fax machine and binders, abandoned.

A large bulletin board holds newspaper clippings, photos, and a city map with colored strings marking routes.

Vinnie, on the phone, half-listens to a distraught client, JEFFREY LAWSON. On the desk, a picture frame of Elsa with adult Elena.

LAWSON (V.O.)

She's never done this before,
Vincent. She's not the type!

VINNIE

Alright, Mr. Lawson. I'll get on it.

LAWSON (V.O.)
(voice breaking)
She usually leaves home around ten.
Would that work for you?

VINNIE
Will do, sir.

LAWSON (V.O.)
Alright. Call me after, please.
Right after!

Lawson hangs up. Vinnie sighs and does the same.

INT. ELENA'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

The modern, cozy living space, harbors many similar family photos to those seen in Vinnie's apartment. Hanging on a wall behind a piano and an easel holding music sheets, a big framed portrait of Elsa singing on stage.

ELENA MORELLO, late 20s, poised but clearly burdened, flips her flip-top phone open, marks a brief pause before dialing.

ELENA
Hey, dad...

INTERCUT WITH VINNIE'S OFFICE

VINNIE
Pumpkin!... Everything alright?

ELENA
Yeah, just thought I'd check in.
It's been a while.

There's an awkward pause, tension evident.

ELENA (CONT'D)
I got a gig next week. Thought
you'd want to come.

VINNIE
Sure! I'll be there. Where?

ELENA
"Crescendo". - Hope to see you.
It's only for one week starting
Monday. - Take care?

A longer pause. Elena hesitates before speaking again.

ELENA (CONT'D)
Sometimes I feel like you forget I
even exist.

VINNIE
(sighs)
I'm sorry, Pumpkin. I'm trying.
It's just... hard to let go.

ELENA
I miss you, Dad. I need you. — Take
care.

She hangs up, leaving them both with frustration.

EXT. LOCAL BARBERSHOP - DAY

A local barbershop. The window is plastered with a poster for Bill Clinton's '92 election.

INT. LOCAL BARBERSHOP - CONTINUOUS

The rhythmic snipping of scissors and the hum of electric clippers set the ambiance in the busy salon. Vinnie sits in a chair, draped with a striped barber's cape.

TONY, an elderly barber with white hair and a thick Italian accent, gives Vinnie a close shave.

TONY
You gonna visit your daughter
anytime soon, Vinnie?

VINNIE
Been meaning to, Tony. — She
actually called this morning. She's
got a gig next week.

TONY
Good! The beauty and the talent,
she got it all from her mother!
Stubborn she gets from you.

VINNIE
(pouring it into his eyes)
Every day, Tony. I miss her mother
every day.

TONY
Time, Vinnie? Maybe it heals... But
Elsa?... she's still with us, eh?

VINNIE
(taps his temple)
In here! You only die when you're forgotten.

TONY
You gonna go see her? Elena, huh?

Vinnie closes his eyes, isolating himself from the questioning. Tony, vexed, does what he does best: shaving.

INT. VINNIE'S LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The reel player spreads Elsa's voice in the room.

Vinnie is in the middle of a routine on his treadmill. Despite his years, he still 'got it'. His feline companion, Clue, interrupts with soft meows.

VINNIE
Give me a minute, Clue!

He keeps exercising, Clue sits and waits, drawing a rare smile from the stoic detective.

EXT. RICCI'S RESIDENCE / POOL AREA - NIGHT

The pool area is beautifully lit. A JAZZ BAND plays. Guests in chic attire converse. Servers move around with trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

JONAH REINCHENBACH, sixtyish, dressed in a sharp tuxedo, stands out from the group he chats with, DONNIE, BURT.

REICHENBACH
(looking at each in turn)
Discretion's everything. That's why we only use one canvasser. Not to worry, she's very good at this.

BURT
Always the voice of caution, aren't you, Jonah?

DONNIE
When will the next batch be ready?

REICHENBACH
Two more girls? By end of week.

BURT
Batches of six. One batch a month.

INT. RICCI'S RESIDENCE / STUDY - CONTINUOUS

An opulent study. Behind the windows, we can see the party going on in the pool area.

DOMINIC RICCI, late 50s, dressed in a tailored suit, sits at his desk, looking at City Councilman RONALD EVANS who just came in, a flute of champagne in hand.

RICCI

Evans... didn't expect to see you here, Councilman. To what do I owe the pleasure?

Evans, elegant 50s, sits across Ricci at his invite.

EVANS

I know you're a busy man, Ricci!... So, I'll get straight to the point. I'm considering a run for Mayor in the upcoming elections..

RICCI

(smirks)

Bold move. What's that got to do with me?

EVANS

I am gathering support. Financial and otherwise. I know your influence in this city, Dom.

RICCI

Oh, it's "Dom" now?

(chuckles)

You're asking for my money, I guess... and my connections, I guess again. But why should I care? What's in it for me?

EVANS

(leaning forward)

A friend who can pull strings, for starters. Someone who understands the 'intricacies' of your business.

RICCI

(smirks)

That's a dangerous game you're playing, Evans. But I admire the guts. - Alright, let's say I'm interested, I'd expect some loyalty in return. - Or it won't be just the voters you'll have to answer to.

Evans holds out a hand. They shake on it. Evans is about to ask something. Ricci interrupts.

RICCI (CONT'D)
Let's just say your campaign won't
lack funding.

OUTSIDE - CONTINUOUS

We watch the extravagance of the party from afar for a bit, to the tunes of the Jazz Band playing joyfully.

EXT. CITY STREETS - DAY

New York City is getting busy.

Vinnie, in coat and hat, tails MRS. LAWSON, seamlessly blending with the crowd; dodging the occasional glance. Just a P.I. tailing someone.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Mrs. Lawson enters. Vinnie slips in shortly after and positions himself strategically. He unfolds a newspaper, while discreetly observing her.

A MAN enters and goes straight to Mrs. Lawson, exchanges a few words... smiles... a furtive caress on her hand.

Vinnie casually snaps pictures with his Minox camera and jots down quick notes on a pocket pad.

EXT. LOCAL PARK - DAY

Vinnie jogs through the park's pathways. New York, in its grandeur, sprawls around him.

He stops to watch a STREET MUSICIAN, mediocre at best.

After a reflective pause, Vinnie drops a generous tip, nodding appreciatively.

INT. VINNIE'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Vinnie, freshly showered, teases Clue playfully, crouched by the 'altar' and the closed door.

He stands up, gently touches the door handle, hesitant to turn the knob and go in. After a moment, he breaks away.

INT. VINNIE'S OFFICE - DAY

The ceiling fan hums overhead. Papers, files, and photographs are strewn across Vinnie's desk.

Jeffrey Lawson, late 40s, disheveled, looks over the photos from Vinnie's surveillance. His eyes widen in disbelief.

LAWSON

I knew she was seeing someone, but this... guy? I never thought... Thank you, Vinnie. - I would appreciate your discretion.

VINNIE

It's my job to find the truth, Mr. Lawson, not to spread gossips.

LAWSON

(voice shaking)

Thank you, Vinnie. I just... I need to...

(a beat, then despaired)

I don't know what to do.

Vinnie nods, pouring two glasses of whiskey. He hands one to Lawson, takes a sip in a moment of silence.

LAWSON (CONT'D)

(confused)

What should I do?

INT. "THE BUZZ" JAZZ CLUB - NIGHT

The warm ambiance of "The Buzz" beckons as patrons mill around. High ceilings, glistening chandeliers, and a polished bar lend an air of sophistication.

On the stage, a BAND gets ready: checking their instruments, tuning, one even plays a short riff, covering the MUZAK for a short spell.

Vinnie, dressed smartly, enters the club and heads to his usual spot at any bar: a corner. He nods to the bartender, LUCAS, and takes a seat a couple of stools from two quiet elderly PATRONS.

Dom Ricci, the club's owner-manager, feeds cash into a register for the night. He offers Vinnie a cursory nod.

VINNIE

(nods back; to Lucas)

Same old, Lucas.

LUCAS
The usual it is.

Vinnie's drink is promptly set before him, but just as he takes his first sip, an arresting saxophone SOLO starts to play on the background tape. Vinnie's eyes widen, taken by the sax performance.

As the haunting tune fills the room, Vinnie is lost in the music, seemingly catching every note.

The recording stops abruptly. The LIVE BAND takes over with an upbeat tune. The transition leaves Vinnie yearning.

VINNIE
Hey Lucas, that track... Who was that
on the sax?

Lucas turns to Ricci who looks at him for a second, taken aback. He seems to search his memory for another second.

RICCI
(shaking his head)
It's an old collection, Vincent.
Don't remember the artist. That
tape was... is... from the '70s.

He wheels away from the bar. Vinnie, skeptical, nods slowly, sensing there is more to the story.

The two elderly patrons nearby discuss between themselves.

PATRON #1
(to his companion)
You remember him, don't you? The
sax guy? Played here for some time.

PATRON #2
Oh yeah, he was good. How come you
remember, old fart, that was ages
ago. "The Buzz" was called "Tutti
Canti" back then. New guy, right?

Vinnie's interest is visibly piqued.

PATRON #1
Yeah. Only played here, then he
vanished. 'bout the time of the
murders.

VINNIE
(to Lucas)
That recording... Heard it before?

LUCAS
What recording?

VINNIE
That last track... on the tape... with
the sax solo?...

LUCAS
I don't know, Mr. Morello. Wasn't
paying attention. — I've heard a
lot of tracks. We have quite a few
of those.

EXT. "THE BUZZ" - NIGHT

Vinnie exits, pulling up his collar against the chill. He walks his way home, stops, then, with renewed determination, pivots in a different direction up the street.

INT. JAZZ RECORD STORE - NIGHT

Vinnie flips through rows of records stacked neatly, occasionally pausing to inspect one. The store EMPLOYEE, a young man with a goatee, approaches.

EMPLOYEE
Looking for something specific?

VINNIE
Jazz recordings from the seventies.

The employee points to a rack at the back of the store.

INT. VINNIE'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Scattered jazz magazines litter the floor by the legs of the coffee table. On the table are notes and a worn-out notebook. Vinnie, intent, sifts through magazines of a bygone era. Clue weaves between Vinnie's legs and hops onto his lap.

VINNIE
(petting Clue)
I know, old pal, gimme a minute.

EXT. WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK - MORNING

A day in the life of Washington Square. Passersby and Artists of all kinds crowd the park.