

**Ear Hustle**  
**"Boots and Max"**  
**March 16, 2022**

**Tiffany:** I'm Tiffany Love of Beauty Behind Bars, and this episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is Advised.

**Quick phone beep**

**Carly:** *Hi there. My name is Carly. And I am in love with someone who is currently incarcerated.*

**Female Speaker:** *I was just calling to share my funny prison story.*

**Female Speaker:** *My husband's done 41 years. I've done 25 of them.*

**Male Speaker:** *This is in response to the love stories. I just did 10 years in a Texas prison.*

**Female Speaker:** *My prison romance started about 30 years ago.*

**Female Speaker:** *And the story that I have is a little bit sad.*

**Female Speaker:** *So, I left a message earlier, but I don't think I explained it very well.*

**Male Speaker:** *Met an incredible heiress. She's been my Christmas Eve gift. She's been my Christmas gift. She's been my New Year's Eve present.*

**Female Speaker:** *I fell in love with him. He fell in love with me. And now we are waiting back for our papers because yes, we currently said "I do" to each other. This is our story.*

[somber music]

**Nigel:** Earlonne, we have talked a lot about love on this show.

**Earlonne:** Right.

**Nigel:** But it's always been in the service of another topic, like love and COVID, love and sports, love in the visiting room.

**Earlonne:** So, we've never done an episode that's just a plain old love story.

**Nigel:** I don't think so.

**Earlonne:** Okay, so that's what we're about to do then.

**Nigel:** Yes. Not that long ago, we put a call out on social media. We set up our own-- what was that show called?

**Earlonne:** Loveline.

**Nigel:** Yes, Loveline. To be honest, I really just wanted to know what kinds of stories were out there.

**Earlonne:** Well, let's find out.

[laughter]

**Nigel:** Today, we're going to tell a prison love story. And unlike most of those callers, this one takes place entirely within the prison walls. I'm Nigel Poor.

**Earlonne:** And I'm Earlonne Woods, and this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia, Loveline edition.

[upbeat music]

**Boots:** *This relationship was different. This wasn't a fairy tale. It wasn't some country music love song. But it wasn't what I thought love was going to be. I felt so comfortable just talking about what I was afraid of. That's what being in love was like for me.*

**Earlonne:** Nige, you met Boots through Tony, right?

**Nigel:** Exactly. And Tony is one of our producers on the show working from inside San Quentin.

**Earlonne:** And he told you and New York to bring this cat in for an interview?

**Nigel:** Yeah. To be honest, Earlonne, I wasn't exactly sure what we were going to talk about. But Boots sat down and started telling this story.

**Boots:** *In 2019, this guy came to San Quentin. He and I hit it off immediately. The connection was so good, like I literally remember the day. He walked me back to West Block, and he even showed me a couple of his tattoos. His way of flirting was, "Maybe I'll stop by your cell, and I'll show you the rest of my tattoos some time." And I laughed. I was like, "Yeah, sure." I took a few more steps, and then I say, "Wait, are you fucking serious?" Right? [chuckles] Because I thought he was joking. What, me? You've got to be kidding me, right?*

*I couldn't believe that someone as amazing as him would take an interest in me. Max is a 9 and I'm like a 2. He chased me, not the other way around. He's got a beautiful smile, and he's got this intelligent sense of humor, like smart sense of humor. And he's got this rich voice, it's nice to listen to. All this stuff about him is just very, very attractive.*

**Nigel:** *Since this is audio, since you've described him in depth, will you describe yourself in depth?*

**Boots:** *I'm short, fat, and ugly. Three easy words. Just take very good care of that description right off the bat. [chuckles] Oh, yeah, I've got these tiny little ears that look like chicharrones, like little pork skins.*

**Earlone:** I've got a question for you, Nige.

**Nigel:** Yes.

**Earlone:** How does his ears look like chicharrones?

**Nigel:** Okay. Well, it was funny that he used that word because I think you know I really love chicharrones, right?

**Nigel:** Okay. Right.

**Nigel:** Whenever we go on a road trip, that's my snack. I recognize those ears. They're just little curly, small, kind of like a shrimp.

Max and Boots started dating. It's a little hard for me to imagine because, honestly, I don't know if I can think of a less romantic place in the world than a prison.

**Earlone:** What?

**Nigel:** Yeah. I mean, there's no privacy. Where do you go on dates?

**Earlone:** Well, I mean, you've got to look at it probably through the eyes of the individuals that's falling in love. It probably looks like Venice or something.

**Nigel:** [chuckles] Right. What you're saying is, when you're in love, everything looks beautiful?

**Earlone:** Probably looked totally different.

**Boots:** *We'd sit on the lower yard watching the baseball games. It was late summer, mostly summer, sun's going down by Mount Tam. I mean, come on, this is shit that people do on the streets. We were watching a baseball game in the late evening and just watched the fucking sun go down. It's crazy. It's normal shit. Honestly, I felt like I wasn't in prison. He took me out of this place.*

**Nigel:** Earlone, I know you missed a lot of things when you were in prison. But listening to Boots made me wonder, what about dating? Did you miss that?

**Earlone:** I mean, of course, you know you miss out in life. It would be something fun to do, but I think I was on a totally different mission.

**Nigel:** What do you mean?

**Earlone:** I was on a mission to get out and not get fall into the sappy sappiness of love and shit.

**Nigel:** [chuckles] Okay, Earlone, you say that, but I'm sorry, you and so many other guys I've met in San Quentin act all tough. But every time we bring up the topic of romance, you know exactly what comes to mind for me. You know it.

**Earlone:** Yeah.

[prison door clangs]

**Speaker 1:** *Everybody's seen The Notebook by now, right? Is it like spoiler alert thing?*

**Speaker 2:** *I haven't.*

**Speaker 1:** *You haven't.*

**Speaker 3:** *No.*

**Speaker 4:** *I've not seen it.*

**Nigel:** *No, I haven't seen it either.*

**Speaker 1:** *I'm the only gangster you probably ever meet that my favorite movie will be The Notebook. Tearjerker, but it's cool. It hits you here in the heart.*

**Speaker 5:** *Of course, I cried. It was very emotional. Very emotional.*

[indistinct chatter]

**Earlone:** *The Notebook, Nigel? How many times you going to bring this up?*

**Nigel:** This was from an episode we did back in Season 4. And you know when something makes an impression on me, I'm going to bring it up again and again and again? Sorry.

**Earlone:** [onomatopoeia]

**Nigel:** [laughs]

**Earlone:** I think dudes in prison just get hella sensitive about shit. You know what I'm saying?

**Nigel:** Mm-hmm.

**Earlonne:** Because you're not in the main fold of everything. You're not taking someone out on a date. You're not doing none of that. So, you live in the movies and in your mind.

**Nigel:** But for Boots and Max, they didn't have to live in the movies, because they were living it in prison.

**Earlonne:** Yeah, but it's not that simple, because there are definitely a lot of guys in prison who aren't okay with people being gay. To be honest, I don't think this happens a lot. But sometime, I mean there can be violence.

**Nigel:** Yeah. I've got to say, the prisons I've been to are some of the most homophobic places I've ever been. And for Max, it got really bad. Boots said the problem started when Max moved into a new housing unit.

**Earlonne:** H-Unit, dorm living.

**Nigel:** It is totally different than living in a cell. It's completely open. There's so many people, no privacy. You're really exposed.

**Boots:** *Immediately, the stresses, the problems, the harassment. He's the only the only gay guy in the building he was in. He's not a weak guy. He's a Marine Corps vet, and he's not flamboyant either. Not a person who bothers people, gets in their way. He's not a rat, not any of that stuff. Got along very well with everyone. But one guy.*

*It was about 10 minutes after 8 o'clock at night, and this guy on my tier came to my bars and said, "Hey, I don't know what has happened, but they just took Max off the yard on the back of a cart, and he was covered in blood." I don't know, my mind-- I was just blank. I jumped up, I grabbed my ID, and I ran. Couple of guys on the yard were like, "Yeah, they took Max." "They took Max." They're saying, "His blood was on the ground back there." I was fucking furious.*

*I've spent a lot of my life in these places. I had no idea, except to try to level that playing field in some kind of way. Just like I'm sure 90% of everyone else in this place, when somebody hurts you, you hurt back. Every chance I got, I was going down to the yard, trying to find the guy and find out who he was, and just being honestly being an idiot.*

*Finally, this guy that knew the guy was pointing them out to me, "That's him right there." As he's telling me, there's one cop coming from this direction, two cops coming from another direction. And they were escorting him off the yard.*

*I don't have a history of being loved and appreciated and cared for. So, having that and then losing it, and having no information on how he was doing and whether he was okay, I had no idea how to deal with that.*

**Nigel:** Earlonne, did you ever really see that kind of violence against gay people in prison? Either at San Quentin or someplace else?

**Earlonne:** Not really. I didn't see physical violence. I've seen maybe mental violence where individuals pretty much stop talking to individuals based on their choices-

**Nigel:** Oh, like ostracize people.

**Earlonne:** -to be in a relationship with a gay person.

**Nigel:** Do you know anyone that was in a situation?

**Earlonne:** I know a cat that we used to all hang out. One day, he had told the homies, like, "Yeah, man, I'm going to move this dude up in the cell." I watched individuals just ostracize him. You know what I'm saying? Say, for instance, cats wasn't eating after him no more. If individuals was smoking of any kind, he wasn't smoking after him no more.

**Nigel:** Wow.

**Earlonne:** Some cats was just shaking him all.

**Nigel:** And this was all because he got involved in a relationship?

**Earlonne:** All because he got involved with a person that was gay. That's a different type of violence.

**Nigel:** Yeah. That hurts too.

**Earlonne:** [crosstalk]

**Nigel:** it just seems that there's a lot of reasons for guys to keep that secret if they're involved.

**Earlonne:** You mean keep it on the down low?

**Nigel:** Yes, exactly. But Boots was not into that.

**Boots:** *I identify as a fag most of the time, but yes, I'm gay.*

**Nigel:** *Why do you choose that word?*

**Boots:** *Well, is it okay to just speak freely, like normally--*

**Nigel:** *Yes, please.*

**Boots:** Okay. It's basically it's a fuck you to all the guys that they hate faggots and queers and punks, and everything else. Prison is probably 20 or 25 years behind the times. And there's a lot of prejudice, and there's a lot of bullshit. So, calling myself a fag is getting to the punchline before anybody else does. It takes the power back a little bit.

**New York:** I'm just wondering, we always hear this thing we can take the power back from words by just calling ourselves that. I wonder if that's what's really happening. Or is that just our coping mechanism?

**Boots:** Well, it probably is part that. Maybe a mixture of both. I don't think everything is as clear cut. Psychologically, it's just one thing, but hearing the words on the tier like I do, even in here, where I work at, I hear it. I hear it all day, every day. My way is to just be like, "You know what, fuck it. I'm going to own it. I'm a faggot. If you don't like it, that's your problem. That's not mine."

[upbeat music]

**Nigel:** I want to point out the way you said the word "faggot," you said it in a very different way, which was with gusto and some kind of, I would say, almost relish. When you said it to me the first time, I was like, "Ooh, he really loves that word."

**Boots:** I think maybe it might help to understand to where I came from. I didn't actually come out of the closet until my 30s. I had experiences, but I didn't own it. I have hated gay people. I have attacked men for acting in a way that I perceived to being feminine. Now that I've not only come out, but also overcome a lot of the prejudice and the stereotypes and the being in prison and being one of the most hated demographics, or if not hated, then at least stereotyped, you know I call myself a fag, I'm a big old fag. I own that shit, it's mine. That's kind of the way I see it. I'm a man who loves men. What's the big deal?

**Nigel:** Yeah.

[somber music]

**Nigel:** It's time for a short break. When we get back, we're going to hear a few more of those love stories from the listeners.

**Earlonne:** And find out what happened with Boots and Max.

[upbeat music fades]

**Female Speaker:** Hi, Nigel and Earlonne. Back in 2003 when I was at CRC, down south, I was going out with this girl named Bo. But Bo was a ho, and she would go out with everybody. She would always try to turn all the straight girls, turn them out. Finally, after a while, I wrote a letter to Art Laboe, Sunday Night Special. We would listen to that every night on Sundays, oldies. And I had them dedicate a song to Bo, So Gone by Monica. I thought that was funny.

**Female Speaker:** *My prison romance started about 30 years ago when my live-in boyfriend got a life sentence. I was only 21 at the time, so I didn't feel that I could stick around, and I left. But I never got over him, I never got married. And then when COVID started, I found your podcast and started writing some incarcerated people as a pen pal thing. One of my pen pals was on his 25th year and told me that people with long sentences either get better or bitter and I should reach out and find out which he was. So, I wrote Khalil, and he is better. He is awesome. We are engaged and we'll be married in the fall.*

**Female Speaker:** *I met my fiancée, Ayana, in 2006. She was a lifer, and I was doing time with her. I walked up to her, told her that she was very beautiful, that I had needed to get to know her. She replied that we should be better off as friends. Our love grew deeper and then I proposed to her knowing that she's a lifer. She said yes. She went to board last year and was found suitable for parole. She's coming home in April, and we will now make our love real out here.*

**Female Speaker:** *It has been quite some crazy thing for me to be good on the outside without him. Today's Monday. It's my first day at work of the week. I'm very grumpy on Mondays. Coming back to the realizations of this is my life and this is what I go through, and this is what I struggle with.*

**New York:** *So, you said something about he was in hospital for 23 days.*

**Boots:** *23 days.*

**Earlone:** *Back to Boots and Max. Max was in bad shape. As we heard earlier on the show, he had got beaten up badly by a guy in his housing unit.*

**Boots:** *He had a spinal fusion surgery, had to have his jaw put back together because the entire bottom half was split. The hinge of his jaw was shattered. His nose was broken. His eye socket was shattered. He was between Marin General Hospital and the hospital here for 23 days.*

**Earlone:** *Eventually, Max was brought back to the hospital at San Quentin.*

**Nigel:** *But it wasn't like Boots can visit him there.*

**Earlone:** *No.*

**Boots:** *I used to go out to the yard at night and hold up these signs to him, to his windows on the fourth floor. I knew what room he was in.*

**Nigel:** *What would they say?*

**Boots:** *It said, "I woof you."*

**Nigel:** *[laughs] It says what?*

**Boots:** *I made these signs on poster board taped together and I yelled out, said, "Come back, come back, come back." I actually made a shirt one time, took a white t-shirt and put a big old paw print on it.*

**Nigel:** *It's adorable and it's so wonderful. But prison is not a place where you think of people showing that kind of fun, loving, exuberant, "I don't care, I just love this person," kind of spectacle. I've got to ask New York a question. What does it feel like hearing about someone experiencing this kind of love in prison?*

**New York:** *I'm jealous, because I don't have the same opportunity.*

**Boots:** *Do you think that drives some of the homophobia?*

**New York:** *I don't know but I'm definitely jealous. I'm definitely hating now. [laughs]*

**Nigel:** *Yeah, New York, that's got to be hard.*

**New York:** *Yeah.*

**Nigel:** Earlonne, I was really struck by New York's reaction. That kind of jealousy never occurred to me before.

**Earlonne:** Well, prison can be really lonely. There's a lot of felons that you put on hold while you're in there.

**Nigel:** Yeah, I bet.

**Earlonne:** Finally, after 23 days, Max was released from the hospital. Boots said he first caught sight of him as Max was being escorted down to tier by guards.

**Boots:** *Max is one of those-- Okay, so he's Mexican with his this very thick, luxurious beard. When he first came back from the hospital, he hardly had any beard at all because he had to have surgeries and all that stuff. So, most of that was gone. At first, he didn't even look the same. I couldn't even hug him. I couldn't even hold onto him. I couldn't do nothing. What I wanted to do was just snatch him up and fucking protect him and drag him in the cell and just kiss him and make everything be better. I couldn't do none of that.*

**Nigel:** *Could you touch each other through the--?*

**Boots:** *Through the bars, holding hands to the bars, and my cellie is behind me. My cellie is straight, kind of conservative Filipino lifer, really good dude, but conservative. So, I'm trying to keep the conversation a little bit clean and not make him uncomfortable, but at the same time, I'm like chomping at the bit.*

**Nigel:** *Where you're putting your fingers--?*

**Boots:** *Yeah, absolutely. We're holding hands to the bars and trying to block that with my body. Man, my heart was just going crazy. I was all smiles. Finally, I don't even care, I kissed him through the bars, and I heard my cellie behind, "Oh, my fucking God." [chuckles]*

**Nigel:** You know what was kind of cool?

**Earlonne:** Talk to me.

**Nigel:** After all of that trauma and everything they went through, the months that followed, I mean they got to live together.

**Earlonne:** I see you trying to frame this like *The Notebook*, Nigel.

**Nigel:** [laughs] Oh, my God.

**Earlonne:** [laughs]

**Nigel:** You brought it up, not me.

**Earlonne:** So, you're saying strolling on the yard, holding hands, watching the sunset.

**Nigel:** Exactly.

**Earlonne:** Okay.

**Nigel:** Romance.

**Earlonne:** Okay.

**Nigel:** *So, how long did you have together after he got out of the--?*

**Boots:** *We only had another eight months, I think, after he came back.*

**Nigel:** *Okay. And those are great eight months.*

**Boots:** *Oh, that was amazing. The cellie that I had moved north block, and Max moved in my cell. I used to tell him, "This is crazy. I can't believe you're actually here." It's amazing that I had to come to prison to meet somebody I've never had an argument with. I've got this tattoo right here on my wrist, it's little paw print, it says "Woof." He's got one too. We've got the same, matching tattoos.*

**Nigel:** [chuckles] Aw.

**Boots:** *I love him. He's the first person in my life that ever loved me back.*

**Nigel:** *What happened to Max, ultimately?*

**Boots:** *Max paroled. He paroled June 10th right before the coronavirus outbreak 2020. He's doing very well. He's working for Warner Brothers now as a camera operator, and will be working the Super Bowl this year.*

**Nigel:** *Oh, that's cool.*

**Boots:** *Yeah, I'm so proud of him. He's doing real, real good.*

**Nigel:** *Now that he's gone, do you find yourself living in that memory?*

**Boots:** *All the time, every day. Every single day. I've got a little notebook actually, I write little notes all the time, and it's got a little teal leather cover on it. So, it gets all filled up, I'll send it to him.*

**Earlone:** I really wanted to hit Max's side of this.

**Nigel:** I know, and so did I. Believe me, we tried. But unfortunately, San Quentin's on lockdown again with COVID. There was really no way for us to reach out to Boots and ask him to put us in touch with Max.

**Earlone:** But their separation is not going to last forever. I hear Boots only has three more years on his sentence.

**Nigel:** But until then, he's in the same boat as a lot of people in prison.

**Earlone:** What boat is that?

**Nigel:** You know, dreaming about someone on the outside. You're living in that movie again. Picturing them standing there in front of you.

**Earlone:** Imagination is all you got in prison.

**Boots:** *He is a tough motherfucker. In real good shape. He's fucking hot. But the deeper safety of just really, really knowing with no question, no doubt that I am completely, completely safe and taken care of and all that. It's okay to be a fucking man and still be a little bit vulnerable, as a physical place of safety and happiness and just wellbeing. When you love somebody and when they love you back, you're not supposed to get that in prison. But we did.*

[pensive music]

**Female Speaker:** *So, this has definitely gone on for longer than 60 seconds, but my phone number is 530--*

**Male Speaker:** *I've been more in love with her ever. My number is 346--*

**Female Speaker:** *That was kind of short and simple.*

**Female Speaker:** *Yeah, that's my little love story.*

**Male Speaker:** *Have a good day. Bye-bye.*

**Female Speaker:** *I don't know if it's romance per se, but that's all I got. Thanks, bye-bye.*

**Female Speaker:** *And that's my story. Thanks.*

[pensive music]

[upbeat music]

**Becky:** Ear Hustle would like to thank Samantha, Audrey, Adaleida, Becca, Carly, Aundrea, Adriana, Jacquai, Lilia, KitKat's Pretty Dee, Talena, Em, Trish, Sean, and me, Becky. And everyone else who called in to tell us a love story.

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**Lt. Sam Robinson:** This is Lt. Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison. And for my entire 25 plus years, I've witnessed people come in and try to have some type of relationship or develop romance. Whether it's reading guys letters, searching the cells, or looking at from a business perspective coming in, this is really a part of the prison experience. So, with that, I will say that I approve this episode.

[upbeat music]

**Earlonne:** This episode was made possible by The Just Trust, working to amplify the voices, vision, and power of communities that are transforming the justice system.

**Nigel:** Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

**Earlonne:** Some of the best podcasts around. I'm Earlonne Woods.

**Nigel:** I'm Nigel Poor.

**Nigel and Earlonne:** Thanks for listening.

[music fades off]

[Radiotopia from PRX]

**End of Episode**