

Setup:

Ash is weirded out when Madison crashes her band practice with tear-smearred eyeliner and her electric cello. Princess-next-door Maddie has never acknowledged Ash exists, and now she's in her garage, rocking out like a badass. Reluctantly, Ash concedes that Maddie might be the answer to their metal-related BandQuest problems.

Maddie's new cello comes with a massive non-verbal agreement – don't tell mum that dad has been fooling around with his secretary. Although Maddie is totally uncomfortable keeping her dad's secret, there is something else that comes with the cello, too: freedom. Maddie can finally do what *she* wants. Starting with joining the hot girl-next-door's punk-rock band.

Ash and Maddie slowly start to build a relationship. When Ash learns that Maddie is failing English, she helps her out, and soon Maddie's finding out what it's like to be a part of a big, messy family. Ash sees how restrictive Maddie's life has been under her parents firm-but-unavailable rule.

After band practice and a late-night study session, Ash and Maddie almost-kiss. Maddie decides to tell her parents that she likes girls – but Ash is determined to pretend that nothing's happened as BandQuest regionals loom. After winning regionals, Maddie asks Ash to the school dance and when Ash refuses, Maddie realises that nothing will happen with Ash so long as she hides herself behind her tougher-than-nails persona.

Maddie decides to come out to her parents anyway. Ash realises she's been too chicken-shit to risk herself for love. She tries to make amends.

Ash stepped into the foyer, the clacky black heels she had stolen from her mum already liquefying her pinky toes. She took a deep, shaky breath – in, count to four, out. Was she about to do this? Out herself in front of everyone in school? Her stomach flipped in protest, stopping her just short of the doors.

What if this doesn't work. What if Maddie laughs at me. What if I really did fuck this up forever. Ash wiped her clammy hands against the fabric of the curve-hugging monstrosity she had picked out with Armadillo and Jess. She readjusted the small purse that hung heavily over her shoulder.

No. There was no turning around. Not this time. Through the doors ahead of her was the chance she wanted more than anything in this world. More than proving her parents wrong, more than winning the national BandQuest championship. Hell, even more than her stupid, oddball bandfam. It was just tough freaking luck that a horde of gyrating muppets now stood between her and her princess.

Ash turned around to look at her bandmates.

“Go get em, short stuff.” Jonah winked at Ash.

“You’ve got this.” Armadillo added.

“Yeah, and if you really do fuck this up, you’ll always have *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.”

Jess grinned, and Armadillo chuckled as she jabbed an elbow at Jess’s ribs.

Ash hesitated, her stupid, mixed-up emotions running hotter than words. “I just...”

She paused, drawing strength from the people she trusted most in the world. Her ‘no matter what’ people. She took another deep breath in. “Okay. We got this. And thanks, guys. For everything.”

Jonah grinned. “Eww, you scrawny little mushball.” He grabbed Ash’s shoulders, turning her towards the doors. “How about we put a cork in all this sentimental ridiculousness and do this thing, huh? My drumsticks are getting cold.”

Ash nodded, taking a step forward and pushing the doors to the school hall open.

Lights searched and flashed, roving over the hundreds of students by the stage. Yet more figures lined the walls, or hovered around long tables topped with half-empty punch bowls and scraps of food.

Damn, everyone in their year was here, surely. It looked more like half the school...

Ash’s stomach lurched again as her eyes roved over the crowd of masked faces – laughing, swarming people engulfed her as she moved forward, pressing herself through the crowd. Maddie was here somewhere. She was probably dancing with the same carefree look on her face she got when she was playing her cello. All Ash had to do was find her. Oh yeah – and convince Maddie to give her a second chance. Piece of cake.

A small pocket opened in the crowd, and Ash briefly glimpsed a flash of light. Searching for the source, her breath hitched. It was Maddie, her princess, wearing the most sequined, bedazzled little dress Ash had ever seen. Her eyes were closed as she twirled to the music, her dress lighting up like diamond fire, oblivious to how beautiful she looked.

Ash’s heart leapt into her throat. Everything else shut down—the blaring lights, the people, the way her dress clung anxiously to the curves she hadn’t realised she had.

Maddie’s eyes opened, and for a split-second Ash saw in them all the reasons why she had come here. Then the shock registered. Shock, with a twinge of anger lodged between those two perfectly plucked eyebrows.

Maddie grabbed Ash’s hand, jerking her towards her. “What the heck are you doing here?” She whisper-screamed, her voice barely carrying above the music.

I'm doing what I should have done the moment you told me you loved me, Ash thought, as she pulled Maddie by the hand, weaving her out of the crowd to a quieter corner.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Maddie closed her eyes, her flare of anger souring into pain. The cover band finished their song and Maddie spoke, firmly but quietly. “No. I don’t want to hear it, Ash. You know I don’t. You had a chance to make things right and you blew it. What makes you think I can just forget about how you treated me?”

Ash’s heart dropped. *Shit, I really have screwed this up for good.*

An argument started on stage, glowering through the amps and everyone – even Maddie – stared as Jonah, Armadillo, and Jess hijacked the stage. Jonah grabbed the microphone.

“Ahh... apologies, everyone, for this brief-yet-essential musical intervention. The evening’s festivities will resume shortly, until then, please enjoy this song from your own Fairwillow High School’s regional-slaying band.” Jonah made a move for the drums as Armadillo and Jess checked and tuned their instruments.

“I chickened out, Maddie, and I’m sorry. I should never have left you to come out on your own. But I’m going to make it up to you. Starting now.”

Ash wiped her clammy palms and wrestled with the fastening on her purse, pulling the microphone out and switching it on. As it shrieked to life, she looked straight at Maddie. No one else mattered.

“Um, this song goes out to the Princess of Prairie Place. Brave, kind, and the best electric cello player the world of punk-rock has ever seen.”

A mixture of shock and hope mixed in Maddie’s eyes. Ash gave Maddie’s hand one last squeeze and spoke straight into the microphone. “I know this doesn’t make up for what I was too scared to do, but I hope that it is enough to show you how freaking sorry I am.”

Jonah tapped out the first bar. That was her cue. She turned and ran up to the stage, bulldozing her way through the crowd. Armadillo and Jess stood at the front, ready to pull her up.

“One, two, three, four!”

Maddie’s head burst with a thousand different thoughts as she watched Ash belt out the final notes of the song. Of *her* song.

As the last strum of Jess’s guitar faded into reverb, Maddie looked around the hall. Everyone was quiet. You could literally hear a pin drop, which was totally awkward, considering how many people were in the hall. Ash cleared her throat.

“It’s time for me to confess to my sins. I wasn’t going to come to the dance tonight because when the most amazing person in the world asked me, I was too shit-scared to say yes.” People started looking around at each other, guessing at who Ash was talking about. A few knowing gazes rested on Maddie.

“I should have said yes, but I was too chicken-shit to come to the dance with a girl. Well, here I am, in front of basically the entire school... and it’s true. I’m queer as hell, and I fell in love with Madison Miller.”

The school stood in stunned silence. A lone person coughed out “Gay!”

Ash ignored it. “I guess all I came here to say was... please forgive me, Maddie.” Ash passed the microphone back to the confused-looking cover band singer and walked offstage.

Maddie’s heart raced. It was true, Ash had slayed her trust, but she was here, in front of everyone, and Goddamn it she was ah-freaking-mazing. Maddie ran up to the side of the stage as Ash exited out the side-door.

Ash looked straight into Maddie’s eyes. “Madison Miller, is it too late to ask you for the next dance?”

“Of course not, you crumpet.” Maddie leapt at Ash and pulled her close. Her heart ached as she felt Ash take a shaky breath in.

“I loved you from the moment I stepped foot into your garage.” Maddie leaned closer, pressing her forehead against Ash’s one. “Even if you do rock out so hard that sometimes you smell like B.O.”

“And I loved you, from the moment your crazy cello skills filled the hole in our band, and your unapologetic awesomeness filled the hole I never knew existed in my heart.” Ash nuzzled at Maddie with her nose. She was so close that she could taste the sweetness of Maddie’s breath.

Maddie closed the last millimetres, her soft, painted lips melting into Ash’s glossy ones. Maddie’s stomach fluttered as Ash’s lips opened and pressed against her own. She tasted like rainbows, and she felt like home.

Maddie smiled when she finally pulled away from Ash, grabbing both of her hands and pulling her forward to the dance floor. Ash stopped her short.

“You know... I still have to tell my parents about us... I was hoping –”

“– You want to do it together?” Maddie squeezed as much encouragement as she could into Ash’s palms.

Ash smiled. “Yeah. Together.” She confirmed, squeezing back.