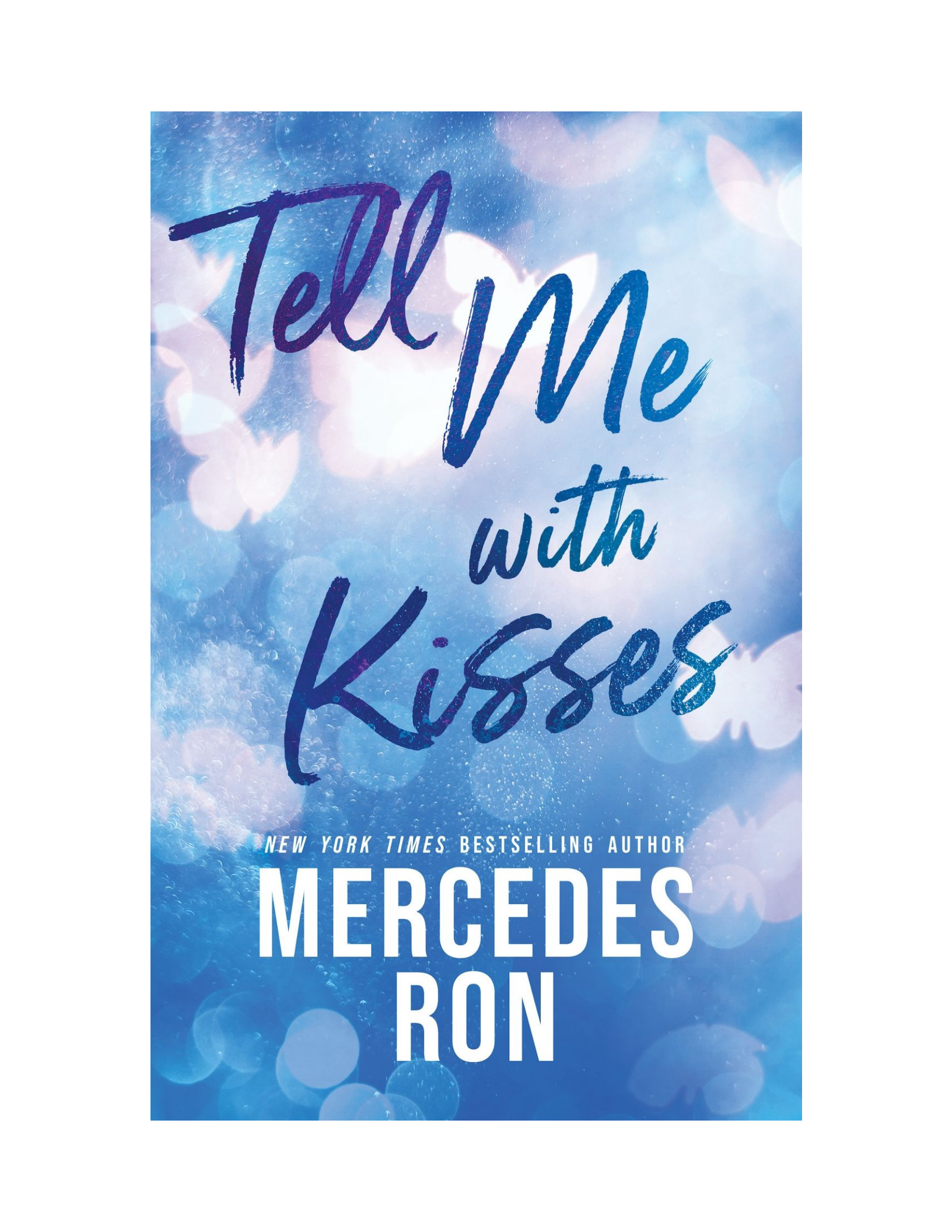


Tell Me
with
Kisses

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**MERCEDES
RON**



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Tell Me
with
Kisses

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Contents

[*Publisher's Note*](#)

[*Author's Note*](#)

[*Content Warning*](#)

Part One

[Chapter One: Kami](#)

[Chapter Two: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Three: Kami](#)

[Chapter Four: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Five: Kami](#)

[Chapter Six: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Seven: Kami](#)

[Chapter eight: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Nine: Kami](#)

[Chapter Ten: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Kami](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Kami](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: Kami](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Twenty: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three: Kami](#)

[Part Two: Decline](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight: Kami](#)

[Epilogue One: Kami](#)

[Epilogue Two: Taylor](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)



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Publisher's Note

This is a work of fiction translated from the original 2020 Spanish publication of the Dimelo series. Translation was done as closely as possible to the author's original work, characters, plot, and voice, so some liberties were taken with regard to U.S. law and the response of authorities to a school shooting.

Author's Note

This book is, above all, a story of love, growth, and second chances. However, it touches on a difficult subject: a high school shooting.

My intention has always been to approach this part of the story with great care, respect, and sensitivity, knowing how deeply painful and real this kind of experience is for so many people and communities. The scene is not meant to glorify violence or dwell on it, but to reflect the emotional impact it has on the characters and how, even in moments of fear and loss, human beings reach for one another in search of comfort, connection, and hope.

If this content feels heavy for you, please take your time reading it, or step away if you need to.

Thank you for trusting this story.

Mercedes

Content Warning

This book contains scenes of gun violence, including descriptions of a school shooting, as well as references to gun violence, sexual assault, cyberbullying, harassment, and physical assault.

Part One

Chapter One

Kami

No one had any idea where Julian was—a week had passed since Thiago had gone to New York and learned that the cyber-stalker, the one who was manipulating everyone and turning them against me, was Julian Murphy, a.k.a. Jules. The same guy who had invited me to watch a movie the night we went to Falls Church only to drug me, take a video of me naked, and put it on the web for everyone to see. The same guy who had caused problems between one of my best friends and me, and had uploaded photos to my Instagram after extorting my little brother to sneak into my room and steal them from me. The same person who had pretended to be gay to get close to me, who had sworn he was my friend.

I stopped pressing my pencil into the sheet of paper and ran my finger over the hole I'd just made in my drawing. I hadn't realized I was pushing down so hard.

I had been doodling randomly, and there was nothing special about the images, but if you really looked at them, they'd make your hair stand on end. Every picture I'd created lately had been creepy. But that was to be expected.

Could the year get any worse?

I doubted it. How could one person have such bad luck?

Everything happening at school had distracted me so much that I had stopped even thinking about my parents' divorce. My mother had become a mere shell of her former self, rendered unstable from all the recent events. She'd found out both her children were being bullied, and my grandmother was driving her crazy, telling her constantly she had no idea how to raise us. She was tired and worried since the money Dad sent us every month wasn't enough to maintain the lifestyle she was used to. Little by little, she was starting to have to make sacrifices.

At least now, though, she seemed a little more human and less like the stupid, superficial Barbie doll she'd always been. She didn't have time to be so self-involved since she had to manage the house, take us to school and pick us up, cook, and focus on my little brother.

She had gone with me the day before to the police station to file a report against Julian for electronic harassment, sexual assault, and unlawful dissemination of explicit images. I had been nervous about it—I wasn't sure if I would be able to handle it, to actually take him to court and try to convict a person I'd thought was my friend just a few days before. I didn't want to see him again, I couldn't, but Mom and Grandma had kept insisting, over and over. In the end, the ones who finally convinced me, though, were the Di Bianco brothers.

What was it about those two that they could penetrate my thoughts so easily? How did they always manage to make their opinions, their concept of me, matter so much that I stopped being scared? How could they persuade me in one simple conversation to do something my family had struggled and failed at?

I hadn't forgotten the moment I'd shared with Thiago in his car the day he'd found out the truth and Julian had gotten his ass beaten. I couldn't forget those green eyes looking deep into my soul to send me a message that would change everything in the depths of my subconscious mind.

He loved me.

Thiago loved me. How could he love me?

We hadn't been alone with each other since that time in his car. Taylor hadn't left my side, and Thiago was more distant than ever. The one time he spoke to me was to try and encourage me to turn Julian in. I was in Taylor's room, and I guess he heard us talking because he burst in and warned me that if I didn't do anything, I was putting hundreds of girls in danger of falling, as I had, into the trap of a manipulative, compulsive liar.

He was right. I knew that. He couldn't have been more right. So I did as he said—I went to the police station and made my statement.

What happened after that still keeps me up at night.

They went to Julian's house to arrest him, but when they got there, he was gone. His family had no idea where he was. The last time they'd seen him had been that morning, when he'd told them he was going to the library to study.

That was a week ago now.

Julian was nowhere to be found. He had vanished and hadn't even bothered to hide the hundreds of photos he had been taking of everybody at school. They were right there in his room, along with videos, especially of the basketball team and the cheerleading squad. But I was clearly the one he'd really fixated on.

He had taken hundreds of photos and videos of me without my knowledge and had stolen private pictures of mine, including images of me as a little girl. Had he been following me, spying on me, for that long?

Julian was a psychopath. A psychopath obsessed with me.

I had tried to get close to Kate again—she was his sister; she had to know something—but even though she used to be my best friend, she refused to talk to me now. Ellie told me Kate had quit the cheerleading squad, and barely anyone had seen her since Julian's secrets came out.

I'd had my eye on her in the days leading up to that weekend, and I could tell something wasn't right. I figured it hadn't been easy for her to find out that her stepbrother was a fucking stalker. It's not like Julian and Kate got along that well. In fact, they could hardly stand one another, but he was still her brother.

On the day Julian was beaten up by the mob of angry students, Taylor had managed to slip away into the crowd at the last second, avoiding the punishment the others got. They were suspended, including Danny. As far as I was concerned, Taylor should have been suspended, too. Every action had a consequence.

But he'd gotten away with it.

I closed my drawing pad and tucked it into my desk drawer. As always, I looked out the window to the next house over, where the cause of my sweetest dreams and my worst nightmares laid his head.

Thiago had been avoiding me ever since that day in his car when he confessed that he loved me. Every day since then, every cell in my body had been longing to be by his side once more. Have you ever felt the pain that

comes from physically needing someone? The way your body begs for their warmth alone to restore its vitality? That's how I felt.

Whenever I went to see Taylor and we crossed through the living room to go upstairs, Thiago was always there, lying on the couch watching TV or sleeping with his face on his forearm. Sometimes, I'd peek into his room from the landing, and there he'd be, reading a book or sitting in front of his computer, or—God forbid—doing push-ups shirtless with his music on full blast.

That killed me.

It killed me every time we crossed paths and I couldn't cover him in kisses.

We looked but didn't touch. I'm not going to lie. Our eyes hungered for each other. We needed a dose of each other just to get through the day. And that scared me.

Taylor was caring, attentive to my every need, and he was terrified that Julian might show up out of the blue and try to hurt me. His and Thiago's relationship was colder than ever. They barely spoke, and Taylor seemed set on avoiding Thiago's company—especially if *I* was around.

That made things hard because I still thought about Thiago all the time. I could hardly control my anxiety; I needed to know how he was doing. I missed him, and however hard I wished I could stop feeling that, it was impossible.

At least we still had the window.

There had been a time when he used to close the curtains to shut me out. Not anymore. Now they were always open, and I could see him whenever I wanted. I left mine open, too. They were big floor-to-ceiling windows that let

in tons of light. Would you believe I had actually moved my bed? So when I lay there, trying to sleep, I could look out and see Thiago doing the same.

I was losing it; I knew that. But I needed him. It was as simple as that.

* * *

Monday was gray and windy. I got up at seven thirty, looked outside, and a chill ran through me. All I wanted was to crawl back into bed. It's hard to leave the warmth of your blankets and the shelter of your room when all that's awaiting you is a long day of classes and presentations—and nothing to look forward to at three o'clock but gray skies and rain.

But that was how it was. And I needed to try to get things back to normal.

My “friends”—I use quotation marks because I wasn't sure how true their friendship was—had started talking to me again. I had the feeling, deep down, that they were only doing it because I'd become the talk of the town, thanks to Julian, and they, like everyone else, wanted to get more details out of me.

The real story had gotten buried under so many layers of lies that there were even people saying they'd seen Julian hiding out in the woods behind my house or walking around town after midnight with a rifle in hand. Some idiot spread the rumor that Julian wore a disguise and still came to school incognito.

Tall tales, that's all they were.

But people were nervous, anxious, and I was worried, too: that he might reveal hidden secrets about the other students, ruin people's lives, their reputations...