

# Trust Me

...SELF FOR THINKING HIS LOSSING S...  
...COMING TO AN END. HE HAD WORKED IN...  
...SINCE COLLEGE AND LOST PLENTY OF RACES. LOS...  
...TINE. POLITICAL CAREERS CAN HANDLE A LOSS F...  
...ND THERE. EVEN SCANDAL IS EASY ON THE STAFF...  
...OUR CANDIDATE GETS CAUGHT HOPPING INTO BE...  
...YOUR CAREER SURVIVES—UNLESS YOU'RE THE I...  
...S'S CANDIDATE WAS IN JAIL. CHARLES HIMSELF WA...  
...AS A SENIOR... AN AMBITIOUS U.S. ATTORNEY WAS CO...  
...CORRUPTION RAN... DOWN THE CH... COMMAND. I...  
... CHARLES BROKE THE... AL RULE OF... PAIRN STAFFERS:  
...**BECAME THE STORY.** THE EUPHORIA OF NOT FOLLOWING HUNT TO...  
...ISON WAS SHORT-LIVED. ALL HIS OLD CONNECTIONS HAD DIED...  
...D BLOWN AWAY, AND NOW EVEN HIS MOM THOUGHT HE WAS A...  
...LET. "WHAT ELSE IS THERE TO DO?" SHE ASKED. CHARLES WAS N...  
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...BECAUSE SHE ALWAYS OFFERED. "THE JOB IN SANTA...  
...IS A CORPORATE G... I BE DOING P.R. THERE A...  
...CORPORATE P.R. JOBS IN DC YOU NEVER EVEN CONSIDER...  
...PEOPLE IN SANTA FE REACHED OUT TO ME. YOU K...  
...INT FEELS? AFTER BEEP NARE, NONE OF MY FRIE...  
...NO ONE RETURNS MY EMAILS. PEOPLE PRET...  
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...AND I DON'T THINK I...

**Richard Z. Santos**

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—Tim O'Brien, National Book Award-winning author of  
*Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*

## Praise for *Trust Me*

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“A compulsively readable debut.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“*Trust Me* pulses with intrigue, thrills and distinctive humor, all while remaining vividly rooted in the landscapes, cultures and complexities of the American Southwest. Santos’ writing is as bright as the New Mexico sunshine.”

—Francisco Cantú, author of *The Line Becomes a River*

“Santos conjures a vibrant, vivid New Mexico full of menace, dark humor, false fronts, mutable histories, regrets, wild hopes, caches of gold just out of reach and characters who—to the reader’s great benefit—just can’t get out of their own damn way. A high-velocity, compulsively readable novel that crackles with energy, narrative drive and its author’s unmistakable joy in storytelling. A hell of a debut.”

—Doug Dorst, *New York Times*  
bestselling author of *S.* and *Alive in Necropolis*

“A multi-tentacled, cinematic debut that will pull you into its winding labyrinth.”

—Fernando A. Flores, author of *Tears of the Trufflepig*

“White men scheming to build an airport on tribal land, Santa Fe’s art scene, Apaches represented by an attorney, what’s up with Geronimo’s ghost and where precisely is he buried—Richard Santos’ debut novel has the anarchic energy and slick characters you’d expect to find in a tale told by Elmore Leonard. *Trust Me* offers every reader a fun ride. My advice: take it.”

—Tom Grimes, author of *Mentor; a Memoir*

“Best debut I’ve seen in about forever, best New Mexico novel I’ve read in a good while, far and away the best airport novel I’ve ever read, and not even close to the last Richard Santos I’ll be reading.”

—Stephen Graham Jones, author of *Mongrels* and  
*The Only Good Indians*

“Richard Santos has written an extraordinary story with great craft and an exquisite use of language in this, his first book. It reads like a breath of fresh air after living in a stifling box of recycled themes and tired tropes, and will hopefully mark a shift for the future of American Latino literature.”

—Domingo Martinez, author of *The Boy Kings of Texas*,  
National Book Award Finalist

“With crisp, cinematic dialogue and insight into all that’s duplicitous and corrupt (and juicy and thrilling), Santos kept me turning the pages late into the night.”

—Dina Nayeri, author of  
*The Ungrateful Refugee* and *Refuge*

“A story that sinks its teeth into a crooked land development deal in New Mexico with reverberations all the way to the seats of national power. This is great, tense writing.”

—Michael Noll, author of *The Writer’s Field Guide to the Craft of Fiction*

“*Trust Me* is a suspenseful and thoroughly enjoyable novel that explores the themes of betrayal, deceit, redemption and cultural collision in modern-day New Mexico. Santos draws on his own political background to create a web of manipulation and intrigue that ensnares his characters in a world in which trust itself becomes dangerously suspect. Even the New Mexico landscape, which Santos carefully paints, seems to hold its eerie and misleading secrets.”

—Tim O’Brien, National Book Award-winning author of *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*

“An earth-shattering meditation on new beginnings, happiness and the dark complications that sometimes arise. Richard Santos is a masterful storyteller. The small moments in his characters’ lives matter just as much as the big ones; they contain entire worlds that tell us about the best parts of ourselves, the worst parts of ourselves.”

—Daniel Peña, author of *Bang*

“A gripping novel with layers of political intrigue, class exploration, love, land and redemption. Santos’ searing debut keeps the pages turning and the guesses coming.”

—Lara Prescott, *New York Times*  
bestselling author of *The Secrets We Kept*

“*Trust Me* is a nimble blend of high-desert political thriller, noir and crime drama. The plot, folded tightly with twists and revelations, never veers far from its vivid and layered characters—reckless oil barons and unsavory political operatives, powerful single moms and redemption-seeking dead-beat dads, ambitious artists and weary veterans—characters who, in Santos’ generous hands, glow with warmth and need and life, who risk everything they’ve got in end-of-the-line attempts to become who they believe themselves to be. An engrossing and insightful debut from a truly exciting talent.”

—Joseph Scapellato, author of *The Made-Up Man* and *Big Lonesome*

# Trust Me

— **Richard Z. Santos** —



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Houston, Texas

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*FRIDAY*

# ONE

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CHARLES O'CONNELL avoided his wife's hopeful, excited gaze. Addie walked towards him, a small drip coffee in her hand.

"That was quick," she said. "Is quick good?"

Charles swung his eyes towards her, then to the rental car. A year ago, they had been pricing new hybrids. Now, he was paying for a matchbox car by the hour and was embarrassed by the company's logos plastered on the windows.

His mother worked in the bank's original, red brick building. She'd claimed it instilled confidence if the bank president was in sight. Whether this confidence meant to be instilled in the costumers, the employees or maybe his mother herself, Charles never knew. Addie had taken a rare afternoon off, and they were going to celebrate his loan with a few drinks before he left Washington. After months of searching and a wallet full of maxed out credit cards, he had a job. All he needed was a little cash to keep him floating his first week in Santa Fe. Of course his mother would help him out. No question.

Addie slammed her door. "Tell me she did not turn you down."

He put the car in gear but left his foot on the brake. "She smiled while doing it. Took me awhile to figure out why. I'm asking for money. A chance to put my life back together, and she's beaming. Beaming, but not *really* looking at me."

"How much did you ask for?"

"I did exactly what we talked about. 'A small one,' I said. I never even gave a number. 'Until my first paycheck.' Nothing. Smiling . . . smiling the whole time, like we were on Oprah. But when I left, I saw her office blinds were open. All her little min-



ions saw her and her son grinning up a storm like a happy pair of . . . chipmunks.”

Addie almost spit out her coffee. “Your mom is not a chipmunk.”

“She’s a vole. Are voles scary and judgmental?”

“Not like her.”

Charles pulled into traffic. He wanted to keep the moment light, but they settled into silence as they crawled towards the beltway.

Charles was not mad at his mom for denying him. He was mad at himself for thinking his losing streak was coming to an end. He had worked in politics since college and lost plenty of races. Losing is fine. Political careers can handle a loss here and there. Even scandal is easy on the staffers. If your candidate gets caught hopping into bed with an intern, your career survives—unless you’re the intern. But the Hunt campaign was the worst of all worlds. Charles’ candidate was in jail. The Senate seat in Delaware went from an automatic win to a pick up for the other party. And Charles himself was forced to hire a lawyer because an ambitious US attorney was convinced the corruption ran up and down the chain of command. For a few days, Charles broke the cardinal rule of campaign staffers: he became the story. The euphoria of not following Hunt to prison was short-lived. All his old connections had dried up and blown away, and now even his mom thought he was a bad bet.

Charles picked up Addie’s coffee and took a gulp. “What else is there to do?” she asked.

“I’ll get paid two weeks after I start. I can make it two weeks on peanut butter.”

“But where are you going to live?”

“They’re giving me a place to crash. I think it’s furnished. I can make it work.”

Charles was not going to ask her for money. He never needed to because she always offered. Charles was living on a hundred dollars a week left on the kitchen counter every Monday morning—no note, no explanation, just five twenties and the unstated expectation that the cash would not be there long.

“Do you know anyone else out there?” she asked.

“My buddy Thompson. I think you met him at . . . a fundraiser or something. He doesn’t even know I’m coming.”

“Maybe you should ask him for a loan.”

Charles merged onto the highway, feeling intimidated in the tiny car. The radio was still tuned to NPR but the volume was down to a murmur. “Ruined local man forced to beg his wife for money,” he could almost hear.

“That’d be pretty awkward, don’t you think? Haven’t spoken to him in years.”

“Then let’s make sure this still makes sense.”

“What do you mean?”

“The job in Santa Fe is a corporate gig. You’ll be doing PR. There are corporate PR jobs in DC you never even considered.”

“I’m working for a group building an airport. They ran into trouble on the construction site. They’re not pharma or tobacco.”

“That’s not what I . . .” Addie massaged a spot in the middle of her forehead. “I don’t know if this makes sense anymore.”

“These people in Santa Fe reached out to me. You know how that feels? After Delaware, none of my friends talk to me. No one returns my emails. People pretend to get lost in their phones when they see me.”

“I can’t give you any more money. I won’t. You’ve put me here. I have to say no.”

“These people are funding a brand-new airport, they can connect me to people. I’ve never worked out west. That congressman out there, Solís, he’s a star, and he’s young. I can rebuild.”

“That’s what you keep saying, but . . . it’s not going to be worth it.”

“Well, it better be.”

Addie’s eyes scanned the road. Her breath began to catch as if the words were slicing her open as they came out.

“We’ve been through so much this year. Delaware, being so damn broke, and I don’t think I can make it through you being gone for a year. It’ll kill whatever I’m still clinging to.”

Charles kept his eyes straight ahead. His face started to burn with shame and more than a little anger. "I have a plan," he said. "I have a chance. DC is dead for me."

"I'm in DC."

Charles looked at her. He put a hand on her leg, and her hand went back to her forehead.

They were quiet all the way home.



To Charles, the worst part of the scandal, something he would never tell Addie, was that his bold, consistent mantra—he was innocent, he reacted to the scandal like a sane, competent professional—was all a lie. Charles being right and the US attorney over reacting had developed into the twin pillars of his personality and self-worth over the past year. Now, those pillars were rotting from the inside.

They returned the car and walked to their Capitol Hill townhome. The neighborhood held an old confidence that Charles envied. He wanted to sling his arm around Addie's shoulders and smile with exaggerated cheer.

Addie wore sunglasses, but Charles saw her expression all too well. During the scandal, she had been his head cheerleader. Now, she was out of encouraging words.

"I saw my cousin in the bank," he said. "You never met him. He used to be a Wall Street guy. Now he's behind the counter. Can you believe that?"

"At least he has a job."

"I have a job."

Addie turned to him in front of the townhouse. "You have two weeks," she said. "In two weeks I'm flying out there, and we're deciding if this job is worth it."

He nodded.

"You're not going to say anything?"

"I agree. I agree. Two weeks. I'll know so much more in two weeks. I'll know if I have a way forward."

Addie hooked both hands around the back of her neck, her elbows pointing at Charles like stake posts.

She turned and walked up the steps to the front door. "Go for a walk," she said.

"A walk?"

"A walk."

She shut the door. Charles heard the deadbolt slide into place from the sidewalk.

Cigarette smoke hit his nose. Charles looked up and made eye contact with one of the junior staffers that were all shackled up two doors down. Not that he had ever hit anyone, or been hit himself, but Charles felt an urge to walk up to the kid and punch him right in his freshly straightened teeth. The smoker gave Charles a quick nod and went back inside.

Charles looked up and down the street, wondering how to kill twenty minutes.