

The background of the cover features a dark blue fedora hat at the top, a dark blue suit jacket in the middle, and a purple striped tie. A yellow smiley face pin is attached to the jacket. The title is written in large, bold, yellow letters.

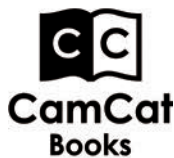
**THE
BADGER
GAME**

WILLIAM NORRIS

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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ALSO BY WILLIAM NORRIS

Fiction

A Grave Too Many

Make Mad the Guilty

Nonfiction

The Man Who Fell from the Sky

Snowbird

A Talent to Deceive

Willful Misconduct

badger game: a dishonest trick in which a person is lured into a compromising situation and then surprised and blackmailed

—OXFORD AMERICAN DICTIONARY

PART ONE
BOOK ONE

1996

ONE

GREGORY BARTLETT STARED VACANTLY AHEAD as he nosed his shiny black Lincoln Town Car through the narrow entrance to the campus. A respectful salute from the pretty young college work-student on duty in the security gatehouse went unacknowledged.

“Up yours, then.” She leaned forward and extended an unladylike finger in the direction of the receding sedan. Bartlett, happening to glance in his mirror at that moment, saw the gesture and tightened his lips. Damned students. No respect for authority. No respect for anything, these days. He’d have to talk to the dean about that one.

The road curved past a palm-fringed pond with herons and wood storks sunning themselves solemnly along the banks, a solitary pelican circling above in search of lunch. In the branches of an overhanging bush, a cormorant stood with outstretched wings, drying them off before its next plunge beneath the smooth surface.

Bartlett registered the idyllic scene without a flicker of emotion. Once, long ago, the ambience of the Fulford campus had entranced him. The rampant greenery, the immaculate lawns, the

abundant wildlife that thrived oblivious to the swarming students—all these had seemed to him the epitome of a liberal-arts college. Food for the soul to accompany a diet of higher learning. How long had it been since the gloss had worn away? Ten years? Fifteen? It seemed an age since he had first driven through those gates for his interview with the college trustees for the post of president.

Back then, Bartlett had been a trusting young administrator in his mid-thirties. A solid PhD in political science on his résumé, a few years of teaching at a prestigious Ivy League university, followed by a deanship at a respectable liberal-arts college in Oklahoma. The trustees, mostly prosperous businessmen with a smattering of clergy and lawyers, had been looking for a dynamic president to revive the flagging fortunes of Fulford—a college too young to have acquired a decent endowment but old enough to be in serious need of renewal. In Bartlett, they decided, they had found him.

Nor had he let them down. No one could accuse him of failure in those early days. *Not that the bastards remembered that now*, Bartlett thought glumly as he swung carelessly into his parking space and almost annihilated an oleander bush. He had raised the profile of the college, solicited funds from every philanthropist within a hundred-mile radius, increased the enrollment, and even produced a modest improvement in academic standards. Now, all they could think of was their stupid budget deficit. Two million dollars and climbing, and none of it his fault, goddamn it!

He slammed the door of the Town Car with unnecessary force and strode the few paces to the door of the Fitzwalter Administrative Building, named after a long-dead benefactor who had been in urgent need of a tax write-off at the time. Bartlett had been good at finding such people. The campus was littered with endowed classrooms and laboratories bearing names that meant less than nothing to faculty and students. The place sometimes reminded him of a graveyard with extra-large tombstones. All those

pathetic efforts to translate ill-gotten gains into some form of lasting posterity, and all forgotten almost before the commemorative plaques had been affixed. Not that he was ungrateful. But for those donors, Fulford College would have sunk into oblivion long since, and his \$150,000 salary would have followed it down the tubes.

Bartlett pushed open the front door and welcomed the blast of cold air that struck his face. Even the short walk from his air-conditioned car had made him sweat inside his habitual blue suit and his throat-strangling collar and tie. He envied the students and the casual young members of faculty who could dress in ways more appropriate for the Florida sunshine and humidity, but appearances had to be maintained. Bartlett was adamant about appearances.

His administrative assistant, Melissa Blunt, looked up from her keyboard as Bartlett clumped toward his office. She began to smile a polite greeting, tossing back blonde hair that framed a face fighting the years with gratifying success, then dropped her eyes. One look at Bartlett's body language had convinced her that she would be wasting her time. Her boss was not in a good mood. But then he seldom was, these days.

Melissa was a fixture on the Fulford campus. Married to an extremely dull academic who had found himself a sinecure as a consultant to one of the local captains of industry, she had worked her way up from a junior position on the public-relations staff to become the most indispensable figure in the college administration. She had looks and she had brains. Most important of all, she knew where all the bodies were buried. As to her relationship with Gregory Bartlett, no one was quite sure. Rumor had it that they were secret lovers. Melissa had heard the scuttlebutt and done nothing to discourage it. She found the slander vaguely amusing, considering the fact that she hated Bartlett's guts.

"Melissa!"

She took her time about answering, picking up her notebook

and stretching her legs beneath her long cotton skirt before getting to her feet. They were good legs, much admired around the campus by lusty young professors and randy male students, any of whom she could have eaten for breakfast. Melissa liked to maintain an air of incipient promise with every man she met, though as far as anyone knew she had never fulfilled that promise with any of them. Those who knew her husband thought it was a great waste and a crying shame. Those who didn't wondered what the man must have to keep such a gorgeous creature faithful between the sheets.

She put on her most bland expression and wandered in to face Gregory Bartlett across the bare expanse of his rosewood desk.

"What do you know about this?" He brandished a piece of paper at her. She took it between two fingers, as though it was something mildly disgusting, and turned it over to read the contents without really taking in the words.

She shrugged. "Nothing," she said.

"Don't play the innocent with me!" Jesus, he was in a bad mood this morning. She stood her ground, her lips firmly shut. "You know everything that goes on around this campus," Bartlett raged. "Why didn't you warn me that those old farts in Einstein House were about to lose their minds?"

"Nobody told me," she said, reading the letter again with greater attention. "No reason why they should. The pensioners run their own affairs, you know that."

"Hah *hah!*" Bartlett was at his most obnoxious, she thought, when he was trying to be ironic. "You've been reading too many of your own brochures, Melissa. They may *think* they run their own affairs, but you and I know different. We hold the purse strings, we provide them with their damn building, and they'll jump when I tell them to jump!"

"Apparently not," she said mildly. "It looks from this letter"—she waved it about to infuriate him further—"as though they're

making a unilateral declaration of independence. I must say, I didn't think they had it in them."

Bartlett fumed. He had always considered the pensioners to be one of the more brilliant strokes of his administration, conceived in a flash of genius more than ten years before. The elements of the idea had been simple: because Florida attracted vast numbers of elderly retirees every year, and because many of them were stinking rich, why not offer them something more constructive to do in their declining years than play golf and drink themselves to death? "Intergenerational learning" had been the key phrase. Convince the old folks that by coming on to campus and associating with the young they could recapture some of their own youth. Let them help out in the classrooms, passing on the dubious wisdom of their years, while letting the ebullience of the students rub off on them like an elixir.

The more Bartlett had thought about it, the stronger his enthusiasm had grown. The group would have to be exclusive—he would demand some extravagant qualification for membership such as "distinguished professional achievement in the arts, business, or sciences." But as long as they had the money, something could always be arranged. There would be a four-figure fee for entry and fairly hefty annual dues, but for that (and he'd giggled at the thought) they would have the privilege of working as unpaid tutors. Even better, once they had become firmly bonded to the college, he was certain they could be persuaded to make generous contributions to the annual fund and, better yet, to remember Fulford in their wills.

Bartlett knew a potential cash cow when he saw one, and he had seen one then. Of course, he had realized that there might be minor problems with faculty. Those damned prima donnas were forever guarding the sanctity of their classrooms, and it seemed unlikely that they would welcome assistance from old dodderers who might, in some cases, know more about the subject under

discussion than they did. They might even, because the pensioners would be volunteers, regard them as a threat to their jobs if the college ever came under financial stress. As for the students, the chance that they would want anything to do with a bunch of septuagenarians was slim to none. But they could like it or lump it.

And so, to the accompaniment of much fanfare, the Fulford College Universal Pensioners had been born. In the educational press, Fulford was hailed as one of the ten most innovative colleges in the land. What a splendid idea: to bring old and young together in the context of common learning. Bartlett had basked in the praise. Parents who came shopping for the safest place to put their fragile offspring were duly impressed that here was a campus with built-in grandparents who would surely help keep them on the straight and narrow. They enrolled them in droves. Under the pressure of demand, tuition fees rose steadily.

As for the pensioners themselves, their numbers grew until they far outstripped the size of the faculty itself. Bartlett never ceased to be amazed at their endless generosity and selfless sense of service. He had provided something to fill the gap in their otherwise empty lives, and for that they were prepared to pay, and pay handsomely. It had been, at least until today, a supremely symbiotic relationship. In fact, the only thing he regretted was his choice of title for the organization. Student imaginations being what they were, the FCUP members had become instantly known as “the Fuckups.”

And now they wanted to go their own way. Bartlett reread the offending letter, inwardly fuming. Signed by the latest FCUP president, Luigi Manzini, it was courteous to the point of unction, but the meaning was very clear. Because his members were constantly being reminded, said Manzini, that their organization was being subsidized by the college, and because the college was demonstrably in financial trouble, he wished to offer a solution. If Fulford would permit the pensioners to hire their own staff and

arrange their own affairs, granting them a long-term lease on Einstein House at a nominal rental, all subsidies could be removed. It was, suggested Manzini, an offer that the trustees could hardly refuse, especially because the pensioners would continue to give freely of their on-campus services.

Gregory Bartlett was hoisted on his own petard, and he knew it. For years, he had been pleading poverty to the FCUP members, urging them on to greater feats of giving with the pretense that their existence was costing Fulford College large sums of money. With hindsight, he wondered how he had gotten away with it for so long, considering the number of former CEOs, lawyers, and accountants who occupied Einstein House. He had habitually been salting away major donations from FCUP members into other accounts to which only he had access, while loading the organization's budget with all manner of expenses to make it seem that it was being subsidized. True, there had sometimes been demands from some of the more curious pensioners for a peek at the books, but these had been firmly resisted. Under the FCUP bylaws, which he had drawn up with considerable care, FCUP members had certain privileges and many duties, but no rights that could not be overruled by the college authorities. Meaning him. And those rights most decidedly did not include a detailed investigation of the balance sheet.

Finally, it seemed, someone had been doing the math.

Bartlett looked up at Melissa, catching the vestige of a secret smile that she swiftly wiped from her face. "It's not funny," he said. "I told Johnson that he should have stymied the election of that wop Manzini to the presidency. Get him on the phone for me, will you?"

Melissa stifled the temptation to remind him that a telephone with a direct outside line stood ready to hand on his desk. It was all part of Bartlett's power complex: getting the servants to do his menial work. Anyway, it gave her a chance to get out of his damned

office. She turned on her heel and returned to her own desk to place the call.

Sydney Johnson, aka “Hissing Syd,” was a newcomer to the post of FCUP director. A failed Broadway actor, he had obtained the position by virtue of charming the knickers off Bartlett’s stagestruck wife. Johnson had been in the job for only six months but had already established himself as a pain in the ass. In contrast to his predecessor, an easygoing individual who managed the affairs of the pensioners with a lightness of touch that combined humor and efficiency in equal measure, he was proving to be a major control freak. His small secretarial staff was being driven to distraction by his constant interference, while the FCUP senate—twelve men and women who were theoretically in charge of the organization—were reduced to impotent frustration by his autocratic methods.

The members of the senate, who had been invited to interview a short list of candidates for their new director, had made an accurate assessment of Johnson at the time and voted against him. It was not simply his manner that caused their hackles to rise; the fact was that he bore a remarkable resemblance to the Democratic vice president of the United States. He was tall and slim, with patrician features and an infuriating air of unassailable virtue. Republicans all, the pensioners could not bear the thought of living with this doppelgänger in their declining years. It ruined their sensitive digestions just to look at the man.

In the end, however, they had been overruled by Gregory Bartlett, who was not about to suffer a domestic dispute by challenging his wife’s judgment. Bartlett was now beginning to regret his decision. He had thought that Johnson would bring some much-needed (in his view) energy into FCUP management—to drag the old codgers into the computerized world of the 1990s and spur them to greater feats of giving. Instead, he seemed to have sparked a revolution.

“Sydney?” Bartlett insisted on being on first-name terms with all his staff, no matter how unpleasant he intended to be to them.

Johnson recognized the voice instantly. “Greg. What can I do for you?”

“You can tell me what that old fool Manzini thinks he’s playing at.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you know what’s going on up there? I thought you had your finger on all the buttons. I’ve just had letter from him saying that the senate has decided that FCUP wants to become independent of the college. How come you don’t know about it? I thought you attended all their damn meetings.”

“I do, Greg, you know I do. No one has said a word to me about this.” Thoroughly alarmed, Johnson spun around in his chair to see if he was being overheard. A flying elbow knocked his cup of coffee over the keyboard of his brand-new Pentium computer and he cursed fluently. Bartlett ignored the epithet.

“Well they wouldn’t, would they? One of the things they want is freedom to appoint their own staff, and it’s my bet that they want you out of there, Sydney. You’ve been ruffling too many old feathers.”

“But that was what you wanted me to do,” Johnson protested. “You told me to come in here and shake them up.”

“I didn’t tell you to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, dammit! The trustees are desperate to save every cent right now. If Manzini can convince them that making FCUP independent will get rid of their precious ‘subsidy’ they might just fall for it.”

“But they’re not being subsidized. Not really.”

“You know that, and I know that,” said Bartlett sourly. “But the trustees believe the balance sheet, and the balance sheet says they’re being subsidized up to their necks. If they get away with this—if they separate themselves from the college—you can bet

your boots that all those donations and bequests are going to dry up overnight.”

“But they can’t fire me—I’ve got a contract.”

“You’ve got a contract with the college as FCUP director. If there’s no FCUP, at least not one affiliated to the college, there’s no job and no contract. Unless they want to pay you themselves, and from all I hear that’s unlikely.”

“What can I do?”

“You can get hold of Manzini and find out what’s behind this. Then you can contact every member of that damn senate and persuade them to change their minds. If this gets to the trustees and they find out we’ve been lying to them about those subsidies, and they want to know where the FCUP donations have been going to, I don’t give much for our chances.

“Why drag me into it? *I* haven’t been lying to the trustees.”

“Sink or swim together, Sydney. Sink or swim together. Now, get on with it!”

Bartlett replaced the receiver and sat heavy in thought. A few feet away, Melissa Blunt hugged herself with delight.



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THE FUTURE OF THE NATION RESTS ON ONE MAN'S BIRTHMARK

Fulford College is broke. In a desperate attempt to keep its doors open, the Florida based college joins forces with the Mafia to establish a scholarship program. This program, however, comes with a new set of students selected by the Mafia and a secret new curriculum. Little did this liberal arts college know, it was now home to the very first criminal education program in the nation.

These brave students are now entering their senior year at Fulford during an election year. This class of well-trained criminals volunteers to work the election: half working for the Democratic campaign and half for the Republican campaign. Using the methods they learned in their sophistry class and other courses in corruption, their assignment is to help rig the presidential election in the Democratic candidate's favor—Vice President Harold Griswold.

But when the vice president is kidnapped and replaced with a doppelgänger, things start to go awry in Washington DC. Who is this man in the White House with Hal Griswold's face? What is the Mafia up to? And how could one identifiable feature ruin it all?



COVER DESIGN: MIMI BARK

