

COLLECTION NO.2

# COTTON

## FBI



EPISODES  
5-7

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

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# What is COTTON FBI?

Your name is Jeremiah Cotton. You are a small-time cop in the NYPD, a rookie that no one takes seriously. But you want more. You have a score to settle with the world. And anyone who calls you "Jerry" will be sorry.

A new time. A new hero. A new mission. Experience the birth of a digital cult-series: Cotton FBI is the remake of JERRY COTTON, the most successful series of German novels with more than one billion copies sold, and it tells an entirely new story in e-book form.

Cotton FBI is published twice a month, with each episode a self-contained story.

# Authors

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**Mara Laue** began writing at the age of twelve. Her first publications were short stories and poetry. Since 2005, she has been writing full-time, mainly working with crime/thriller, science fiction, dark romance, fantasy, as well as poetry and plays. She was co-author of the science fiction series "Sternenfaust" and launched two of her own online mystery series: "Succubus" (*Sukkubus*), which will continue as a book series in 2013, and "Shadow Wolf" (*Schattenwolf*). She also teaches creative writing in workshops and correspondence courses, and ghostwrites biographies and company histories. When she can afford

the time from her writing, she also works as an artist and photographer.

# BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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# **The Infection**

## **Linda Budinger**

Translated by Frank Keith

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

# 1

Friday, July 4th, Astoria Park, New York

Time and again the dark sky over New York was lit up by bursting blooms of sparkling light, showering down glitter and sparks. From further up the East River, the smell of black powder wafted into Astoria Park, an oasis of greenery stretching almost a thousand yards along the eastern shoreline of the narrows.

Jubilant crowds of people lined the water's edge, gathering at Hell Gate and the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge. They craned their necks to see the fireworks on this day of independence.

But not everyone had left their overheated dwellings in order to join in the festivities.

Jeremiah Cotton glanced at the photo displayed on his cell phone and then over at the man who was passing underneath a street lamp barely ten yards away. He had no doubt: That was Miller, the wanted man.

Cotton turned to look at Detective Joe Brandenburg, drawing his attention to the man. Brandenburg nodded and followed the suspect while Cotton radioed G-Team headquarters to report that they had found Miller.

Ten minutes went by. Cotton and his former colleague from the NYPD took turns following Miller to avoid arousing his suspicion.

Miller had been the FBI's focus of attention for only a few hours now, and he seemed oblivious to it. His head bowed, he strode past the park's sports grounds, cutting through the excited crowds as if there were no tomorrow.



Just as Cotton was about to relieve Brandenburg, his cell phone vibrated. He answered it with a snarled "What?" "This is High. What's the suspect doing?"

Cotton reflexively stiffened when he heard his boss's chilly voice. "We're tailing him, sir," he whispered, skillfully snaking his way past a kissing couple.

"We found a number of dead monkeys in the lab where Miller works," John D. High said. "There were also two co-workers of Miller on the premises who are now dying. They confirmed the plot. One of them is our informant. In addition, we've examined the virus. Hunter classified it as highly contagious. It is transmittable by air. And there's something else, Cotton."

"Yes, sir?"

"It is likely that Miller has a bomb with him."

"Yes, that is possible, sir," Cotton confirmed. "He's carrying a cooler." Cotton didn't let the suspect out of his sight for even a second. Then Cotton's sixth sense sounded the alarm. He listened impatiently to his boss's instructions, replying simply, "Okay, I'll let him know," before ending the call.

Joe Brandenburg peered back to see where his relief was. He picked up a newspaper that happened to be lying on a park bench and hid behind it, always staying about fifty yards behind the suspect.

Cotton sought eye contact with him and tapped his finger against his ear to show that he had received new instructions. He inconspicuously pulled out his weapon as he walked faster to catch up with Brandenburg.

People were barbecuing in the parks and on their lawns. Those who had attended the traditional 4th of July concert were ambling back home, whistling or humming patriotic songs as they walked. Children threw bang snaps at each other with excited shouts. It was a joyous chaos, good for observing, but it would be hell if it came to a pursuit.

Cotton didn't even dare to think what a bomb would do to this mass of people.

The air was heavy with the scents of black powder and grilled meat. For a moment, Cotton was drawn back to the worst day of his life, that fateful September 11th, 2001. But he shook those thoughts away like a dog shaking off water.

"Was it an invitation to a barbecue, rookie?"

Brandenburg asked as Cotton overtook him. The stocky NYPD detective had a receiver underneath his Yankees baseball cap that allowed him to communicate with the other police units.

Cotton shook his head. "That was High. The situation is more serious than we thought. Miller is a virologist. But more importantly, he's a nut with a crazy worldview. He's already killed two people. We're supposed to eliminate him if necessary, and before he spreads his virus over half the city. He may also have a bomb with him."

"Hallelujah!" Brandenburg had a sardonic look on his face. "Things like this always happen when I'm with you!"

"I've got an uncanny sense for these things."

It was merely a coincidence that Cotton had heard the message from headquarters calling all agents for this assignment. He had been on 31st Street when the G-Team got the tip-off. A traffic video camera not far from the East River had spotted the suspect.

Cotton had taken an unmarked car over to Astoria Park to meet Brandenburg, who was on routine duty with his men. Brandenburg was one of the few people outside the G-Team who knew of its existence.

Now Cotton held his pistol close to his body, half-hidden in the sleeve of his jacket. "Backup is on its way," he told Brandenburg. "But I could end this whole thing right here and now."

"Holy shit, no!" Brandenburg waved his folded newspaper emphatically. "There's not a clear line of fire. The last thing we need in this madhouse is a stampede." He

spoke into his mike: "I need all available officers in Astoria Park. The suspect is moving towards the waterfront. What? Yes, use the damn cordons from the parade."

He turned back to Cotton. "They're closing off the entrance and are guiding people away from the shoreline. When the boys are here, we'll force Miller towards the tennis courts and take him there."

"I'm afraid it's too late," Cotton responded tensely, pointing ahead.

The moonlight touched the countless branches and leaves of the trees with ghostly fingers. Miller was kneeling on a small grass-covered hill, opening his cooler. Wisps of fog from the dry ice within billowed out. He pulled out a gas mask and slipped it over his face. In the stroboscopic light from a nearby roman candle, he looked like some strange giant insect.

He reached into the cooler.

"Watch my back, Joe," Cotton yelled. A head shot would eliminate Miller.

Cotton raised his pistol and took careful aim, estimating the distance and angle. By this point, several pedestrians had noticed the odd character with the gas mask.

Cotton pulled the trigger but missed because two teenagers had jumped from a nearby low wall directly into the line of fire. Bark splintered from the tree standing next to where Miller was kneeling. An older man selling ice cream from a hand cart with a penguin logo gaped wide-eyed at Cotton and then dove for cover.

Only those who were quite close heard the pistol being fired; for everyone else, the shots blended into the noise of the fireworks. But those few people who knew that the sound was a gunshot were enough to set off a panic. Screams and shouts mixed with applause and laughter. The people closest to Cotton ran away in fright.

The virologist lifted three connected bottles out of his cooler. Attached to the bottles was a small packet of plastic

explosives.

*I have to take out this nut before he activates the fuse!*  
Cotton thought frantically.

He aimed and slowly exhaled.

A hellish pain suddenly ripped into his arm. A projectile tore the pistol out of his hand. His weapon skidded away into some dense bushes near where a dozen people were standing.

Cotton took cover behind a park bench. Holding his aching hand, he cursed. Miller had an accomplice, probably a sniper up on the bridge! All right — he'd have to let Joe take care of him. He must already be on the way. Cotton saw his partner nearby in a crowd of people, talking hastily into his mike.

Cotton was unarmed now, and he would be targeted by the sniper if he moved. If just *one* bullet hit those bottles ... But for Cotton, doing nothing was simply unthinkable. He dashed away.

Using his shoulders like an offensive lineman, he shoved through the mob of people between him and Miller. He bounded over a short fence, expecting to be hit by a bullet between the shoulder blades at any second. He flew across the lawn, his feet digging into the soft ground.

Ten yards to go.

Miller turned and faced Cotton. His facial expression was invisible behind the glass goggles of the gas mask. Undeterred, he kept working on the bottles.

Cotton saw the glinting reflection from a metal blade. Miller was using a knife to pry open one of the bottles. Cotton still felt the terrible pain in his hand from when his pistol had been shot away, but he ignored it.

Without hesitating, Cotton stormed between the man and the cooler. He punched Miller, using his momentum to push Miller away from the bottles.

Miller sprang up and jabbed his knife at Cotton. The blade sliced through his jacket sleeve and cut into his arm.

The pain burned like fire, racing all the way up to his shoulder. Cotton knocked the knife out of Miller's hand and elbowed him in the face. Miller fell to the ground and angrily kicked at the bottles.

To protect them from being broken, Cotton immediately threw himself down between Miller and the bottles.

Miller sprang up and swung several punches at Cotton; however, they were poorly aimed, hitting him ineffectually on the back. With numb fingers, Cotton shoved the bio-bomb back into the cooler. Every bit of additional protection from the virus could mean life or death for thousands of people.

Miller went for the knife again, but tripped and fell. Cotton spun around, quick as a cobra. He blocked the knife, his elbow slamming into Miller's lower arm.

"Where's the fuse?" he gasped, tearing the gas mask from the virologist's face with his left hand. "Come on, give up, already!"

Then he saw the fuse lying in the grass. It had fallen out of Miller's jacket pocket. Miller followed Cotton's gaze and grinned. He had nothing to lose, and he knew it.

Miller lunged for the fuse.

*Dammit, I hate fanatics!* Cotton feigned a move towards the fuse to fool Miller, then turned to the side and hammered his fist into the man's knee. Miller sank down, his target out of reach.

Instead, it was Cotton's hand that grabbed the fuse and gingerly cradled it like a raw egg.

Heavy, rapid footsteps approached. Handcuffs snapped shut, and Brandenburg read Miller his rights.

It was over.

## 2

Monday, July 14th, Cyberedge building, G-Team  
Headquarters, John D. High's office

"It's nice to have you back, Cotton," the director of the FBI's secret G-Team unit greeted Cotton, who had been a member of the team for only a short time.

"Thank you, sir," Cotton answered.

Mr. High stood up and reached out a hand to the newest member of the special unit. Cotton wanted to shake his boss's hand, but High made a slight bow. Instead of shaking Cotton's hand, High gave him a squeeze on the arm, just below his elbow.

Cotton inwardly flinched and cringed from the pain. Once again he was surprised by his boss, whose eagle eyes saw everything.

"Are you sure that you're completely okay?"

"Yes, sir." Cotton looked steadily into the eyes of the tall, dark-skinned man.

Mr. High gestured to a chair and then took his own seat. With a few taps on his keyboard, he opened a document.

Absentmindedly, Cotton rubbed the wound on his arm. The cut he had received from Miller in the park still hadn't closed; the edges of the wound were inflamed, and it hurt like hell when touched.

"You discharged yourself from the hospital three days ago," John D. High said, "against medical advice."

"I'm fine." Cotton couldn't stand being in the hospital any longer. He had been cooped up in quarantine for a

whole week. No one had told him why he had to remain in the hospital for so long, either.

"Then during the long weekend — I'll quote from your medical records — 'the initial necrosis on the lower arm' must have completely disappeared. After all, you put a new fender on your Jaguar, which must've been a strenuous undertaking."

Cotton swallowed hard. *How had he found that out?* "The wound is still a bit sensitive, but for the most part it's all right."

"I'm surprised that you haven't pulled the stitches out yourself, Cotton."

Cotton clenched his teeth until his jaw ached. Actually, pulling the stitches out was exactly what he intended to do next — very soon.

"What do you think you're doing here?" High's voice had taken on a more sinister tone.

"I could work with Zeerookah and help him out, sir."

After ten days of involuntary vacation, Cotton was raring to get back to work. "It's only my arm. I've had worse injuries."

"You could be carrying a dangerous pathogen into this place with your open wound. As long as you're not fully healed, I can't use you here, Cotton."

"But I ..." Cotton wanted to protest. He had come too far to be put out of action by such a minor thing as a slow-healing wound.

"You're wasting my time, Cotton." A thin, shark-like grin appeared on the austere features of the Special Agent in Charge. "But since you're here on the premises already, you can go through some unanswered questions in the report on the latest operation."

"And I want to add that I hope you won't interfere with another police sharpshooter next time. Special Agent Decker will brief you after you're done. You're dismissed."

*Thank goodness. We're finally in business again!* "Thank you, sir."

Cotton glanced back over his shoulder as he returned to the enormous central room of the G-Team headquarters. Through the large glass wall of High's office, he could see a peculiar look on his boss's face as he watched Cotton descend the stairs. One could almost interpret his expression as amusement.

With the giant monitor on the wall and the numerous work stations, the G-Team's main office resembled the empty bridge of a space ship. The majority of the personnel were on outside assignments or out to lunch.

Cotton sat down at his desk to call up the report on his computer. However, his monitor's screen remained black. It seemed clear that he wasn't logged into the system yet. Cotton decided to go directly to the server room instead of phoning. It was often easier to resolve this sort of issue in person.

In the thoroughly air-conditioned server room, Zeerookah sat staring at his oversized monitors. He clearly hadn't been expecting anyone, because the former computer hacker and current G-Team IT expert jumped up startled at Cotton's sudden appearance in the room. When he saw that it was Cotton, he gestured for him to come over. "Hey, buddy. Everything okay?"

The portly, jovial Zeerookah treated everyone on the G-Team as his friend, but it was impossible to take his casual attitude the wrong way. "Back in action?" he asked Cotton as he scanned the pictures on his monitors.

Cotton saw a street, a shopping mall, and a satellite image appear on the screens. "I have to go through some paperwork," he answered. "I'm here to ask you to put me back into the system, Zeery, okay?"

"Will do." As Zeerookah went through the necessary steps on his computer to log Cotton in, Cotton took a look around the room. There was only one chair, designated for



the technology guru himself. Data storage devices and printouts were scattered across the one part of the desk that wasn't already covered in candy wrappers.

A cell phone stuck out of a carrier case that was velcroed to a cabinet door. The charging unit, hanging on the phone, was plugged into the completely occupied outlet. Two other phones were also being charged, plugged into a overloaded power strip. This place had never heard of the term *energy conservation*.

Cotton shook his head. "How many phones do you have, anyway?"

"Oh, it varies," Zeerookah answered absentmindedly. "I'm never at home, so I have to have these things ..." He stopped and looked up. "I'm sorry, but I can't activate your workstation."

"What do you mean, you can't?" Usually, there was *nothing* Zeerookah couldn't do with computers.

"I just can't," he repeated, and the tone of his voice indicated that he *wasn't authorized* to do so. "I'm sorry."

"Listen up, Zeery, I have to work on my latest report. I was instructed to do so from the top. Mr. High thought ..."

Zeerookah's obstinate expression substantiated his Indian heritage. "No."

Cotton slapped his hand on a worn mouse pad and cringed as pain shot up his arm. "Okay, the hell with it, then!" He turned to leave.

"Hey, stay cool," he heard Zeerookah say behind him.

Cotton turned back and saw Zeerookah's fingers racing across his keyboard. A few moments later, he shoved a netbook across the desk to Cotton. "I retrieved the data you'll need from the databank and put it on this. Take it with you and use it for as long as you need to, but I don't want any scratches on it — that's a real piano lacquer finish."

Cotton clamped the small computer under his good arm. "Thanks, buddy."

Zeerookah nodded. "By the way — that was good work over at Astoria Park."

"I was only doing my job," Cotton uttered with a shrug. "It would have been better if a police sharpshooter hadn't disarmed me, of all things, when I wanted to stop the nut."

Zeerookah made a face and said, "Ouch! I always say, communication is everything."

Communication. That reminded Cotton of the second reason he had come to see Zeerookah. "There wasn't enough time to set up proper communication channels with the police, but you probably know that first-hand already." He stepped over to the flexible backrest of the office chair, took hold of it with both hands, and then pulled it back until Zeerookah's feet were lifted off the floor. "Did you spy on me this weekend?"

"I never snitch on a buddy," Zeerookah exclaimed as his feet floundered in the air. He resembled a helpless bug caught on its back. "But when Mr. High wants to know something, his word is law."

"Just listen to our law-abiding ex-hacker, who once even attempted to spy on the Vatican. Is nothing sacred to you?" Cotton let go of the backrest.

Without even twitching an eye, Zeerookah told Cotton, "Next time, you should let *me* order parts for you. I know a very cheap online auto parts store ..."

\*

Cotton had barely finished the distasteful task of re-working his report when his partner, Philippa 'Phil' Decker, returned from her lunch break with another co-worker. Good timing — as usual.

Cotton greeted the two agents. "Nice to see you, Phil," he said, feeling cocky.

The slim, elegant blonde dressed in a beige pantsuit nodded imperceptibly. "Good day, Special Agent Cotton,"

she said with exaggerated propriety.

Cotton gestured at the netbook. "There's the report for the Astoria Park operation. That should conclude the case." Zeerookah could file the report in the databank while Cotton finally went out on a new assignment.

"Case closed?" Decker raised her eyebrows. "I don't think so. We're still working on it, trying to delve into the background. It's hard to imagine that one man could manage all the logistics of building a secret lab."

"Okay, that may be," Cotton responded. He added impatiently, "What's our next step?"

Decker gestured for him to come over to her desk. She sat on top of the desk so that he could sit in her office chair. Cotton remained standing, however. He felt better when he didn't have to look up at his partner, who was a bit taller than him anyway.

"Before I forget," he said, "I need my service weapon and badge returned to me before I can go back on duty."

"That won't be necessary," she said, shaking her head. Was there something like pity in her expression? "You'll be going home shortly."

Cotton's stomach cramped up. *That's it! I messed everything up with the incident at the park. They want to dump me.* This would also explain High's reluctance concerning the activation of Cotton's workstation. Now he knew that he was off the team. *But if they're going to throw me out, then Decker will have to tell me to my face.*

"And?" he asked, preparing for the worst.

"And go get packed. Then you're going to go to the Belfort Private Clinic on Staten Island. You'll register there as a patient under the name of Ken Mitchell."

"What?" Cotton exclaimed. "I've just been released from the hospital! I'm doing fine!" He was, even though the doctors had done a lousy job. But suddenly he felt relieved, because it was obvious that he was still on the G-Team. "Ah, I see, I'm supposed to go undercover in that clinic, right?"

Decker coughed and tucked a strand of long blond hair behind her ear. “Wrong. As I understand it, you’re not yet fit for duty. Belfort is a private clinic that specializes in wound healing disorders. Sarah Hunter suggested that you be sent there.” Sarah was a member of the G-Team’s forensic staff.

“The wound simply needs more time to heal,” Cotton retorted. “I already told Mr. High that I could do simple background investigations for as long as necessary. Think about it, Decker. There are a bunch of idiots walking around out there and I’m supposed to sit around with my thumb up my ...”

“I’m sorry. This isn’t my decision, it’s *his*.” Decker nodded towards John D. High’s office. “By the way — you’ll be treated at the clinic incognito, and you won’t have any contact with the G-Team. Is that understood?”

She gathered up her paperwork and handed him a brown envelope.

“Here are your fake papers and your imaginary health record. Sarah Hunter will be in constant touch with the clinic as your make-believe primary care physician, and she’ll keep us posted on the progress of your recovery. I trust that you’ll study these papers thoroughly, so that your cover story won’t be blown. That covers everything, doesn’t it?” Decker looked at him questioningly, one eyebrow raised as though she were expecting him to protest.

Cotton shrugged. “Do I have a choice?”

“No. And don’t cause any unnecessary trouble with the doctors. No spontaneous self-discharging from the clinic. Mr. High made that very clear. If you mess this up, you’ll get booted from the team.”

Decker smoothed out a wrinkle on the leg of her trousers.

“See to it that you get well as soon as possible, Cotton. I need you back here.”

No one needed to tell *him* that. Cotton was forced to pull himself together for the second time that day.

### 3

Monday, July 14th, Belfort Private Clinic, New York

Belfort was a special clinic. It was more like a hotel than a hospital. There were only private rooms, and no white-smocked doctors. Instead, there were pastels everywhere, silent doors, and no phones allowed for the patients. Cotton really did feel like a Ken, the alias he had checked in under, in this health oriented perfect environment.

While he surreptitiously gleaned an overview of the place, the Barbie for this dream house appeared. A well-groomed lady with Slavic cheekbones wearing a pencil skirt and a mint-green blouse greeted him with a smile. "I'm Doctor Sheffer, the head of the clinic. You must be Mr. Mitchell, our newest patient. I do hope you'll like it here."

After they had gotten the small talk out of the way, she came to the point. "Your appointment for your initial examination will be at fifteen hundred hours in Room 3B. Please be on time, but don't stress yourself about it; we place high value on calmness and concentration on the essentials."

Cotton nodded, satisfied. At least he had smuggled in a beverage with a high enough proof to ensure a more pleasant stay. "That's why there aren't any TVs in the rooms, am I right?"

"That's correct. But you may visit the TV room at any time. And there are a number of local and regional newspapers in the lounge." Dr. Sheffer excused herself and left Cotton to his own devices.

Cotton's mobile phone didn't work in the building. To use it, he either had to lean far out of the window in his room or go out into the park that, together with the institution's high wall, isolated the premises. There was a jogging path that ran along the inside of the wall around the clinic.

As Cotton had driven into the clinic's parking lot, he noticed a car that didn't quite fit in with the area's suburban charm. The silver-gray Chrysler 300C Touring still stood parked by the curb next to the clinic. The occupants had left the car and were strolling around the premises.

His internal alarm went off at the mere sight of the individuals: two large men in suits and sunglasses. Despite the summery shades of their light suits, they were still roomy enough to hide weapons in shoulder holsters. The men, who looked like hired thugs, didn't let the clinic out of their sight for even a second.

Cotton decided to do the same and resolved to keep a close watch on them.

Tuesday, July 15th, Belfort Private Clinic

His first day at the clinic was filled with initial examinations, needle pricks, discussions, and diet plans. His actual treatment began the following day.

The area of the clinic where he was sitting and waiting was drenched in sunlight, as the entire clinic was, and it was decorated with magnified photos of insects. It smelled of lemongrass rather than pungent disinfection solution. But hidden beneath the citrus smell lay the odor of sickness and disease, with a hint of decomposed flesh. It smelled like Cotton's wound.

Lying beside Cotton was an overweight man named Schultz. His bandaged lower leg was propped up.

"You got hurt at home?" he asked Cotton.

"Yeah — I was renovating," Cotton answered. The cover story Decker had invented for him to use during his clandestine stay made him look like a bumbling fool. *Did she do that on purpose?* He wouldn't put it past her.

"Housework is the number two cause of death in the US. Right behind number one — sex. Did you know that?" Schultz laughed. "A fun way to die, I guess."

Cotton let the mockery bounce off him, but it wasn't easy.

Schultz misinterpreted his ironic look. "Don't worry too much about it. Sure, it's odd the first time, but over time you forget the little helpers."

"Hard to imagine," Cotton murmured.



When he had read the clinic's informational brochure on its alternative healing methods, he thought they were referring to acupuncture, homeopathy, or something along those lines. However, as he now knew, the clinic's success was due to a quite different technique. It specialized in using insects in the art of healing: the use of insect toxins and other products.

"So you've already made the acquaintance of the little beasts?" Cotton asked, continuing the conversation.

"Yes. I've got diabetes and I have an open wound on my leg. The little pinkies only eat the dead tissue, which helps the body heal better."

Pinkies — a euphemistic term for blowfly maggots. Cotton cringed at the mere thought of having the fat wiggly fly larvae on his skin, eating a part of him. But he had to play along if he wanted to get his job back.

"I prefer to see insects from behind a spray can," he said.

A nurse carrying a tablet covered with a cloth entered the room. *Vera Hernandez* was emblazoned on her nametag.

Cotton's heart rate went up right away, and it wasn't only because of the attractive woman with the chestnut-colored ponytail.

Mrs. Kelly, sitting on the other side of Cotton, laughed at his comment. The older lady was darkly tanned and had no bandages as far as Cotton could see. "If you consider these things here to be insects, you ought to come to my part of the world," she said. "Down under we have some of the biggest and most poisonous creepy crawlers on all seven continents," she added in her thick Australian accent. "And of all places, it was here in the US that I was bit by a germ that only maggots can help to heal."

"Here in the US, we've also got some bad critters," Cotton said. His thoughts went to the two thugs, who were parked near the entrance again today.

Cotton's thoughts were taken in a new direction by the nurse's smile. "I'm sorry you had to wait," she told the three patients. "We had a slight delay owing to the late delivery of some micro-surgeons. Would you please come with me, Mrs. Kelly?" She gestured towards a room divider at the end of the room. "One more treatment, and then you can travel again."

"I sure hope so," Mrs. Kelly said bitterly. "Every day counts when you're my age!"

A doctor entered the room, also carrying a tablet covered by a green cloth. This was the graying Dr. Carter, who had held the preliminary talk with Cotton.

Dr. Carter greeted the two patients, placed the tablet on the table, and pulled the cloth back halfway.

Cotton, who had anticipated seeing a wiggly white mass, instead saw two little packets made of gauze lying in a kidney bowl tagged with his false name. Beneath this, the tag read '*Lucilia sericata*'. It looked like merely a change of bandages awaited him. He breathed a sigh of relief.

But on closer inspection, the bandage material seemed to be alive, although the slight movements beneath the gauze were barely perceptible.

Cotton remembered the doctor saying something about caged larvae and bio bags: two different methods of using maggots in treating wounds. The caged maggots did their job trapped beneath loosely fitted gauze bandages, while the other method, the so-called bio bag, allowed the maggots to eat the patient's flesh through a thin layer of gauze. The larvae emitted digestive enzymes into the wound that would only dissolve dead tissue, which they would then eat. The thought alone made Cotton wince.

They heard a pain filled moan from behind the screen. The nurse peered out from behind the room divider, saying, "Dr. Carter, could you please have a look at Mrs. Kelly?"

The doctor hurried over.

Schultz caught a glimpse of Cotton's reaction. "The pinkies were used during the Civil War, you know, before modern medications were available. What was good enough for our forefathers can't be so bad for us."

*Very comforting*, Cotton thought, saying nothing.

Dr. Carter was back in short order to remove Cotton's bandage from his arm. The edges of the wound were inflamed, and the wound itself was swollen. The black stitches cut deeply into the flesh. It hadn't looked that bad yesterday. The smell was nauseating.

"This doesn't look good," the doctor said. "Don't you feel any pain?"

"I do," Cotton admitted. Today he had even taken one aspirin more than usual.

"Unfortunately, I'll have to remove the stitches again, but only until the infection gets better." The doctor cut the stitches with a tiny pair of scissors and pulled them out.

Cotton fought back the tears that were threatening to spring to his eyes.

"I would suggest letting the larvae directly into the wound," the doctor said after a careful examination. "I can open the bio bags. What we're doing with Mrs. Kelly and Mr. Schultz is far more effective."

"I can hardly wait." Cotton sighed.

"It's his first treatment, Doc," Schultz reminded the physician. "We all take the bags with the first treatment."

The doctor muttered something. He moistened one of the maggot-filled bags, placed it onto the open wound with a pair of forceps, and then covered it completely. The second gauze bag was left unused. "That'll do for now. You'll see — tomorrow you'll feel better, and in four days we'll replace the bag." He fastened the bag with a loose bandage, and then he washed his hands thoroughly.

"If you have an extra bag of pinkies, I'd be glad to take them." Schultz winked an eye. "I'd like to be able to walk up to the altar in three weeks time. I can't keep my fiancée

waiting for too long. I had to wait long enough to get into this clinic.”

“We’ll see.” The doctor slipped latex gloves onto his hands before he unwrapped the bandage on Schultz’s leg. The wound was extensive, about three times as long as Cotton’s cut. Dr. Carter pulled the second metal dish towards him; a glass tube was revealed when the cloth was lifted. White maggots wiggled and moved inside the dish, and the doctor carefully pulled one out with a moist spatula.

Revolted but simultaneously fascinated, Cotton watched as Dr. Carter took out one maggot after another and placed them in the crater-like wound using the stainless steel spatula. The off-white larvae soon filled the wound, looking like a handful of rice. They too were covered with a bandage secured by a strip of tape.

“And what about this?” Schultz pointed to an area about the size of a postage stamp that still had a lesion.

The doctor looked at it dubiously. “There will be no further maggot treatments today. We can’t put the maggots in the bio bags together with the others due to hygienic reasons. They would have to be killed.”

“Go for it.” Cotton gestured at the gauze bag.

The doctor placed the bio bag onto Schultz’s wound.

“You can relax,” the doctor reassured Cotton as he left the room. “At most you’ll feel a little movement.”

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Cotton kept an eye out for Schultz during lunch, but he only saw Mrs. Kelly sitting at the next table. The food here was definitely better than it had been in the other hospital. The steak was very tasty. It was as soft as butter and almost didn’t need to be cut with a knife. That was good, since he had been told to take it easy with his arm so that the maggots could do their job.