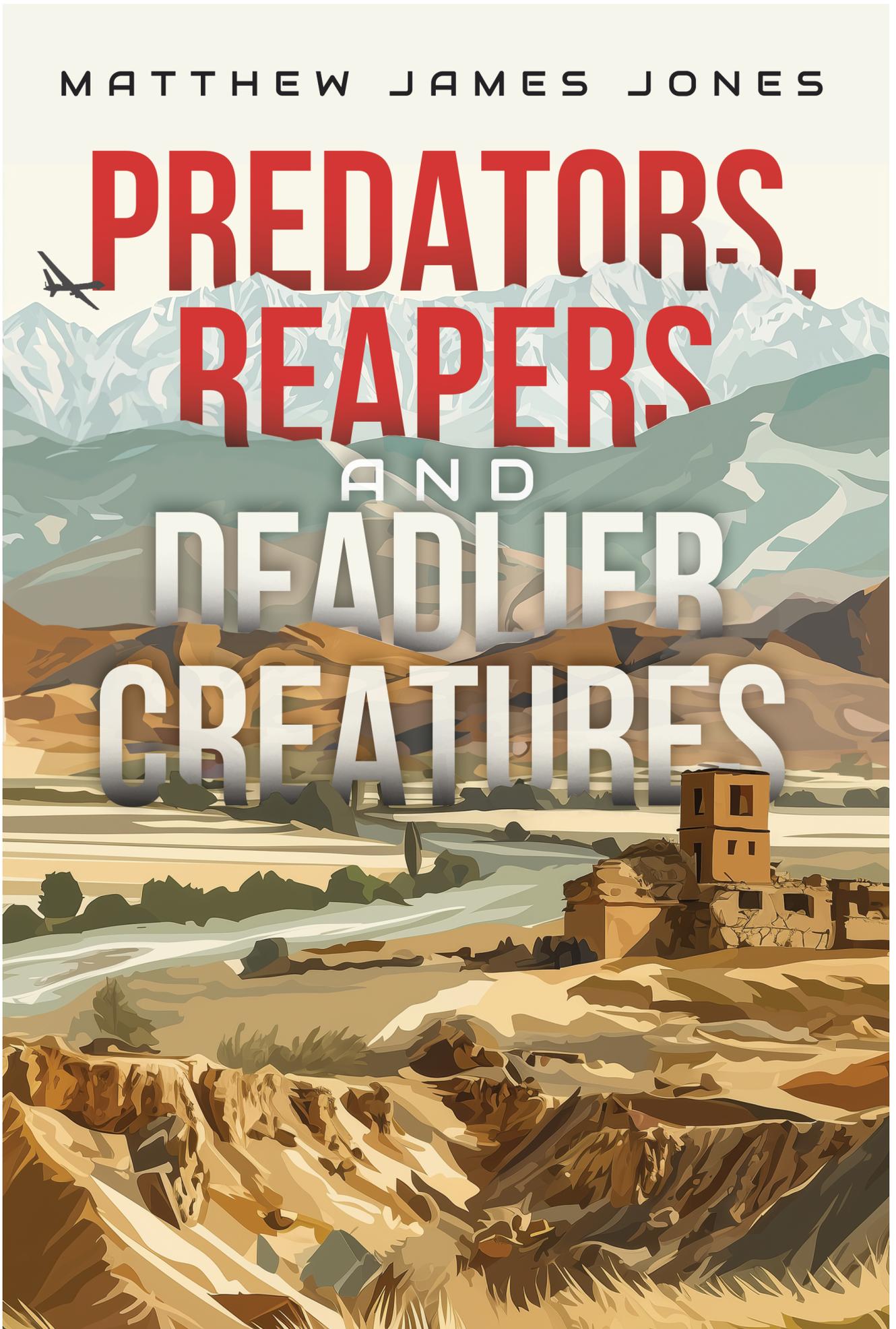


**New Fiction by Matthew James
Jones: Excerpt from
Predators, Reapers, and
Deadlier Creatures**

MATTHEW JAMES JONES

**PREDATORS,
REAPERS,**

AND
**DEADLIER
CREATURES**



I'd been in Afghanistan for three months when I saw the woman in the marketplace die. Thirty or forty men haggled the price of fruit as she skirted a low stone wall in her burka, stomach swollen in late pregnancy. Our drone was hovering overhead, studying the Pattern of Life, when the woman triggered the bomb, which exploded in a white flash. The screen dimmed; we saw her legs had been severed, nearly at the hip.

Commotion: the men in the market scrambled to aid her, pouring water in her mouth, and we sent a helicopter, which landed in the marketplace a few minutes later. The men formed a protective circle around the dying woman. When the medics climbed from the chopper with their kits and stretchers, the villagers didn't let them get close.

Minutes passed. The medics arguing with the villagers as the woman's mouth stretched into a black 'O' and blood seeped into the sand and we sipped coffee and cracked cruel jokes until she died.

And I didn't even want to go here, because you can't make sense of the stupid awful waste of it no matter how you try. But back then I hadn't yet grown wise; after my shift, I stumbled back to the barracks in the pre-dawn fog and sat on the steps outside in the rear of the building to be alone.

I heard a whimper. A muted cough.

Pulled a little sailor's flashlight from my pocket, spun around, and poked my head under the steps. A black cavity yawned—more than large enough for a person to crawl into the building's underbelly. I inched forward, flashlight piercing the darkness, and discovered the Bigfoot.

On closer inspection: this was not a military-issued Bigfoot. It had wormed its way into the corner beneath the shower room where the floor got soggy and sagged. Shining my little light up and down its hulking body, dozens of greasy frogs hopped deeper into darkness. The creature huddled next to a

drainpipe, where marks in the fungi suggested it'd been slurping the nourishing scum.

At first I had no idea what I was seeing: a bulkish white man-shape snuffling in the dirt, enormous hands pressed over its brow like the light was a welding torch. Thick fur tufts, filthy and matted with sweat and frog oil. Some kind of tremendous gorilla-bear, eyes glittering with intelligence, whimpering and seeming to mouth language—what other word but Bigfoot applies?

The flashlight nearly slipped in my sweaty palm. A voice in my head told me to run, run far, sprint all the way back to Canada. Another voice said, get your pistol out, fool, and I complied, pulling my rusty 9mm from the holster, and flicking off the safety.

The creature, seated in the cellar's muck, peeked at me through its fingers, big pooling blue eyes, fuzzy eyebrows furrowing low, two great canine tusks jutting over a wolf-like muzzle. It grovelled: the saddest Bigfoot I'd ever seen, yet also the happiest, since it was my first.

I tried to keep my voice steady, but it cracked anyway. "Are you... with the Taliban?"

To my surprise, it responded in a twangy English with a voice deeper than a bear's. "Shit, man. I ain't with anythin' 'cept a hundred frogs, and 'bout four thousand fleas."

"You're obviously not from around here." I was looking at his thick fur, orange and matted, with patches of white, freckled skin peeking out. Summer in Kandahar the heat rises halfway to boiling, and just a bit cooler at night. "How the hell did you get onto the base?"

The Bigfoot hung its heavy head and sighed. "Took a nap on the wrong plane." It picked at a few rags that clung to its shoulders, that might have once been a woolen scarf. "I'm

havin' a pretty shitty day on top of a whole stack of other shitty days. I know ya gotta job to do, but please don't shoot me. Please." He closed his eyes, waiting for the bullet, and clasped his hairy-knuckled hands. "I know how I look but I never wanted to hurt nobody." His lower lip trembled.

It could not know that it was pleading for mercy from a drone operator. That in the last month, I had seen eleven people killed by missiles and bombs. I hadn't ordered any of the strikes, but I had facilitated each one by lining up assets and passing information. If I hadn't seen that woman die in the marketplace, I would have wasted the freak. But watching without being able to do anything had been the absolute worst feeling, like a fabric in the chest tearing. Here was a living creature who needed my help, and a chance to prove to myself I was still capable of a good deed.

I took a whole sleeve of Saltine crackers, which my mother had sent me in a morale box, and slid it, and two bottles of water, into the crack at the back of the barracks, where his eyes glittered in the dark.

I felt for him, the big bastard. He was hot in his pelt and chomping the heads off frogs. "Don't let anyone else hear you crying," I said. "I can't protect you. Avoid discovery. Preserve water."

The Bigfoot nodded its huge head in thanks.

I made a promise to tell this story, even if it hurts. There will be drone strikes, monsters, barbed wire, and forbidden love in bunkers. Once I was a giant but now I sit in the wake of strength with the cripples. I have taken innocent life and nearly destroyed myself in grief.

But the story starts with a kindness, and that matters.

Predators, Reapers, and Deadlier Creatures is available for purchase on [Amazon](#).