

The New York Times bestseller from the author of
The Coffin Dancer and *The Devil's Teardrop*

JEFFERY DEEVER



"[A] pulse-racing
chase." — *The New
York Times Book
Review*

THE CROWN

THE Empty Chair

Jeffery Deaver



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"Deaver writes the types of thrillers that would challenge even the most enthusiastic roller-coaster rider."

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Praise for Jeffery Deaver and *THE EMPTY CHAIR*

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—*Publishers Weekly*

"Quick to the punch, *The Coffin Dancer* is diabolically packed with the good stuff: cover-ups, mystery, action."

—*Library Journal*

BY THE AUTHOR OF

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Mistress of Justice

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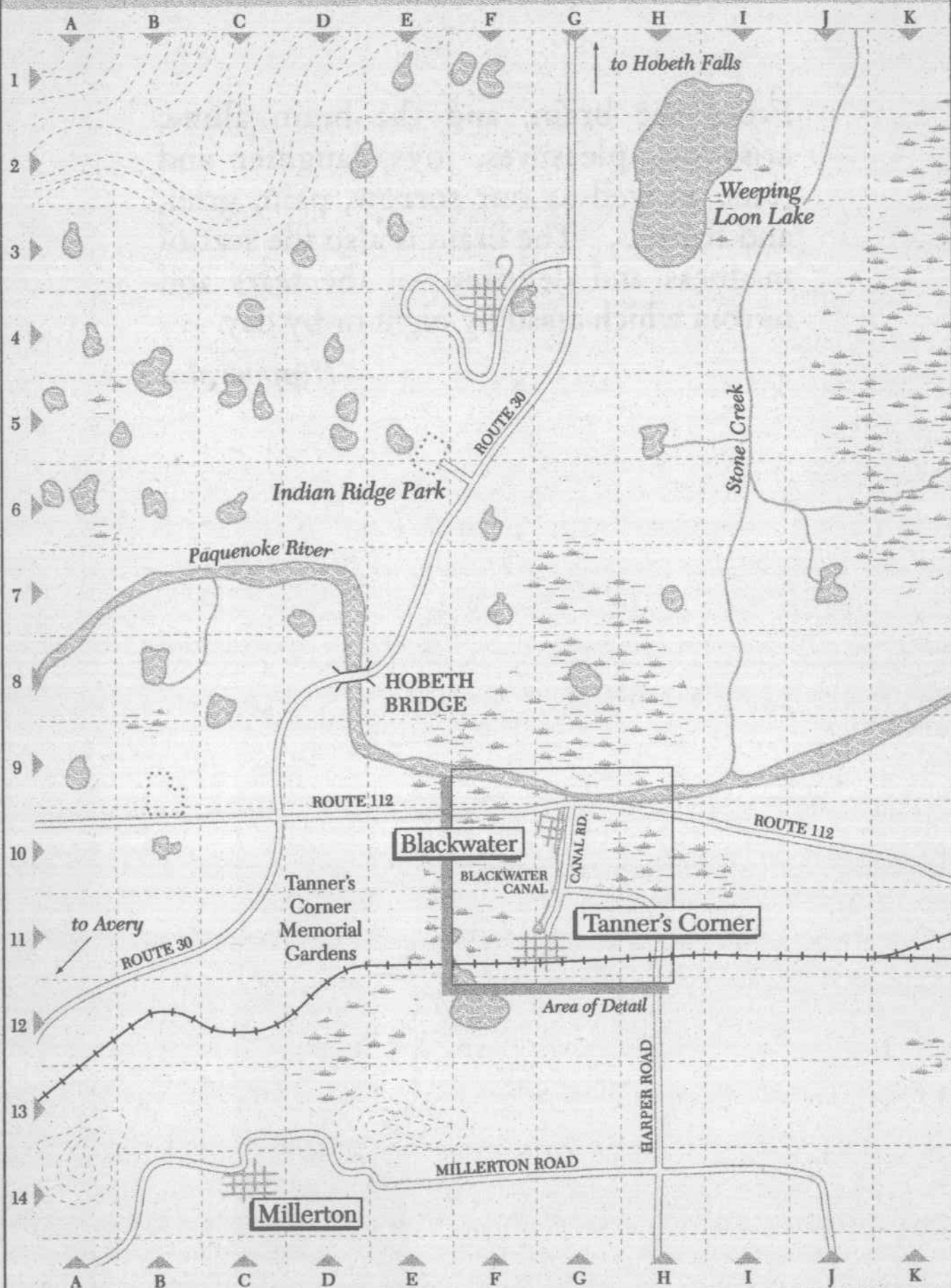
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no better agent, no better friend*

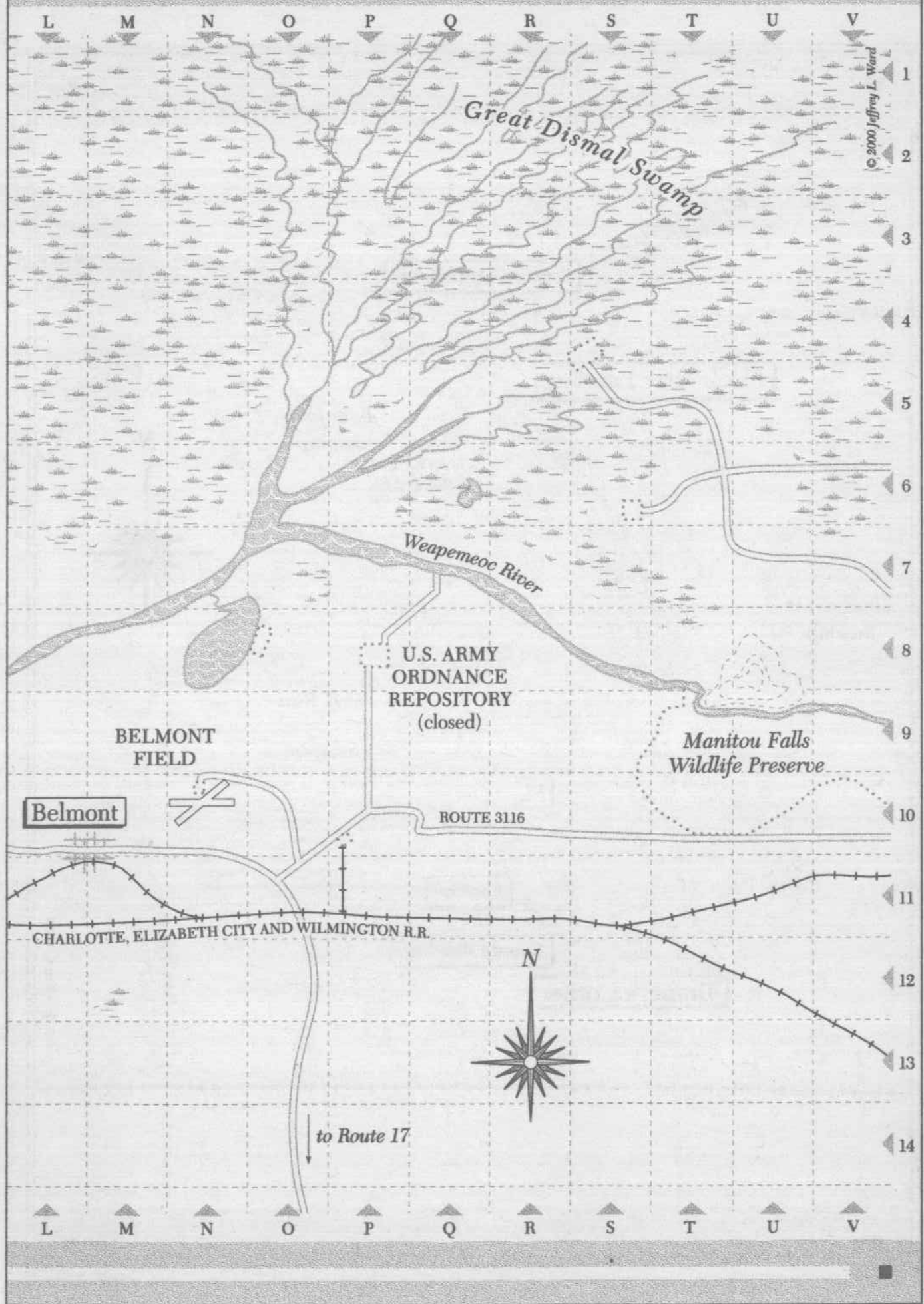
From the brain, and the brain alone,
arise our pleasures, joys, laughter and
jests, as well as our sorrow, pain, grief,
and tears. . . . The brain is also the seat of
madness and delirium, of the fears and
terrors which assail by night or by day. . . .

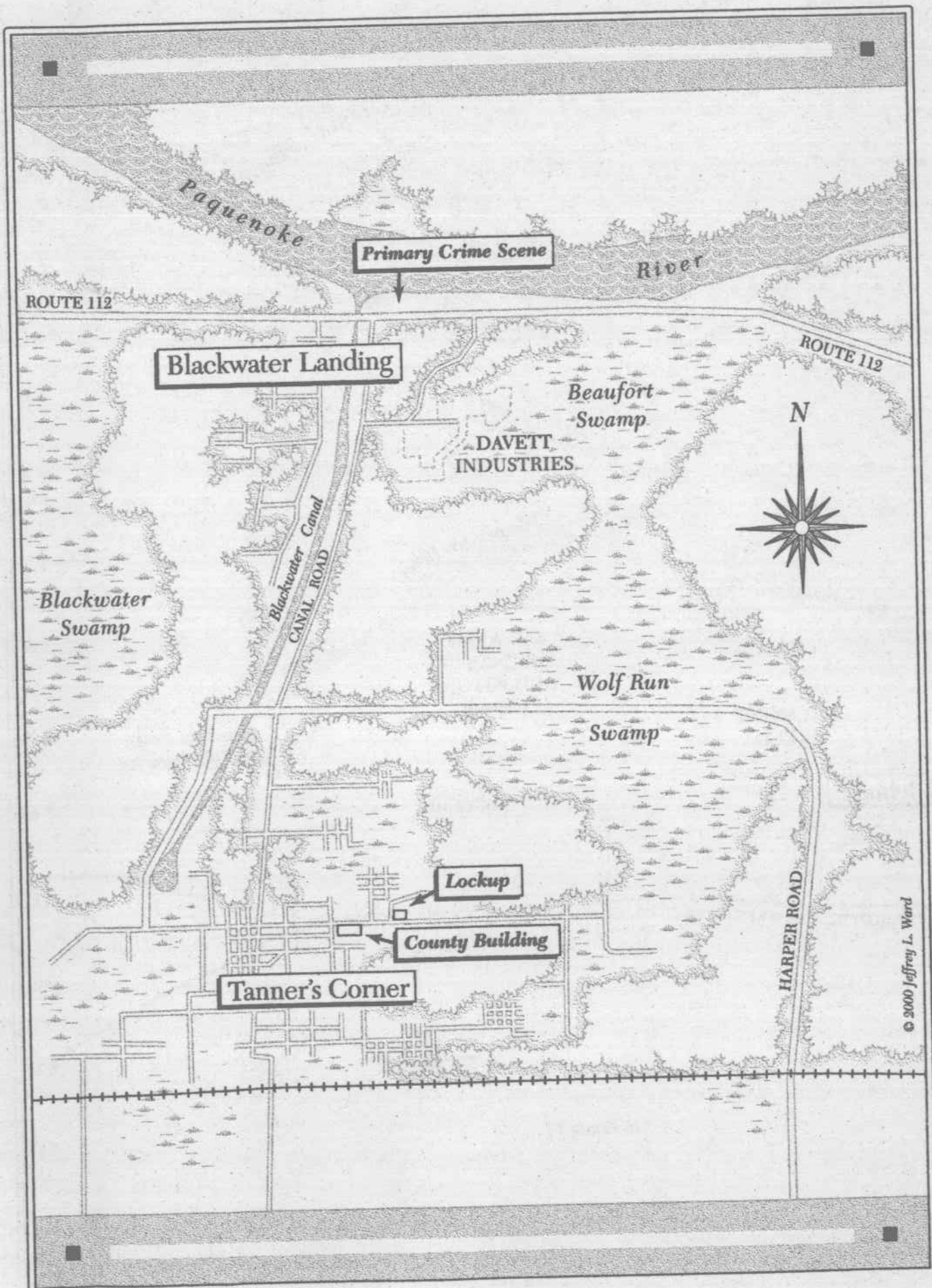
—*Hippocrates*

PAQUENOKE COUNTY,



NORTH CAROLINA





I

North of the Paquo

. . . chapter one

She came here to lay flowers at the place where the boy died and the girl was kidnapped.

She came here because she was a heavy girl and had a pocked face and not many friends.

She came because she was expected to.

She came because she wanted to.

Ungainly and sweating, twenty-six-year-old Lydia Johansson walked along the dirt shoulder of Route 112, where she'd parked her Honda Accord, then stepped carefully down the hill to the muddy bank where Blackwater Canal met the opaque Paquenoque River.

She came here because she thought it was the right thing to do.

She came even though she was afraid.

It wasn't long after dawn but this August had been the hottest in years in North Carolina and Lydia was already sweating through her nurse's whites by the time she started toward the clearing on the riverbank, surrounded by willows and tupelo gum and broad-leafed bay trees.

She easily found the place she was looking for; the yellow police tape was very evident through the haze.

Early morning sounds. Loons, an animal foraging in the thick brush nearby, hot wind through sedge and swamp grass.

Lord, I'm scared, she thought. Flashing back vividly on the most gruesome scenes from the Stephen King and Dean Koontz novels she read late at night with her companion, a pint of Ben & Jerry's.

More noises in the brush. She hesitated, looked around. Then continued on.

"Hey," a man's voice said. Very near.

Lydia gasped and spun around. Nearly dropped the flowers. "Jesse, you scared me."

"Sorry." Jesse Corn stood on the other side of a weeping willow, near the clearing that was roped off. Lydia noticed that their eyes were fixed on the same thing: a glistening white outline on the ground where the boy's body'd been found. Surrounding the line indicating Billy's head was a dark stain that, as a nurse, she recognized immediately as old blood.

"So that's where it happened," she whispered.

"It is, yep." Jesse wiped his forehead and rearranged the floppy hook of blond hair. His uniform—the beige outfit of the Paquenoke County Sheriff's Department—was wrinkled and dusty. Dark stains of sweat blossomed under his arms. He was thirty and boyishly cute. "How long you been here?" she asked.

"I don't know. Since five maybe."

"I saw another car," she said. "Up the road. Is that Jim?"

"Nope. Ed Schaeffer. He's on the other side of the river." Jesse nodded at the flowers. "Those're pretty."

After a moment Lydia looked down at the daisies in her hand. "Two forty-nine. At Food Lion. Got 'em last night. I knew nothing'd be open this early. Well, Dell's is but they don't sell flowers." She wondered why she was

rambling. She looked around again. "No idea where Mary Beth is?"

Jesse shook his head. "Not hide nor hair."

"Him neither, I guess that means."

"Him neither." Jesse looked at his watch. Then out over the dark water, dense reeds and concealing grass, the rotting pier.

Lydia didn't like it that a county deputy, sporting a large pistol, seemed as nervous as she was. Jesse started up the grassy hill to the highway. He paused, glanced at the flowers. "Only two ninety-nine?"

"Forty-nine. Food Lion."

"That's a bargain," the young cop said, squinting toward a thick sea of grass. He turned back to the hill. "I'll be up by the patrol car."

Lydia Johansson walked closer to the crime scene. She pictured Jesus, she pictured angels and she prayed for a few minutes. She prayed for the soul of Billy Stail, which had been released from his bloody body on this very spot just yesterday morning. She prayed that the sorrow visiting Tanner's Corner would soon be over.

She prayed for herself too.

More noise in the brush. Snapping, rustling.

The day was lighter now but the sun didn't do much to brighten up Blackwater Landing. The river was deep here and fringed with messy black willows and thick trunks of cedar and cypress—some living, some not, and all choked with moss and viny kudzu. To the northeast, not far, was the Great Dismal Swamp, and Lydia Johansson, like every Girl Scout past and present in Paquenoke County, knew all the legends about that place: the Lady of the Lake, the Headless Trainman. . . . But it wasn't those apparitions that bothered her; Blackwater Landing had its own ghost—the boy who'd kidnapped Mary Beth McConnell.

Lydia opened her purse and lit a cigarette with shaking hands. Felt a bit calmer. She strolled along the shore.