

Hidden Among the Antiques



Cynthia Ebers

Book two of the series has Jillian preparing for the grand opening of her newly acquired antique store. The town's mayor is kidnapped and a relic stolen. Jillian's daughter is unknowingly drawn into the crime and it's Mom to the rescue!

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By Cynthia Ebers

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-961267-44-2

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-961267-45-9

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-498-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Ebers, Cynthia

Hidden Among the Antiques: Book Two in the Jillian MacSweeney
Mystery Series by Cynthia Ebers

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026905814

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

First Edition

Chapter One

Country life may be new to me, but all kinds of creatures called the Kansas prairie home long before Jillian MacSweeney arrived. My husband, Frank, and I purchased a piece of property on a hill near the town of Limestone. The locals called the land “Lover’s Lane” for its secluded location, and magnificent view. We made it our own, and renamed it Windyridge.

Frank called me over one day and pointed out two rock circles in the ground. He pronounced them “mammoth tracks.” I may have rolled my eyes out of his line of sight, but then I gave him my usual affirming smile. I had to give him credit for coming up with a great story that our grandchildren would enjoy. My skepticism must have been more obvious than I intended, so Frank took me to the Riverview Town Hall to see a mammoth skull in a glass case.

In the spring of 1992, a local farmer in Millwood County, Kansas, made a unique discovery on his land a few miles south of Riverview. He unearthed an enormous skull that would later be confirmed by the state university as a Colombian mammoth. After months of study, the skull was returned home to our county and placed on display in the town hall for free public viewing.

I couldn’t believe it. Apparently, there are many records, dating back to the 1870’s confirming the discoveries of mammoth bones in the area by other farmers as well. Just imagine, prehistoric animals wandering the plains of Kansas. I grew up in Kansas, and I had never heard these stories before.

Frank and I actually have no idea if the rock circles on Windyridge are mammoth footprints, but the idea that they might be is intriguing. We surrounded our unconfirmed fossils with limestone rocks, and created a rock garden around them. It is entirely possible that Frank's deduction is true, and surprisingly fun to ponder such a fascinating connection to history.

My own history, as a farm wife on Windyridge, began a few short years ago. After owning the land for many years, we took the monumental step of building a cozy home for our retirement in the country. We had both completed forty-year careers in the city, and Frank was immediately thrilled to be a full-time gentleman farmer. I, on the other hand, felt a little lost with so much free time on my hands, until a murder happened over the summer in the nearest town to us, Limestone.

I nearly got myself killed by nosing around and asking too many questions, and had to be rescued by both canines and cops, as well as my beloved Frank. The aftermath led to an opportunity of a lifetime for me that I didn't even know I wanted; I bought an antique store.

"Memories" had been in business in the neighboring town, Riverview, for decades. It was first owned by Robert O'Conner, and passed on to his daughter and her husband, Delores and Charles Jenkins. Following the scandal of the local murder last summer, Delores moved to Arizona to live with her cousin. Charles, the murderer, was interred in the local cemetery, and Memories Antique Store became available.

“I’m headed to the store,” I told Frank on Monday morning, kissing him goodbye.

These were familiar words since we purchased a store that was in desperate need of attention. Frank had done his share of the original clean-up and clean-out process. Our three daughters helped as we took truckloads of junk to the dump. Frank hauled truckloads of metal to be cashed in for scrap. Slowly, after about a million loads of trash went into the dumpster, and a thousand gallons of paint was tediously applied, the building and property began to look like we were making progress.

Please don’t take my description of the cleaning process as an insult to my old friends, Delores and Charles. The business, before I arrived, had been open for over sixty years, through two generations. A lot of stuff can pile up in sixty years! Frank and I moved from our home in the city after living there for twenty-five years. When we were packing and sorting, I found things I had not seen for twenty-four of those years hidden in nooks and crannies that I forgot were even there. It’s easy to think, *I might need that someday*, or *I’ll deal with this thing later*. Our massive clean-up efforts at the store served to remind me that I need to keep control of the stuff, so it does not take control of me.

My new-to-me store already had a new name, The Country Boutique: Antiques & More. This had been decided early on in my adventure, and a wonderful sign declaring the new name, and my ownership, was presented to me by my wonderful family. This name pretty much says it all. I wanted to keep the actual antiques, get rid of the junk and trash, and add country

decorative items that will appeal to a multi-generational clientele.

Our middle daughter, Lainey, has been instrumental in creating a store that shoppers will love. She has an eye for what is truly valuable, and what needs to be tossed. Aileen, our youngest daughter, has taken charge of the much needed outdoor renovations. And I have our oldest daughter, Bridget, making connections with local artists to place their wares on consignment, for what I hope will help bring in shoppers from outside our little community as well.

There are two employees working for me in the new store, and I couldn't manage without them. One is a friend of mine, Celeste Miller, who spent her life caring for a wealthy woman in the town of Limestone until her passing. The other one is Chad a young man who is currently working off the money he owes us. Oh, and Celeste always brings her rescue dog, an eight-year-old terrier-mix named Trixie. I am always happy to have a sweet dog around.

I pulled into The Country Boutique and spotted Aileen planting a small red maple in the side yard. She gave me a wave and continued to work. I parked in front of the store and walked around to see her progress.

“What a beautiful little tree!” I said, appreciatively.

“We'll plant some hydrangea bushes along this fence next spring,” she explained, pointing behind her. “They will bring some color. I think we need another rock garden right over there,” she added. “That will make a nice place to set some of

the outdoor statuary and antiques, without having to constantly move them around for mowing.”

Smart.

Aileen pointed suddenly, and we both stopped and held our breath as a monarch butterfly landed on the handle of an old water pump. The delicate creature didn't stay long and was soon drifting away in the wind.

“I saw the property west of here had milkweed plants around the pond, and I wondered if we would see any monarchs,” Aileen offered.

My children all know how much I love monarch butterflies.

“Did I ever tell you the story of the monarch picture I made when I was eight years old? Our teacher passed out an outline of the butterfly. We glued black string to the outline and filled in the wings with brightly colored rice,” I reminisced. “I loved that picture. The colored rice looked like stained glass to an eight-year-old. Mom put my picture in a frame and hung it in the hallway. With five kids, she couldn't display every art project that showed up at home, but I think she liked the reminder of the beautiful monarchs as much as I did.”

“You may have told us that story a time or two, or two hundred,” Aileen teased, “but it is a good story.”

Ah, yes. The people who know you best know all of your best stories. I decided to share that story with Celeste sometime and gave Aileen a hug for listening to it again.

“Can we add some butterfly bushes?” I asked my official landscaper. “I love all kinds of butterflies, and they surround my butterfly bush on Windyridge all summer.”

“We can definitely add some butterfly bushes next spring,” she confirmed.

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Eastern North American Monarchs, including those we see in Kansas, have a winter home in the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico. While some types of butterflies can survive over the winter as larvae, pupae, or even adults in some species, monarchs cannot live through the cold winter temperatures. They take environmental cues and begin their long migration south with the use of air currents and thermals, some flying as far as three thousand miles!

They return to the same areas to roost for the winter on oyamel fir trees, sometimes called sacred firs. Researchers are still trying to explain their amazing ability to return to the same spot and have deduced that they may be using the magnetic pull of the earth and the position of the sun for directional-aids, among other things. They cluster in colonies to stay warm, with tens of thousands of monarchs together on one tree. I would love to see that!

In spring, the monarchs become reproductive and begin their journey north. While only a single generation migrated south, it will take multiple generations to make the migration north, with each new generation making it farther and farther on the journey.

Because the landscape parallels roadways, or vice versa, the Interstate-35 corridor that runs through six states, from Minnesota to Texas, follows the central flyway of the monarch migration. In 2016, these six states signed a “memorandum of understanding” that informally named the Interstate-35 corridor “The Monarch Highway.”

The states agreed to coordinate efforts that will benefit monarchs and other pollinators. You may see signs in the grassy-areas along Interstate-35 letting you know about The Monarch Highway, and the purposeful planting of wildflowers. In order for these magnificent creatures to sustain life during their migrations, they require nectar-bearing plants. These plants allow them to rest and refuel on their long journeys. I am very proud of Kansas for being a part of this collaboration.

Monarchs love our plethora of wildflowers in Kansas, but it is the humble milkweed plants that are the hosts for monarch proliferation. Milkweeds are the only plants that the Monarch larvae can eat. Without milkweeds, the larvae would not develop, and we would not have monarch butterflies. For this reason, monarchs only lay their eggs on milkweed. The sap contains toxins, making the larvae and the butterflies unpalatable to predators. The toxic taste, as well as their black and orange coloration warning, is how they survive.

Monarchs, and all pollinators, are vital to our ecosystems. The world would not be the same without them. The hope of a monarch visit is what keeps Frank and I diligent in sowing more wildflowers and protecting the milkweed plants on our property.

So far, we have been blessed with monarch butterfly sightings every spring and every fall.

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The two-acre property surrounding The Country Boutique is evolving into a welcoming business. The store itself was added onto a couple of times, making for a complex footprint. The main two-story building, with a box-gable triangular roof, faces town. It has an expansive covered porch, with two large windows on either side of a decorative wooden door. Many years ago, the original antique store owner added a large, single-story room on the northside to increase the store's display area. On the south, a smaller addition provided space that Delores used for an office. Her office led into a large storage area with a garage-style door for loading and unloading big items, like furniture.

While our girls gallantly threw themselves into sorting the mass confusion inside, Frank and Chad helped me with the outside. We scraped for a week and then painted the clapboard siding with a rich, taupe-color, and the trim with white, while I chose a hunter green to accent the door. Hidden among the junk, Lainey had discovered window boxes that fit the two large, front windows. We painted the boxes white, and Aileen hand painted ivy vines that appeared to be spilling from the boxes, like the ones Frank and I frequently saw at the stores in Bavaria, Germany. When we added live, fall-colored chrysanthemums in orange and yellow, the decorative boxes looked delightful.

Baskets of the same colorful chrysanthemums hung from the porch trim. Among the chaos, we also discovered two rocking chairs, one wicker and one wooden, and a wrought iron bench for sitting outside and enjoying the porch. Celeste made cushions for the iron bench in a beige outdoor fabric with a green ivy print, and pillows for the rockers in yellow and sage green. I was already in love with the porch! Frank attached poles to the sign my family had presented to me and erected the welcoming notice in the front yard. Aileen plans to add flowers along the sidewalk next spring, and Frank said we really should start saving for a new roof. Oh, the joys of property ownership.

After four weeks in a row of using every moment of everyone's spare-time, all of the back-breaking work and the trash-runs, the inside began to be more manageable. We painted the interior walls ivory with white trim and added a sage-green accent wall behind the counter. A gold, antique cash register perched on the counter. It was all starting to feel very cozy.

Lainey began organizing our main showroom, which she felt needed some "lines of distinction" for our shoppers, so that they can explore all of our treasures more easily. We decided that the large addition to the north would become our "everything kitchen" display. It would have wooden furniture pieces, like the antique baker's cupboard I had fallen in love with last summer, along with dishes and silver. I was going to ask Bridget if she might find a local seamstress who could add embroidered tea towels, and though I had not asked her yet, I hoped my first-born

might write a cookbook of her own to add to the kitchen products display someday.

The main display room held everything from antique furniture, to a vintage soda vending machine, to toys and jewelry. Chad did his best to keep up with Lainey's requests of, "Let's try this over there. No, maybe over there." It was fun to see the birth of what I had previously only imagined.

We decided the smaller, but still adequate-sized room to the south would become the artists' consignment display area. Bridget already had three local artists on the hook. A married couple, Kyle and Heather Anderson, are local photographers. They do family portraits as their "put food on the table" job, but their passion is capturing Kansas landscapes. I have seen their work, and it is impressive. With our unimpeded views of the sky, we have glorious sunrises and sunsets nearly every day. The colors will take your breath away, and the Anderson's showcase this color with all-things-Kansas, like waving fields of wheat, rustic windmills, and wooden fence posts. They are very talented.

Our third artist is a sculptor, Ben Atohi. He explained to me that Atohi means "woods" in his native Cherokee language. He works with local quartz. Some of his pieces are designed to showcase the natural beauty of the quartz, and some are carved into familiar animal shapes, like fish and wolves.

I am excited to host all three of these artists. Bridget says she would like to find at least one more, hopefully a painter.

We decided to use the room upstairs, over the main showroom, as “our space.” There was already a restroom. We added a small kitchen area with a microwave and apartment-sized refrigerator, along with a table and chairs for an employee lounge. I put my office upstairs, complete with a comfy, overstuffed sofa and small television, should any of my grandchildren need to spend a sick or vacation day out of school with me. Then we lined the remaining empty space with shelves to store holiday decorations. Decorating for each season and holiday will be an important part of inviting our customers to keep coming back. I knew filling those shelves with colorful decorations for every occasion was imperative.

And finally, the large storage area on the ground floor had to be tackled. This will be an important space for us. New items for the store may have to be cleaned, or painted, or stained and will always need to be priced. It is crucial that we sell everything at a price the customers feel is a good deal while making sure we produce enough profit to stay in business. A tricky balancing act, to say the least.

The former owner placed three large metal storage containers out behind the store. They are big and rough-looking, like the back end of a semi-truck you see driving down the road. They will make excellent storage. They are tall and roomy, with the two doors on the rear end being the only way in and out. We cleaned out most of the hodge podge and partially filled one container with furniture that we were still mulling over. Lainey thought the containers would make a good space to store

purchases from estate sales until they could be sorted through, though we probably don't really need all three containers.

"If you're sure you don't need all three storage-containers," Frank began, "we could lease two of them out. The man who owns the local lawn and snow removal service already approached me and asked if he could lease one or two of them to store equipment. He said our location and highway access would be very convenient for him. The price he's willing to pay for leasing two containers would just about pay the store's electric bill every month."

We all agreed that renting two of the storage-containers would be a big help for a fledgling store. Frank voiced a concern that some child or teenager, or even a homeless adult, might try to hide inside one of the containers and get locked in. Heaven help us if that happened. He said he would place new padlocks on them and give the new renter a key, too, just to be on the safe side.

Bit by bit, all of our hard work began making a difference. Our grand opening for The Country Boutique is just two weeks away, and the dream is finally feeling possible.

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