Chapter 1
Discovery

I am falling through space. All that flashes before my eyes is unfocused blue sky and hard, white, granite. I land harshly, sitting in a cavity within the moraine, my day pack cushioning my back against the rock. Seven feet above, the talus boulder that turned under my foot continues wobbling, teetering on the edge, a vulture deciding to stay or fly. It finally settles quietly on the rim.

Nothing hurts. Nothing is broken. Gathering my legs beneath me I stand and proceed to do a banana peel slip on tiny ball bearings granite. My arms and hands shoot out to break my fall. Instead, they collide with rocks, upsetting my balance even more. I land in the same place before, thankful my head doesn't whiplash into the rock. The joint on my left ring finger, the one with the wedding ring, feels like it has been slammed by a hammer. The swelling is instantaneous.

Getting up carefully this time, nursing my throbbing hand, I cautiously climb out the hole and look around. Had the rock that threw me in here followed behind I don't think I ever would have been found. Who would know where to search? I can see Michele Hinatsu, my hiking partner for the last ten years, several hundred yards ahead at the top of the moraine marveling at the dissected slope of Mt. Mendel. What a great scene! I'll worry about my injury later. Pulling out my camera I snap a photo and then move to join her, conservatively picking each step across talus and scree.

All morning, Michele and I struggled with the thin air. Step, breathe. Step, breathe. It's amazing how far you can go, placing one foot in front of the other. Step, breathe. Step, breathe.

An elevation of 12,000 feet has a third less atmosphere pressure as sea level. Even though the percentage of oxygen remains the same, it's impossible to receive the same amount of oxygen per breath at 12,000 feet as at sea level. Believe me. I can feel it. And I did the math too. At every breath, we are getting 63% of the oxygen we would get at sea level. With not enough oxygen to carry on the important business of life, the body is easily fatigued and the brain becomes clouded, confused.

Participating in any deep thinking at this elevation is a lot like walking into a surprise 30 year high school reunion. Some people may look familiar but most do not. And chances are you have no idea who the people are that do strike a memory chord. I often wonder if this is how it is to awake from amnesia - like floating to the top of consciousness from a deep sleep. After

over 40 years of hiking in the Sierra I know what to expect. But expectations don't make reality any easier to face. Conditioning helps. But even conditioning fails me this high up.

In two slow, out-of-shape days, we have climbed over Lamarck Col into Darwin Canyon in the northern part of Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks. The cirque of Mt. Mendel spreads out below our feet. Climbing up the terminal moraine, over unconsolidated rock, gravel and sand, wasn't any different than trudging up long flights of stairs. People unfamiliar with what we do probably have a different concept of this kind of wilderness travel. Hiking off-trail is not an activity that engages the "fear gene." That's for climbing and mountaineering. A lot of our time is spent in trudging over all sorts of terrain, over all sorts of surfaces, finding our way by map and compass. Sure. Some of it gets dicey. But we're not here to climb. We're here to look.

Around us an amphitheater of rock rises nearly 2000 feet to a dome of deep blue sky. The ground is one wide field of ice with rocks poking out of it and the uneven surface of the glacier where we walk is a slippery rough and tumble world of inclines, declines, melt pools, running water and other hindrances to movement. It's necessary for us to pick our way up and down slope, wending around ice-embedded boulders and rock debris that have fallen from the vertical cliffs. The hard, sharp granite already provides enough barriers to movement but a long summer of sun has melted deep divots in the ice. Walking on sun cups is a lot like walking across overlapping potholes.

Danger is everywhere; in the city or in the wilderness, on the ground and in the air. On November 18, 1942, a United States Army Air Forces training flight went terribly wrong in this cirque. The Beech 18 AT-7 #41-21079, on a navigation exercise with 2nd Lt. William Gamber and aviation cadets John Mortenson, Ernest Munn and Leo Mustonen, got lost somewhere between Sacramento and Los Banos. Somehow it ended up here, far off course, in the glacier below Mt. Mendel. Four University of California students discovered the wreck in 1947. One of them guided a small team to the site that autumn. Engine identification tags were collected and later confirmed to have been from the Beech. In 1948 the Army sent a detail to recover remains and returned empty-handed. Everything was forgotten until October, 2005, when two ice climbers stumbled across the body of an airman from the flight. He was mostly encased in ice but Mendel Glacier, like glaciers all over the Sierra Nevada mountains, is melting. That's why he appeared. I wrote an article about the discovery for *Sierra Heritage*. Michele and I are here to look for wreckage of the airplane.

We cross the terminal moraine to the south lateral moraine and traverse the slope, keeping our eyes alive to anything unusual or out of place. I wish I'd brought binoculars, "eyeball extenders," as my friend Hal Genger used to say. Eyeball extenders would be a big help. All I can see is rock and ice. Nothing grows here. Not a tree, not a shrub, not an herb or a blade of grass or a tuft of sedge. There are no mosses or lichens. I kick at a rock but it doesn't move. It's still embedded in ice. Last year the glacier was here. Now, it's hidden below the rocks. This landscape is new. It hasn't had time to be introduced to life.

The south side cirque head wall with a bergschrund lies below an ice-filled couloir. The couloir rises above an ice apron before splitting left and right. This is a popular spot when conditions are perfect for ice formation. To the west is "Right Mendel Couloir" and on the east is a climb known as "Ice 9" or the "Left Mendel Couloir" - considered the most challenging ice climb in the entire Sierra Nevada. After surmounting a chockstone, climbers ascend an icy rill hardly ever wider than a person's outstretched arms. The gully's 60^0 pitch rises 800 vertical feet to Mt. Mendel's summit ridge. Below the bergschrund is a sloping field of ice where, in 2005, the climbers found Cadet Leo Mustonen.

We stop a hundred vertical feet below Ice 9 to rest and appreciate the scenery. There is exposed glacial ice above us and rock-embedded ice below. The slope is about as gentle as it can be without exceeding the angle of repose. Except for our breathing the only sound is the sound of flowing water. Rivulets of water rushing downhill have cut smooth channels into the ice. The channels remind me of a luge course. After my ears tune to the water sounds I begin to hear other things. As the ice melts, it sinks and consolidates; crackling, popping and squeaking. Big rocks settle into the softening ice with that particular sound slopes makes just before an avalanche.

Conversation is superfluous when there isn't enough oxygen to take a satisfying deep breath. Besides, what is there to say about a place such as this that hasn't been said before in lower elevations over drinks, on long drives from the city or while walking up dusty trails? Some things transcend language.

Michele points down the glacier. Something silvery and shiny mixed within the speckled white and black of granite. Definitely out of place, colorwise. We drop straight down to the object, stepping on rocks poking out of the ice.

Closer and closer, the object develops size and shape. Round, reflective. A mechanical smell. Not until we're nearly on top of the object do I see what it is. Part of an engine! There are gears and tubing and flashing. The smell is engine oil dripping into the ice.

Excited, we pour over the machine. A small, fast-moving stream of cold water flows directly under the engine. Though we can stand on large rocks, the rocks are frozen in place. The glacier lies immediately beneath our feet.

There are identification plates on various pieces of the engine. Mindful of the 1947 trip, I clear grease off the plates and copy the numbers into my journal. We take photographs. What an incredible find! I hoped to find pieces of wreckage but nothing as quickly as this and certainly nothing this big. Everybody I spoke to who knew anything about airplane wrecks said I'd be lucky to find anything.

Pulling out my GPS I mark the waypoint coordinate. Michele and I speculate on where the rest of the airplane could be. If the Beech 18 flew into the cirque in the area around Ice 9, debris easily could have fallen onto the glacier and slid down the ice to where we are. It's important to remember that the glacier was much deeper and larger in 1942 than it is today. Below us there is very little exposed ice. In 1942, none of this rock was exposed. For wreckage to still be this high up, snow must have fallen soon after the crash and embedded wreckage into the ice.

Neither of us are excited at the thought of climbing back up the slippery surface to explore but I'm willing to give it a try. Michele decides to continue downslope, fanning out to what she surmises to be a reasonable debris field. I pick my way, trying to stay on the surface rocks where I'll have traction. I get almost to the height where we first saw the engine and then run out of firm surface to step on. I turn around.

In my GPS I have the coordinates of where Cadet Mustonen was found in 2005. Using the GPS like a divining rod, I angle downward, to the left of the engine and towards a rib of talus thrown up the glacier.

Following the line on the GPS screen, I'm not paying close attention to anything except where I put my feet. When I look up briefly I'm surprised to see a tree about a hundred feet in front of me. I stop to think about that. Something about what I think I see and what I know can't be here finally sinks in. It can't be a tree. There are no trees up here. Only people.

He is leaning over a rock, his left arm curled under him as if favoring a sore shoulder. His body is desiccated, the skin black. Tatters of a rough-woven wool sweater are wrapped around him. He has blond, wavy hair. Beside him is an undeployed parachute, the pack long ago rotted away. The parachute shrouds appear new and are still tightly arranged. Ah; nylon! On his ring finger, a gold intaglio signet ring of a Roman soldier shines in the sun.