

## Prologue

It is not unusual for an old woman to remember being young. But it is strange for a young woman to remember being old. As I did.

This thought comes to me as I lie face down in the midst of my little vegetable garden, having snagged my cane, lost my balance, and fallen. I am not hurt, but shaken. The tilled earth is soft, and it feels like too much effort to get up just now.

My head is turned to the side. From this position my garden is upside down. I have a worm's eye view around the roots of bushy lettuces, the orange tops of carrots under their ferny leaves, tomato plants towering over me, hung with bright fruit. There are weeds everywhere.

It's all undone, all the work I did in my garden when I was still young, before I went up the mountain. It's hard to believe that only four days ago I walked freely there, high above tree line, ran lightly, leaping from rock to rock.

I turn my head. Dizziness spins through me and my eyes go dark. I am in the spaceship, the Elirians around me, touching me with their strange, seven-fingered hands, transforming my body.

Greg comes running. "Mom, what happened? Are you okay?"

I open my eyes. I'm not in the spaceship; I'm in my garden. "I'm fine," I say. "Just resting."

Greg bends over me. "What the hell are you doing? You shouldn't be trying to work in your garden yet. You just got home from the hospital yesterday."

He is frowning, his lips pressed together. I guess I'm hard to care for. The change was so sudden I forget I can't move easily anymore, can't squat to tend my garden, that I

must lean on my cane and be careful.

Greg lifts me to my feet. I smell the faint tang of his sweat. In spite of his impatience, he is gentle, supporting me with his strong arm as he helps me into the house and settles me in my rocking chair. I lean my head back and close my eyes.

I know they are far, far away now, across the galaxies, but still they seem near. I remember the soft touch of their radiant fur, see their luminous eyes, hear their melodious voices singing, *Write your story.*

It seems a small thing to do in the face of great need. But now they are gone, I would do whatever they ask. After all, they are far older and wiser than I.

I am too weary to write now, but I can start remembering. It all began when I climbed the mountain on my birthday.