among the truly deserving. Therefore, when he invited Ali into his house for ice cream in that dark alley, Ali did not even think that he should not enter his house. Because in the neighbourhood, the fame of his good name had spread. Besides, his mother had also praised the old man a great deal, so the old man was no stranger.

Ali went inside the house to eat ice cream, but this was as far as he remembered: the old man had pressed a wet cloth from behind over Ali's mouth and nose; however much he struggled, it did no good. Ali remembered nothing else. When he regained consciousness, he found himself several alleys higher up, with blood soaking through the seat of his trousers. He tried to get up and saw that his legs hurt. After an hour or so, he dragged himself home, limping, and told the story to his father and mother, but they did not believe him. They thought Ali was lying. They thought he had fought with the neighbourhood children and, because he had come home empty-handed and without the charcoal, he had been afraid his father would beat him and scold him, so he had made up this story.

Ali came back to himself with the loud sound of glass breaking; he had been standing above the courtyard door for moments. Dizzy and dazed, he looked inside the house. His father had shoved his mother towards the glass door of the house, and the glass had shattered over her head. Ali gathered his senses. He swung his legs over the door and jumped into the house. He was still shocked and stupefied by what he had heard. His breathing became laboured. His foot had twisted, as if it were broken. His eyes fell inside the house, where his mother was being beaten and her head and face were bloody. With difficulty, he pulled himself together and limped towards the fight to make himself a shield for his mother.

His father, sick with withdrawal, had somehow got hold of a knife and was threatening his mother that he would cut her head from her body. When Ali heard this, he did not understand how he covered the few metres left between the courtyard and the house with that lame foot. When he reached his mother, who had

fallen on the floor and was pleading, he threw himself over her. His father did not understand where Ali had suddenly appeared from; otherwise, he would have been more careful. Ali's roar rose to the sky. Blood covered his whole face. His father and mother, stunned and terrified, stopped fighting. The tip of the knife had sunk into Ali's right eye… Ali had been blinded…

CHAPTER 2

It was the short break between two classes. Ali came out of the classroom and went to his room. The distance between the courtyard where the class was held and his room was less than a hundred metres. After walking only a few metres, he would lose his breath and need his inhaler. He picked up the book for his next lesson and set off towards class again. On his way back, he saw Hajagha[1] Milani, one of the ethics teachers, with a group of seminary students gathered around him. He grew curious and went towards them. He stood a little farther back to find out what the matter was. They were talking about recruitment. Hajagha was saying that the Judiciary had recently announced a need for young seminarians who wanted to begin working there. As soon as Ali heard this, his ears pricked up.

For many years Ali had been looking for a proper job; from the year he had run away from their house in Khaniabad, Tehran, until now, when he was eighteen years old, he had never been able to find decent work. For a few years he had been a grocer's assistant, for a while he worked in shoe repair, and for a while he was a barber's assistant. That last job had been the best for him. He swept the barbershop floor after each customer. It was not so exhausting that it took his breath away, it did not require much walking, and it did not demand so much precision that he could not do it with one eye. His dream was to have a desk job, and that was why he had abandoned schoolwork and come to the seminary. He knew that to become a doctor or an engineer, he would have to study a great deal; it would take many years, and the competition was fierce. His schoolwork had never been anything to boast