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*Michael Scott*

# THE ALCHEMYST

*The Secrets of*  
THE IMMORTAL  
NICHOLAS FLAMMEL



## CHAPTER ONE

*"Of*—answer me this: why would anyone want to wear an overcoat in San Francisco in the middle of summer?" Sophie Newman pressed her fingers against the Bluetooth earpiece as she spoke.

On the other side of the continent, her fashion-conscious friend Elle inquired matter-of-factly, "What sort of coat?"

Wiping her hands on the cloth tucked into her apron strings, Sophie moved out from behind the counter of the empty coffee shop and stepped up to the window, watching men emerge from the car across the street. "Heavy black wool overcoats. They're even wearing black gloves and hats. And sunglasses." She pressed her face against the glass. "Even for this city, that's just a little *too* weird."

"Maybe they're undertakers?" Elle suggested, her voice popping and clicking on the cell phone. Sophie could hear

something loud and dismal playing in the background—*Lacrimosa* maybe, or *Amorphis*. Elle had never quite got over her Goth phase.

"Maybe," Sophie answered, sounding unconvinced. She'd been chatting on the phone with her friend when, a few moments earlier, she'd spotted the unusual-looking car. It was long and sleek and looked as if it belonged in an old black-and-white movie. As it drove past the window, sunlight reflected off the blacked-out windows, briefly illuminating the interior of the coffee shop in warm yellow-gold light, blinding Sophie. Blinking away the black spots dancing before her eyes, she watched as the car turned at the bottom of the hill and slowly returned. Without signaling, it pulled over directly in front of The Small Book Shop, right across the street.

"Maybe they're Mafia," Elle suggested dramatically. "My dad knows someone in the Mafia. But he drives a Prius," she added.

"This is most definitely not a Prius," Sophie said, looking again at the car and the two large men standing on the street bundled up in their heavy overcoats, gloves and hats, their eyes hidden behind overlarge sunglasses.

"Maybe they're just cold," Elle suggested. "Doesn't it get cool in San Francisco?"

Sophie Newman glanced at the clock and thermometer on the wall over the counter behind her. "It's two-fifteen here . . . and eighty-one degrees," she said. "Trust me, they're not cold. They must be dying. Wait," she said, interrupting herself, "something's happening."

The rear door opened and another man, even larger than



the first two, climbed stiffly out of the car. As he closed the door, sunlight briefly touched his face and Sophie caught a glimpse of pale, unhealthy-looking gray-white skin. She adjusted the volume on the earpiece. "OK. You should see what just climbed out of the car. A huge guy with gray skin. Gray. That might explain it; maybe they have some type of skin condition."

"I saw a National Geographic documentary about people who can't go out in the sun . . .," Elle began, but Sophie was no longer listening to her.

A fourth figure stepped out of the car.

He was a small, rather dapper-looking man, dressed in a neat charcoal-gray three-piece suit that looked vaguely old-fashioned but that she could tell had been tailor-made for him. His iron gray hair was pulled back from an angular face into a tight ponytail, while a neat triangular beard, mostly black but flecked with gray, concealed his mouth and chin. He moved away from the car and stepped under the striped awning that covered the trays of books outside the shop. When he picked up a brightly colored paperback and turned it over in his hands, Sophie noticed that he was wearing gray gloves. A pearl button at the wrist winked in the light.

"They're going into the bookshop," she said into her earpiece.

"Is Josh still working there?" Elle immediately asked.

Sophie ignored the sudden interest in her friend's voice. The fact that her best friend liked her twin brother was just a little too weird. "Yeah. I'm going to call him to see what's up. I'll call you right back." She hung up, pulled out the earpiece

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