

CHAPTER 3

California's most dangerous men

The people were unhappy. It was twenty years since Montero left California, but life was no better. The Spanish landowners and their soldier friends became richer. Everyone else became poorer.

At night, in the country around Los Angeles, fathers, mothers and children disappeared from their homes. No one ever saw them again. People spoke of dark riders on horseback.

Everyone asked the same question. Where was Zorro? His people needed him but he did not come.

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One hot day, three men arrived in the square of a small *pueblo*. One man was old and the other two were young. They all had long hair and dirty clothes. The old man's name was Three-Finger Jack. Jack rode a horse and pulled the others behind him with ropes around their necks.

A group of soldiers were resting in the square. They had a big box that they were taking to Los Angeles. It was full of money.

'Hey!' Jack shouted to them. 'Look who's here! I've got the Murrieta brothers.' He showed them a picture. 'Joaquin and Alejandro Murrieta,' it said under the picture, 'California's most dangerous men.' The soldiers looked at the faces in the picture and they looked at the faces of the two men.

'It's them!' they cried.

'Leave them here,' said one of the soldiers. 'We'll take them. You can collect your money from the government office in the next *pueblo*.'

'I don't think so!' shouted Jack. 'I'm not stupid.'
'How much are they offering for us?' asked Alejandro, the younger brother.

'Two hundred pesos*,' said Jack.

'Two hundred pesos each?' asked Joaquin, the older brother.

'No,' laughed Jack. 'Two hundred pesos for both of you!'

'It's not possible,' said Alejandro angrily. 'We are very dangerous men! Don't take it, Jack – it's not enough.'

A soldier hit Alejandro hard.

'Shut up!' he said.

Joaquin suddenly pulled out a gun. He pointed it at the soldier. 'Don't hit my little brother again or I'll kill you.'

'But ... you're free,' said the soldier.

'And you're stupid,' said Joaquin.



* The money in Mexico is the *peso*.

Jack and the Murrieta brothers moved quickly. They took the soldiers' guns.

'Take off your clothes,' said Jack.

'All of them?' asked the soldiers.

'All of them,' said Alejandro.

They stole the soldiers' horses and they took the box of money. Then they rode away fast.

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The Murrieta brothers and Three-Finger Jack travelled for some time. Then Joaquin stopped to open the box. He used his knife.

'There!' he said. 'Hey ...'

'How much money is there?' asked Alejandro.

'It's a dead cat!' said Joaquin.

'Trouble ahead!' shouted Jack suddenly.

A line of soldiers on horses waited on the road in front of them. A man with long blond hair sat on a white horse in the centre of the line. His name was Captain Love.

The three men turned to ride back. More soldiers were on the road behind them.

'It's a trap!' shouted Joaquin.

Jack, Joaquin and Alejandro looked at each other. They jumped off their horses and started to run into the wild country. Captain Love fired his gun. Three-Finger Jack cried out and fell. The Murrieta brothers ran faster. Captain Love fired his gun again. This time Joaquin fell. Alejandro went back to his brother's side.

'No, Alejandro! Run!' said Joaquin.

'I can't leave you,' said Alejandro.

'They'll kill us both,' said Joaquin. 'Go! Now!'

Alejandro ran like the wind. Then he stopped and looked back. The soldiers stood around his brother. Love

pointed his gun at Joaquin. But Joaquin quickly pulled out his own gun and fired it at himself. He was dead.

Love jumped off his horse and looked at the body. He took out his sword and angrily cut off Joaquin's head.

Much later, Alejandro came back. He saw his brother's blood, but his body wasn't there. Then Alejandro saw something else, not far away. It was his brother's medallion – Zorro's medallion. He took it and walked away.