

DAVID MORRELL

**THE
COVENANT
OF THE
FLAME**



WARNER BOOKS

A Time Warner Company

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*To Barbara and Richard Montross,
in memory of Matthew, Saturday nights, and a castle in Spain*

If a man abide not in Me, he is cast
forth as a branch and is withered.
And men gather them and cast them into
the fire.
And they are burned.

—The Gospel according to John

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PROLOGUE

**A FURY SLINGING
FLAME**

ASH WEDNESDAY

Spain, 1391

Archdeacon Ferran Martínez, driven to excess by his fervent Catholicism, preached increasingly inflammatory sermons against all heretics. On March 15, Ash Wednesday, his charismatic hate-filled oratory aroused his parishioners to such a frenzy that they stormed from his church toward the Jewish quarter of Seville. If not for the orderly minded civil authorities, a massacre might have ensued. Instead two leaders of the mob were seized and scourged. But their punishment, far from being a discouragement to fellow bigots, made the leaders martyrs and fueled the fires of their followers' hate. Antiheretical fury spread from Seville to neighboring cities and finally throughout Spain with the terrible consequence that during the summer of 1391 an estimated ten thousand disbelievers were executed, most by beatings and stonings.

Several, though, were put to the torch.

GUARDIANS OF THE FAITH

France

The religious mania in Spain was not unique. Since the start of the Middle Ages, a heresy derived from ancient Mideastern theology had attracted so many followers that the Church felt threatened. The heresy, known as Albigensianism, maintained that good and evil were balanced forces, that two Gods—not one—controlled the universe, that Satan was equal to, in combat with, and as cunning as the Lord. The body—flesh—was Satan's domain. The mind—the *spirit*—was the path to salvation.

The thought of two Gods horrified the Church. Christ, the physical incarnation of the Blessed Father, could not have been evil. A version of God in the flesh, He could *not* have been part of the Devil's work when, crucified, He sacrificed Himself to redeem His decadent children. The heresy had to be crushed.

The resultant crusade against the Albigensians was merciless. Tens of thousands died. But the heresy persisted. Thousands more died until at last in 1244 at the mountain fortress of Montségur in the Pyrenees of southwestern France, the last stronghold of the Albigensians was surrounded, assaulted, and set on fire.

But there were rumors that the heresy—despite the crusade's brutality—had not been eradicated, that a small group of heretics

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had used ropes to descend from the mountain the night before the massacre, taking with them a mysterious treasure, and that this core of heretics had impossibly survived to disperse, to burrow deeply, their repulsive errors festering.

THE PLACE OF BURNING

Spain, 1478

The massacres at Seville and Montségur were but two examples of religious hysteria in the Middle Ages. Jews, Moors, Albigensians, and Protestants became the common target of a papally authorized purification of the Faith, its official title the Inquisition. The northern countries of Europe rejected the Inquisition's influence. But Italy, England, and France committed atrocities in its name.

Nowhere else, however, was religious intolerance as extreme as in Spain. There the Inquisition, conducted by the sunken-eyed Dominican priest Tomás de Torquemada, resulted in tens of thousands of tortures and executions. The intent was to educate heretics and to guide them toward the true belief.

Victims had their hands tied behind their back, from which a rope was raised, the pressure on their shoulders excruciating.

"Confess!" they were ordered.

"*Confess?*" the victims moaned.

"Your heresy!"

"*Heresy?*" the victims wailed.

"Raise the rope!" the Inquisitors commanded.

Arms were strained. Shoulders popped.

If the victims survived, they were stretched on the rack, and if they *still* survived but persisted in denying their theological error, the Inquisitors thrust a tube of cloth down their throat. Water was

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poured. When the victims came near to drowning, the tube—forcibly extracted—brought with it not only water but blood.

These victims had lost both their property and the right to question their accusers. Helpless, they had only two choices: to confess and beg for mercy, but more important, to implicate fellow heretics; or else to insist that they were innocent, that jealous neighbors had lied when informing against them. To confess, even if the victim was not a heretic, brought the chance for freedom. To insist that there'd been a mistake, to refuse to implicate others, caused the harshest penalty.

At the *quemadero*, the place of burning, the accused were dragged from prison for their *auto-da-fé* or act of faith. All wore yellow robes and peaked caps. Those who'd been sentenced to death had black flames—pointing downward—on their garments. The others could still not be sure that they would survive. Only when they climbed to the scaffold would they be certain of the Inquisitors' judgment. Some, a few, were set free. Their confessions had been believed, although penance would have to be suffered. Others were sentenced to prison, a reprieve of a lingering death.

Still others were strangled.

But the worst offenders were burned alive at the stake. Their ashes were scattered, along with those of suspected heretics who'd died before the Inquisitors could question them. Even after death, those suspected heretics were not immune, their bodies exhumed and purified by flames.

This zealous protection of the Faith persisted for a longer period of time than is generally realized. For centuries, from the close of the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and then to the so-called Age of Enlightenment, the Inquisition enforced its beliefs. Only in 1834 was the institution finally disbanded.

Officially, at any rate. But there were rumors.

ONE

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

