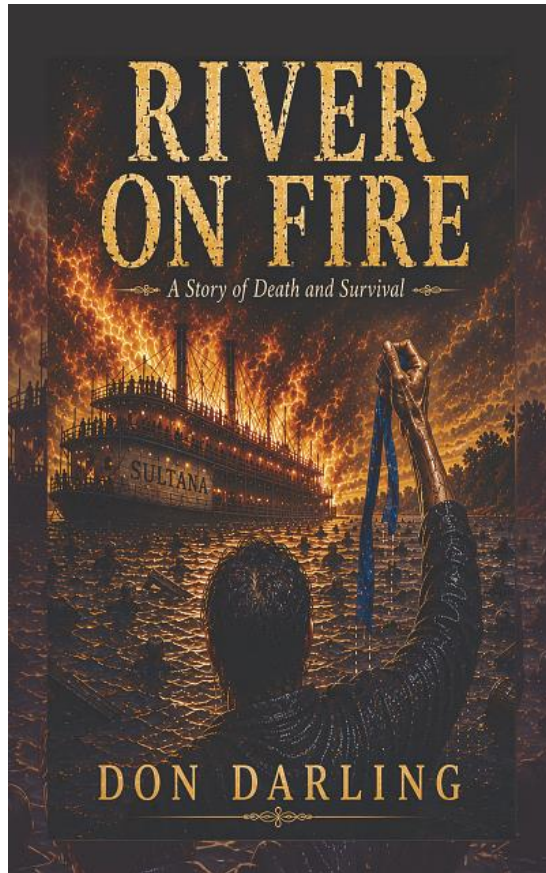




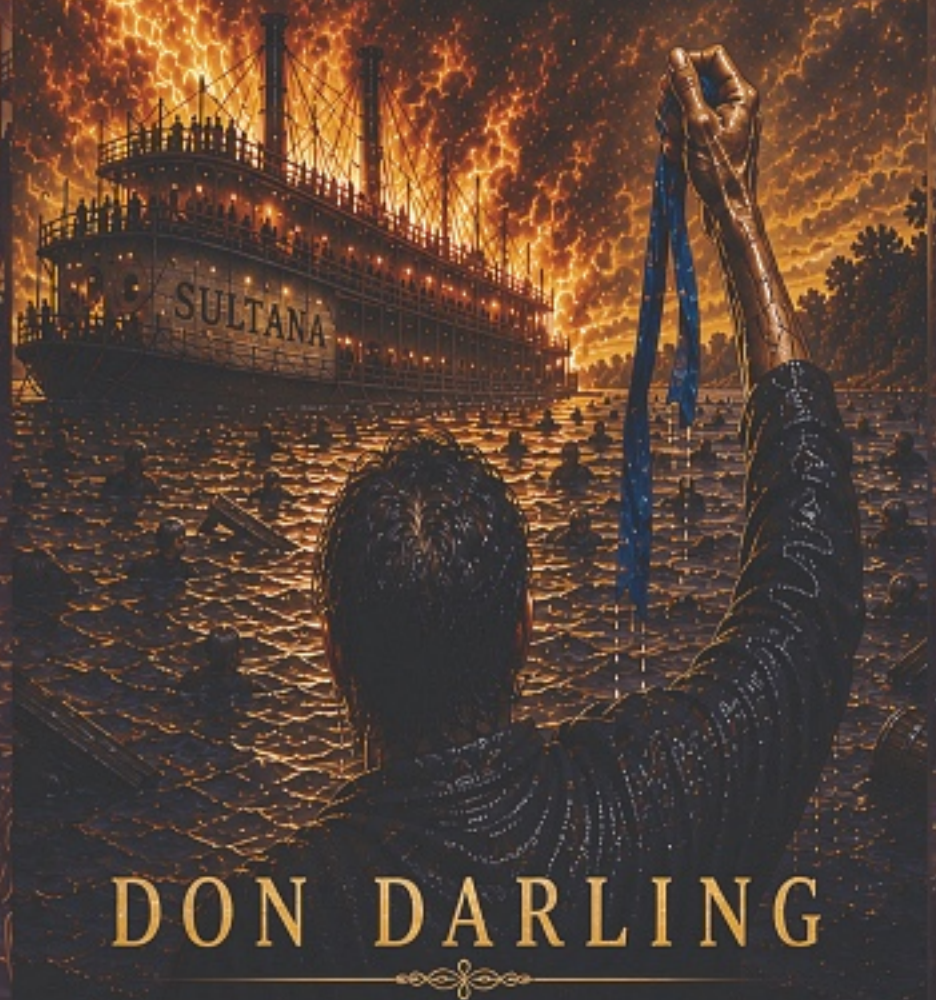
Inspired by true events, River on Fire follows Union soldiers caught in the deadliest maritime disaster in U.S. history. A moving story of courage, faith, sacrifice, friendship, and one final promise that endures across generations.

River on Fire: A Story of Death and Survival
By Don Darling

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RIVER ON FIRE

— A Story of Death and Survival —



DON DARLING

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-961268-67-8

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-961268-68-5

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-684-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Darling, Don

River on Fire by Don Darling

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026918775

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

PROLOGUE

Silas heard Daniel struggling for breath beneath the sounds of the river.

Every few seconds the current lifted them apart again, then drifted them slightly closer, as though the Mississippi itself could not decide whether to spare them or swallow them whole.

“Don’t you quit on me,” Silas shouted.

Daniel managed a weak smile that barely showed through the darkness.

“Ain’t planning to.”

But Silas heard it in his voice.

The exhaustion.

The fading strength.

They had both seen enough dying men to recognize the sound and what it looked like.

Another body drifted between them, turning slowly in the black water before continuing downstream. Silas tried not to look at the face. The river no longer cared about names or uniforms. It carried everyone the same.

Somewhere in the distance, a boiler burst again inside the wreck. A deep thunder rolled across the water, followed by another wave of screams.

Both men turned towards the sound.

The *Sultana* was dying behind them.

Silas kicked harder toward Daniel, fighting the pull of the current. Every movement sent pain through his arms and legs. He could barely feel his fingers anymore.

“You remember Ohio?” he called out desperately. “Your farm?”

Daniel nodded faintly.

“Yeah.”

“You told me your father planted apple trees near the fence line.”

Another nod.

“And Anna...” Silas swallowed hard. “You said she made the best bread in Ashland County.”

Daniel gave the smallest laugh at that, though it turned quickly into coughing.

“She’d tell you that herself.”

Silas clung tighter to the plank. “Then you tell me again when we get there.”

For a moment Daniel said nothing.

The river moved around them with a violent unforgiving current.

Finally, Daniel spoke with a clear familiar voice.

“You still afraid of water?”

Even now, Silas almost laughed.

Back during the river crossing months earlier, he had slipped beneath the current like a child and nearly drowned before Daniel dragged him upright. Silas had never heard the end of it afterward.

“Right now feels like a poor time to ask,” Silas answered.

Daniel smiled faintly again.

That smile hurt worse than the river.

The current shifted suddenly, pulling Daniel farther away. His broken railing spun awkwardly in the water.

“Daniel!”

“I’m here.”

But weaker now.

Barely able to keep his head above water.

Silas felt terror clawing at his chest.

Not fear for himself.

Fear of being left alone.

After prison camps and battlefields and endless roads marched beneath rain and snow, the thought of surviving without Daniel beside him suddenly felt unbearable.

“You hold on!” Silas shouted again.

Daniel coughed hard into his shoulder. When he looked back up, his face had changed somehow. No emotion. More distant, as if part of him already stood somewhere beyond the river.

“Silas.”

“No.”

“Listen to me.”

“No.”

Daniel’s eyes held steady on him.

“You’re gonna make it home.”

“We both are.”

The river pushed them farther apart.

Silas kicked harder, nearly slipping beneath the water again.

“We didn’t come this far for this!” he yelled.

Daniel’s hand disappeared briefly beneath the water, then emerged trembling as he reached into his coat pocket.

When he pulled it free, the ribbon hung from his fingers, soaked and dark.

Even in the firelight, Silas recognized it instantly.

Daniel looked down at it for a moment, his thumb brushing across the fabric.

“She gave me this before I left,” he said.

Silas shook his head violently.

“I know, you keep it.”

Daniel looked back up.

“No.”

The current widened the space between them again.

“Daniel—”

“Take it.”

His voice was firmer now. The old Daniel. The one who never asked twice. With the last of his strength, Daniel tossed the ribbon across the water.

For one terrible second Silas thought it would fall short.

Then it struck his chest.

He grabbed it instantly, nearly losing the plank in the process.

“Good,” Daniel whispered.

Silas clenched the ribbon in his fist.

“You’re bringing it back yourself.”

Daniel looked toward the eastern horizon where the darkness had begun, just barely, to fade into light.

Morning coming.

They had survived long enough to see morning.

“Tell them...” Daniel started, then stopped to catch his breath.

Silas stared at him helplessly.

“Tell them I was coming home.”

The words struck Silas harder than the freezing water ever could.

“No,” he said again, shaking his head. “No, you tell them yourself.”

Daniel’s hands slipped slightly on the railing.

Silas saw it—saw the strength leaving him.

“Daniel!”

The current pulled hard.

Daniel drifted farther away now, little more than a shadow between firelight and darkness.

But his eyes never left Silas.

“You’re not leaving me,” Silas said desperately.

A faint smile crossed Daniel’s face one final time.

“You’re not alone.”

Then his hand slipped.

The railing rolled sideways in the current.

Daniel vanished beneath the black water without a sound.

Silas froze.

The river moved on as though nothing had happened.

“Daniel?”

No answer.

Only the sounds of the *Sultana* and her dying passengers.

Only the crackle of distant fire.

Only the endless Mississippi carrying the dead southward toward dawn.

Silas stared at the water where Daniel had disappeared, unable to breathe, unable to move.

DON DARLING

Then finally, with shaking hands, he pulled the ribbon against his chest and held on while the river carried him into the coming light.

CHAPTER ONE

Ashland, Ohio



Golden morning sunlight rolled slowly across the Fisher farm just outside Ashland, Ohio, warming the fields beneath a clear spring sky. Rows of young corn swayed gently in the breeze while a team of horses pulled steadily through rich black soil at the far end of the property.

The farm looked solid, built through years of hard work, held together by routine, faith, and stubbornness.

The barn stood weathered but strong against the morning light. Chickens scratched through the yard between wagon wheels and fence posts while smoke drifted back and forth from the farmhouse chimney.

At the reins of the plow, Daniel Fisher Jr. guided the horses with firm, mature hands. At seventeen, he already carried himself like a grown man, broad-shouldered from years of labor beside his father.

Nearby, while Daniel stopped to get a drink of water, two younger brothers struggled to lift a heavy seed sack onto the wagon.

The sack slipped.

One boy nearly fell backward with it.

Daniel stepped over without hesitation, grabbed the weight himself, and hoisted it easily into place.

"Thanks, Daniel," the younger boy said breathlessly.

Daniel shrugged as though it were nothing.

"We take care of each other around here," Daniel Sr. said from farther down the row.

His voice was calm and steady, carrying naturally across the field.

Daniel Jr. looked toward him.

Daniel Fisher Sr. rarely handed out praise openly, but he gave the faintest nod of approval before returning to the horses.

That was enough.

From the porch of the farmhouse, Harriett Fisher watched the two Daniels working the field together.

A slight smile touched her face.

She stood with one hand resting gently against the curve of her stomach while Elizabeth Fisher, the oldest, shook out a tablecloth beside her. Several younger children raced laughing through the yard below the porch steps.

“Those two would work themselves through winter if I let them,” Harriett said.

Elizabeth smiled. “You won’t.”

“No,” Harriett answered. “I surely won’t.”

Even pregnant and tired more often these days, Harriett carried herself with quiet strength. She was the steady center of the home, the calm voice in every storm, the person each child still searched for first at the end of every day.

That evening the farmhouse glowed warm against the darkening fields outside.

The long wooden supper table filled nearly every inch of the room, crowded with bowls of stew, fresh bread, tin cups, and a dozen voices talking over one another at once.

Daniel Sr. sat at the head of the table while Daniel Jr. settled beside him. Elizabeth moved among the younger children trying unsuccessfully to keep them still long enough to eat.

Harriett carried another bowl to the table.

The room was loud.

Alive.

Whole.

Daniel Sr. finally raised one hand.

Slowly the voices settled.

“Let’s give thanks.”

The family bowed their heads.

“Lord, we thank You for this land, this food, and this family. In Your name, Amen.”

“Amen,” the family answered together.

One of the younger children suddenly pointed toward Harriett’s stomach.

“Ma says there might be another baby.”

The entire table burst into noise again.

Excited voices.

One of the other children asked, “Is the baby going to be a boy?”

Laughter.

Harriett laughed despite herself while Daniel Sr. looked across the table toward her.

Gently, almost shyly, she rested her hand against her stomach.

“Seems this family might be getting a little bigger.”

The younger children cheered.

Daniel Jr. stood up and said, “I vote for a boy.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes while smiling. “That’s because you’d have to help less.”

Daniel Sr. leaned back slightly in his chair and looked around the room.

For one moment, life was exactly as it should be.

Later that night, crickets outside, the candles have a yellow glow.

Daniel Jr. sharpens his knife at the table while Harriett repairs pants.

“You’ve been carrying more than your share lately.”

“Somebody has to.”

Harriett smiles at that as she continues.

“You sound like your father.”

Daniel looks up, not sure if that was praise.

“That’s a compliment.”

“You’re a good man Daniel.”

He looks away. “I try.”

Harriett sets her sewing aside and looks directly at her son.

“Being a man isn’t about being the strongest.”

Daniel sets down the knife and listens.

“It’s about who you take care of.”

Her words resonate like scripture carved in stone.

“Your father understands that, and someday you will too.”

She places her hand over his...their eyes lock...a profound moment.

Sunday morning brought church bells across Ashland.

The small white church beside the dirt road filled steadily with wagons and families dressed in their best clothes. Men gathered near the steps discussing crops, weather, and the reality of the growing war between North and South while children darted laughing through the grass.

The Fisher wagon rolled into the yard.

Daniel Sr. climbed down first and helped Harriett carefully to the ground. Elizabeth gathered the younger children while Daniel Jr. tied off the horse near the fence.

That was when he saw Anna—different this time.

She stood near the church doors holding her Bible close against her chest. Seventeen, with kind eyes and an easy smile that always seemed to catch Daniel off guard.

She was staring at him looking.

A shy smile passed between them.

Daniel suddenly became very interested in tying the horse properly.

Anna approached before he could escape inside.

“Morning, Daniel.”

“Morning, Anna.”

A small silence followed.

“Father says planting will start early this year,” she said.

“Looks that way.”

Neither seemed certain what to say next.

Elizabeth passed nearby carrying one of the younger children and caught sight of them standing awkwardly together. A quiet smirk crossed her face before she disappeared inside the church.

Daniel cleared his throat.

Anna nearly laughed.

The church doors were opened wide as families entered.

“Guess we’d better get inside,” she said.

“Yes ma’am.”

They walked toward the church together beneath the ringing bells.

Inside, sunlight filtered through stained glass windows while the congregation settled into the old wooden pews.

Daniel Sr. bowed his head in prayer beside Harriett.

Across the aisle, Daniel glanced toward Anna.

She was already looking at him.

Both quickly looked forward again.

The preacher stepped to the pulpit and opened his Bible.

He noticed the two of them. A smiled before starting to speak.

Then looking down at his Bible, he began: “There is a time for everything. A time to be born... and a time to die...a time to plant....and a time to harvest...”

Months later, rain tapped against the farmhouse windows while Harriett cried out in pain from the bedroom upstairs.

It was late in the day.

A midwife moved quickly beside the bed while Daniel Sr. stood near the doorway trying desperately to remain calm.

Harriett gripped the sheets on the bed, exhausted, determined.

In the hallway, younger children whispered nervously while Elizabeth kept them back.

They tried to keep quiet.

Daniel Jr. stood behind her, tense and silent.

Then suddenly—a baby cried.

Then another cry of the newborn child.

The sound filled the house like light itself, the midwife bursting with a big smile.

“It’s a girl.”

Daniel Sr.’s face softened instantly from concern to joy.

The child was placed carefully into Harriett’s exhausted arms. Pale and weak, Harriett still glowed with joy as she looked down at the tiny child wrapped in blankets.

Tears in her eyes.

“What shall we name her?” she asked.

Daniel Sr. stepped beside the bed and studied the baby for a long moment.

“Jane Mae.”

Harriett smiled.

“Jane Mae.”

Elizabeth quietly allowed the younger children to peek into the room while Daniel Jr. watched from the doorway.

For that perfect moment, the entire room felt filled with wonder.

But the wonder did not last.

Weeks later, a silence settled heavily over the farmhouse.

It was deafening and felt wrong.

The laughter and joy was no longer heard that day.

Harriett lay pale beneath the blankets while Daniel Sr. sat beside her holding baby Jane Mae in trembling arms.

Elizabeth stood nearby with red eyes.

Daniel Jr. remained near the doorway, unable to step farther into the room.

Unable to look away.

Harriett opens her eyes and turns, slowly reached for Daniel Sr.’s hand.

“They’re going to need you; take care of them,” she whispered.

Daniel Sr. could not answer.

He sat, unable to speak.

Harriett looks toward Elizabeth, no words needed.

They cry.

Harriett’s eyes moved toward the doorway.

Toward Daniel Jr.

She knew.

And he knew she knew.

RIVER ON FIRE

Daniel fought tears as Harriett gently touched Jane Mae's cheek one final time.

Her eyes drift toward the cradle and then toward the family she loves.

Then her eyes closed.

Stillness filled the room.

No one moved.

No one speaks.

The silence says everything.

Weeks later, beneath a lone tree near the edge of the field, two simple wooden grave markers stood side by side:



HARRIETT FISHER
JANE MAE FISHER

DON DARLING

A light breeze moves through the grass.

The preacher finishes the prayer.

The family slowly begins to move back to the house.

Daniel Sr. stays, stands before the markers, alone with his hat in his hands.

Then Daniel Jr. stepped beside him.

Neither man spoke for a long time.

Finally, just the two of them

Then Daniel Jr. broke the silence.

“We’ll keep things going.”

Daniel Sr. stared ahead at the crosses.

Then nodded once.

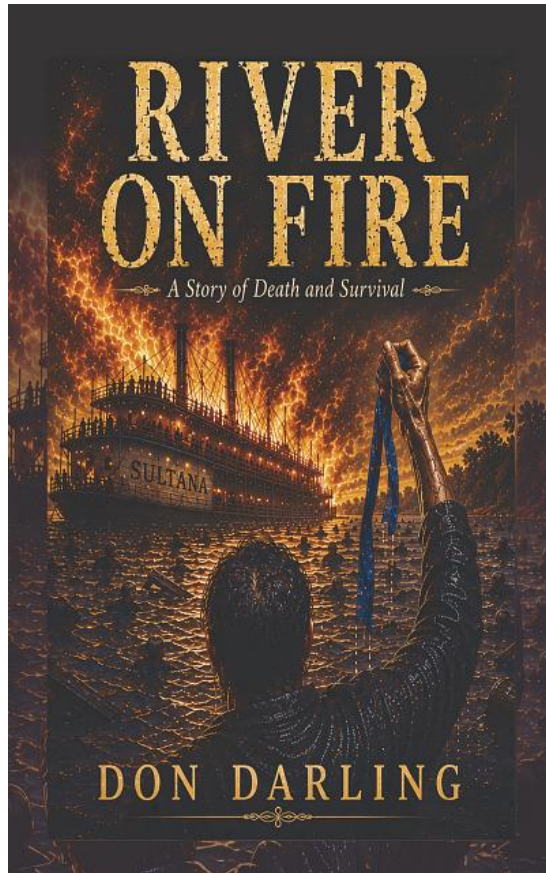
It was the first moment Daniel Fisher Jr. became more than a son.

He became his father’s strength.

The two stand side by side, father and son.

Both carrying more than they ever did before.

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