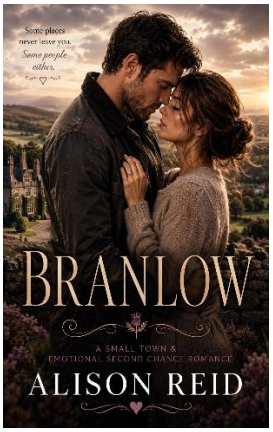
Branlow

by Alison Reid



A sleek, low sports car came barrelling toward her, too fast and too close. She slammed on her brakes. The car braked, too, tyres shrieking—but her bike was already skidding, tilting out of control.

A thousand thoughts exploded in her mind—she had no helmet, she'd never see her father again, never ride across the hills, never see Branlow Hall standing golden in the light…

The bike veered wildly. Simone flew.

Time slowed. She felt herself lifted, weightless, flung like a rag doll through the evening air—light, bright, breakable. She saw sparks fly as her bike hit the road, scraping along the tarmac in a blur of metal. And then came the crash. Not of steel, but of her body, plunging into the grassy ditch beside the road.

The grass gave a little, but not much. The earth beneath was hard. Winded and dazed, she didn't move. Her limbs were sprawled like a marionette with its strings cut, her eyes closed, her face bloodless.

She looked like a crushed wildflower tossed carelessly by fate.

The man who leapt from the car reached her in seconds, his face pale under a deep summer tan. He dropped to his knees beside her, hands moving urgently

over her arms and legs, checking for breaks, feeling for breath. His relief was visible when her chest rose, shallow but steady.

A tremor passed over her lips. Her mouth twisted with pain.

Then, slowly, her eyes fluttered open—honey-gold and dazed.

And locked immediately with eyes the colour of lightning struck water—startling, piercing, unmistakable.

Sapphire blue.

Her heart thudded once, violently. She closed her eyes again, hard and fast, like slamming a door.

Too late.

Sean had come home.

"Open your eyes."

The voice was the same—low, commanding, threaded with the authority she remembered too well. And, as always, she obeyed without thinking.

So much for avoiding him.

She blinked up into the face she'd spent four years trying to erase from memory—only to find herself locked in place by the piercing blaze of his eyes. For the briefest moment, all the fury and grief drained from her, leaving only that dazzling blue. A colour that had once filled her whole world.

"Sean…"

"You little fool."

His voice lashed through the air—sharp, scathing, and cutting the fragile moment clean in half.

The warmth in her chest vanished instantly, replaced by instinctive panic. She jerked in his arms, trying to sit up, but he held her fast.

His heart was still thundering.

Seconds ago, she'd been airborne—hair streaming like flame, limbs flung helplessly through the air—and for one gut-wrenching instant, he thought he'd killed her. The woman he had come back to claim. The woman he couldn't stop thinking about, no matter how far or how long he stayed away.

Four years. And still she had that hold on him.

"Lie still," he snapped, his voice rough, his hands already moving to steady her. One at her shoulder, the other braced against her ribs—gentle but unyielding. "You damn near killed yourself."

He didn't mean to sound so angry. But beneath the fury was fear—raw, pulsing fear that refused to ease, even now that she was breathing, blinking, speaking.

Still alive.

Still his.

God help them both.

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