



Scarlet Rose



Liza James

Branded

Branded

by

Liza James

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Branded

COPYRIGHT © 2007 by Donna Kowalczyk

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Angela Anderson*

The Wild Rose Press
PO Box 708
Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706
Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History
First Scarlet Rose Edition, 2007

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Stacey...you'd better read this one!

Branded

“Down on your knees. *Now.*”

Her heart in her throat, Lily McCourt squinted into the last of the fading sunlight at the two strangers who’d been lying in wait for her in the barn. “Please...I-I don’t have much, but I have some money.”

“Ain’t that cute, Blade, she thinks we mean to rob ‘er.” The shorter of the two chuckled, sending a chill up her spine. She’d seen them before. A couple of drifters who’d worked the neighboring ranch for the past few months.

If they weren’t here to rob her, that left only one other reason they would corner her like this...dear God, please no—

“Relax, we got no interest in your money,” the one called Blade said, his beady eyes boring into hers, a feral grin twisting his thin lips. He grasped his belt buckle and opened it with a flick of his wrist. “We just wanna have a little fun.”

“Hell, I wanna have a lot of fun, Blade,” the short one chimed in as he unbuckled his own belt.

Lily swallowed hard. “Please, I...” She met Blade’s gaze and beseeched him with her eyes. “I can get that money for you. I have almost a hundred dollars in the house.”

“Good to know. Soon as we’re done here, you can go get it fer us.”

The short one chortled and lunged forward, grabbing her upper arm. “Give us a kiss, girlye.”

“Let go of me!”

Blade followed suit, only he grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back. Lily could smell his rancid breath as he attempted to kiss her, and she swung her head from side to side in an effort to avoid their disgusting mouths.

“Please...don’t do this.” She thought she might vomit

as he pressed his lips against hers and tried to force his tongue into her mouth.

"I got somethin' better to put in her mouth," the short one snickered.

They shoved Lily to the ground, the taller one tearing at her skirts while the other straddled her shoulders. She fought frantically, but the two of them had her pinned so that she couldn't even move her arms.

"Now you just do as we say, and we won't hurt`cha. Right, Blade?"

"We ain't gonna do nuthin' yer husband ain't done before he died," Blade said as he attempted to pry her legs open.

A shot rang out. The short one screamed and clutched his arm. The taller one dove to the dirt floor, cuss words spewing from his mouth. Panicked, Lily scrambled to her hands and knees and crawled toward the back of the barn. She heard the distinct sounds of fists hitting flesh and prayed whoever her savior was, he won the fight.

"Lily, are you all right? Come on, darlin', answer me!"

Tears of relief stung Lily's eyes when she recognized that deep baritone voice. "Troy?"

She started to rise, praying her mind wasn't playing tricks on her. Then he was there, pulling her into his arms, checking for injury. Lily clutched on tight as he swung her into his arms and carried her out of the barn and into the house.

Once the sheriff left with her would-be rapists in tow, Lily curled up in the corner of the settee and thanked God for Troy Hammond. She was in love with the man, had been since the first moment she'd laid eyes on him. The thought of never seeing him again brought an ache to her chest and fresh tears to her eyes.

So tall, so handsome, his movements efficient and sure as he filled the bathtub for her, Lily loved watching him move around her home, imagining him living here with her forever.

His keen brown gaze shot toward her every few minutes, followed by a quick reassuring smile as he swiped his fingers through those thick sable locks. Troy

made her feel safe, and she hated that all too soon he'd be on his way to the next job in the next town, maybe the next state. But she'd sensed a growing restlessness in him. Probably only a matter of time before he moved on. He'd only stayed this long because he'd made a promise to her late husband.

Troy poured one last bucketful of hot water into the tub and turned to face her. "I'll give you your privacy. Do you need anything else before I take my leave?"

I need you, Troy. "I...could you stay? Just until I'm through bathing?"

He cleared his throat and gave a curt nod. "I'll put on some coffee."

Relief swelled her chest, and a hesitant smile lifted the corners of her lips. Genuine concern shone from his eyes. Troy cared for her. Desired her. There was just no mistaking the look on his face the few times she's caught him staring at her.

Hungry.

But he'd kept his distance due to propriety. Or so she'd assumed. It had been almost a year since her husband's death, and Troy had yet to do more than settle his intense gaze on her.

Lily knew she'd have to make the first move if she hoped to keep this man in her life. Something was holding him back, and although it would take every drop of courage she possessed, she planned to seduce Troy tonight.

Only somewhat shaken by what had happened earlier—her mother always said she had a strong constitution—Lily stripped out of her clothes, pinned her long, dark tresses up in a bun, and sank into the steaming water. She leaned back with a sigh of contentment. Behind her she could hear Troy moving around the kitchen, probably heating up the leftover stew from dinner. She needed to get him in here, but he'd never set foot over the threshold without a darn good reason.

Guess she'd have to give him one.

Lily took a deep breath, closed her eyes and let out a blood-curdling scream.

Troy practically broke down the door in his haste to get to her. He dropped to his knees beside the tub, and his

head whipped around as he searched every corner of the room. "What is it? Lily, what the hell happened?"

She grasped his arm, sloshing water onto him and the floor. Her breasts spilled over the edge of the tub, and she tamped down on her inhibitions as she cried, "I—I thought I saw someone peeking in the window."

Troy visibly swallowed as his gaze skimmed her wet, bare breasts. "I'd better go check it—"

"No!" She sat up and clutched his arm with both hands. "Please, don't go," she begged, imploring him with her eyes before lowering her voice to a near whisper. "I only feel safe when you're with me."

He cupped her cheek, his gaze softening as he stared into her eyes. Eyes he'd once told her were the prettiest shade of green he'd ever seen. "Lily..."

Lowering her lashes, she pressed her face against his palm and smiled at the pleasure of just that simple touch. It gave her the courage to open her eyes and meet his gaze dead on. "Stay with me, Troy. In my home. In my bed." She said the last on a breathy whisper.

He frowned. "Lily, you feel obligated and—"

She reached up and covered his mouth with her hand. "What I feel isn't obligation. I care for you, Troy. So much. I want to show you...prove it to you." She took his hand and guided it to her breast. Her nipple puckered at his touch, and he tried to pull his hand back, but she held fast.

"Dammit, Lily, you're confused. You don't know what you want."

His tone was harsh, yet his words were uncertain, as if he were begging her to deny his claim. She smiled, her confidence soaring. This wonderful man wanted her every bit as much as she wanted him. Now all she had to do was convince him they had a future together.

"I am grateful to you. The thought that they planned to force me to...I only want you to touch me that way. Only you."

"Jesus, Lily."

"You can't deny you want me, too, I can see it in your eyes. I'm no blushing schoolgirl, Troy. I can please you. I know I wasn't married very long, that I don't have much experience, but—"

"I don't give a damn about that."

"—I can do what those two wanted me to."

"Lily!"

She licked her lips and put on her best seductive smile. "Are you saying you wouldn't want me to pleasure you with my mouth?"

Troy groaned low in his throat, the sound feral and surprisingly titillating. A flood of heat pooled between her legs. Startled, she squeezed her thighs together beneath the water's surface. He extricated his hand from her breast only to grasp her by the shoulders and half lift her from the tub.

"Sweetheart, you'd better make damn sure this is what you want. 'Cause once I start, I'll never be able to stop. I want you so much I'm aching with it."

Without hesitation, she wrapped her arms around his neck and slanted her mouth across his, kissing him with everything she had. Passion exploded like a keg of dynamite. Growling his satisfaction, he cupped the back of her head and plundered her mouth, the rasp of his tongue against hers like a flint on steel, shooting sparks straight to her nipples. She moaned deep in her throat, tunneling her fingers through his thick, dark hair, clutching on for dear life.

Troy broke off the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. Their chests heaved with the effort to breathe. Then with a speed that surprised her, he scooped her out of the tub and carried her into her bedroom dripping wet.

After laying her gently on the bed, he straightened and just stood there, staring down at her. "Last chance, Lily. Ask me to stop, and I will."

"I don't want you to stop, Troy. I need you." She pulled the pins from her hair and finger-combed her waist-length, dark brown tresses.

His hungry gaze raked her from head to toe. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever known."

"You make me feel beautiful."

Troy continued to stare at her, and she felt a pang of fear. Had he changed his mind? Naked and vulnerable, she stared right back, praying her eyes conveyed how much she wanted him.

Then he reached up to unbutton his shirt, and Lily blew out a silent breath, watching him through heavy-lidded eyes. The man was magnificent—broad shoulders, heavily muscled chest and arms showing long hours of physical labor. A sprinkling of crisp dark hair ran down his stomach and disappeared into the waistband of his denim trousers. He shrugged out of his shirt and dropped it on the floor before reaching for his buckle. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, that strange throbbing and wetness between her legs intensifying

Although Lily had cared for her late husband, she hadn't been in love with him. She'd married the older man because her father had forced her. And while John McCourt had always treated her kindly, she'd never felt even a twinge of what Troy Hammond made her feel.

She wanted to touch herself.

In less than a minute, he stood naked before her, his member thick and stiff, and, she couldn't help but notice, much bigger than her late husband's.

"I've never wanted a woman more," he said in a low tone, stretching out beside her on the bed.

Lily could feel his heat, smell his scent, raw and masculine. She instinctively turned to face him, wanting him in ways she didn't fully understand. Her nipples were hard and aching, her eyelids heavy. Although still damp from her bath, the slick wetness between her thighs had nothing to do with water. Lily prayed he would touch her there, where she burned hottest.

He reached out and ran his palm down her arm, her thigh, back up again. "I promise I'll make this good for you."

Her breath caught in anticipation, but also in fear. Did he plan to make love to her then leave in the morning? The thought was inconceivable. She wanted him to stay, run the ranch with her, marry her, father her children. They could have an incredible life together if only she could convince him of it.

And she had one night to do so.

Summoning every bit of her nerve, she reached out and placed a gentle hand against his chest. His heart beat steady and strong beneath her palm. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, and when he opened them, he leaned

forward and took her lips with savage hunger.

She melted into him, her moan mingling with his growl of satisfaction. He coaxed her mouth open, his tongue seeking, finding and mating with hers, the friction fanning the fire down below. He rolled until he partially covered her, his rock-hard erection pressing into the juncture of her thighs. Lily couldn't stop herself from moving against him.

"Easy, darlin'," he whispered against her cheek. "We have all night."

He started at the base of her throat and trailed a slow hand to her aching breasts, teasing each nipple with his palm then gently squeezing and pulling with his fingers, drawing another moan from her. She met his gaze, and needing to convey just how much she wanted him, she worked her hand between them and curled her fingers around his incredibly hard...

She'd heard the word cock before, had inadvertently heard some of the ranch hands talking, but knew it wasn't a word a proper lady used. She could think it, though. The word somehow excited her more. It was naughty, and right now, Lily felt naughty.

He covered her hand with his and showed her how to stroke him, slowly, up and down. Then he bent his head and took her nipple into his mouth. She worked his hard cock while he sucked her aching nipple, both of them groaning their pleasure. The throbbing between her thighs grew with such force she squirmed, grinding against him.

Troy let go of her nipple with one last lick. "You taste so good, I want to taste you everywhere. Do you understand what I'm saying, Lily?"

She didn't, not really, but instinct told her she wouldn't be disappointed. She nodded, praying her instincts didn't prove wrong. She panicked when he slid down on the bed until she could feel his hot breath against the inside of her thigh. He flattened his palm against her belly as if holding her in place. "Relax your legs," he commanded in a low tone.

Lily quivered with anticipation as she waited for what he planned next. He grasped both her thighs and spread them so wide her knees touched the bed. *Oh, my*

God, does he actually plan to—

He blew lightly against her hot flesh, and it took every bit of strength she had to lie still. The pearl nestled within her wet folds began a slow throbbing, and the slickness between her legs trickled down her backside. Embarrassment burned her cheeks. She prayed her face wasn't as red as it felt.

With a low murmur, he traced the trail of dew with his hot tongue. One hand held her thigh steady while his tongue licked up and down the cleft of her backside, shocking and thrilling her at the same time. Then he lapped at her wet folds again as his thumb worked its magic on her swollen nubbin.

Lily wanted to arch into his mouth, wanted to play with her nipples while he feasted on her as if he hadn't had a meal in days, but she didn't dare. A proper lady would never behave so boldly, so wanton. Her hands clutched the coverlet, her legs trembling with the effort not to move.

Suddenly, he stopped his bone-melting assault and sat up to whisper, "Doesn't it feel good, Lily?"

She swallowed hard and gave a jerky nod. She wanted to scream with how good it felt but couldn't find the nerve. What would he think if he knew just how wicked she was? What would he have thought if she'd grasped him by his hair and held him against her throbbing mound like she'd wanted to? Would he be disgusted by her wanton display?

He lay down on his back and beckoned her forward. Uncertain, she scrambled to her knees. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Shh. I want you to forget about everything except you and me, sweetheart. Now come here and position yourself over my face. We're going to try it a different way."

Her heart hammered against her chest. He couldn't possibly mean what she..."I-I don't understand."

Leaning forward, he grasped her around the waist and guided her until she knelt over him, her knees on either side of his head, open and vulnerable, her slick folds just inches from his hungry mouth. *Oh, God.*

"Lily, relax and trust me. You trust me, don't you?"

She swallowed hard. His hot breath whispered across

her tender flesh. "More than anyone."

"Good. I'm going to lick you again, but in this position you can move better. Don't hold back, Lily. I need to know how good I make you feel."

He wrapped his big hands around her hips and raised his head to flick at her swollen nub with his tongue. Her head fell back on her shoulders with a shuddering sigh. Ohhh, it felt so good...so wickedly delicious. His tongue rasped against her sensitive flesh, delivering pinpoints of pleasure straight to her nipples. Her skin tingled and grew hot, her thigh muscles clenched. She'd never imagined anything like this, never knew lovemaking could be as enjoyable for a woman as it was a man.

He adjusted his hands so that he clutched the cheeks of her backside. Lily gasped as the pleasure intensified. She couldn't hold still a second longer. She moved her hips against his stabbing tongue and was rewarded by his growl of satisfaction. His grip tightened as his tongue moved even faster, joined by his lips and teeth. She licked her lips and gave in to temptation, grasping both her nipples and pulling, twisting, her eyes squeezed shut. A low moan tore from her throat. Pressure built, she gyrated against his mouth until she thought she might explode.

With an abruptness that startled her, he stopped his sweet torment and dropped his head to the pillow. "Turn around," he ordered his tone harsh.

Heart pounding, throbbing, confused and disoriented, she swallowed again. "I-I don't understand, is something wrong?"

"Hell no. You're beautiful, Lily. I'm rock hard and aching for you. Turn around and you'll see."

Wobbly as a newborn foal, Lily did as he asked, turning so that she faced his long, muscled legs—and his thick cock. Again, she was amazed by the sheer size of him, from his impressive manhood to the top of his dark head to his big feet.

She stared at his erection, wanting to taste him. The thought of taking him into her mouth made the throbbing between her legs intensify. All she had to do was lean forward, brace one hand on the bed, and open her mouth.

He fondled her breasts, teasing her aching nipples back into tight buds. She closed her eyes, feeling as if she were suspended in air, unable to move one way or the other.

"Does this feel good, sweetheart?"

Incapable of coherent speech, she nodded. His hot breath feathered against her wet, slick flesh, and she wanted nothing more than to lower herself until he understood. She couldn't say the words, those sinful words. "Please, Troy, I..."

He ceased his assault on her tender nipples and caressed his way to her backside, grasping each cheek and spreading her open just the tiniest bit. Lily had never felt more exposed...or more excited. She wanted—no, needed—him to bury his tongue in her aching passage. Hot cream dripped, burning a path down the insides of her thighs. Her legs shook with the effort to hold still for his perusal.

Please don't make me beg.

"Bend over, Lily," he whispered "Brace your hands on the bed."

She closed her eyes for a brief, fortifying moment, then did exactly as he asked. Her breasts brushed his abdomen, and she wanted to rub her aching nipples against his the hair on his belly. His impressive erection lay just inches from her face. She didn't know why, particularly after what she'd nearly been forced to do earlier, but she wanted to pleasure him with her mouth. All she had to do was open her lips and—

He ran his hot tongue along her slick folds, starting at her throbbing nubbin and ending with a stab of his tongue in her tight opening. She stared at his hard cock, her mouth literally watering with the desire to taste him.

Giving in to temptation, she balanced on one hand and wrapped her fingers around his smooth, iron-hard shaft. Troy gave a slight jerk and blew out a hard breath. He replaced his mouth with his fingers, fondling her. "Stroke me."

He lifted his hips, urging her to give him the same pleasure he'd been giving her. The unfamiliar pressure that had been slowly building dissipated, helping her to focus. She moved her hand up and down his thick

erection, wringing one groan after another from him. He caressed and squeezed her backside as she explored him from the base of his shaft to the head and back to the sac below, gently cupping him.

He let out a low growl. "You're driving me crazy, Lily."

Emboldened by his words, she opened her mouth and took him in, just an inch. Her lips closed around the smooth silky flesh, and by instinct alone, she slowly worked her way down, never imagining she could take so much of him. She pulled back up, stroking his cock with her lips and tongue, sucking on the tip while giving his balls a gentle squeeze.

"God, yes." He leaned forward to sink his stiff tongue inside her, and Lily nearly wept her relief. He traced her inner lips with his thumbs while driving his tongue in and out, then moved down and sucked her swollen nubbin into his mouth, drawing on it before letting go with a loud sucking noise.

Lily tried to concentrate, working her lips and tongue down his thick shaft, desperate to please him. But that same pressure was building again, and she couldn't hold back this time. She moved against his darting tongue, bracing one hand on the bed while stroking his now slick shaft with the other, eyes squeezed shut, bottom lip caught between her teeth.

He murmured something she didn't understand, leaned forward and caught her arm, breaking her grip on his cock. "I want to be inside you when I come, Lily."

Without warning, he grasped her hips and positioned her on her back, thighs spread, backside all the way to the foot of the bed and her heels barely hanging on to the edge of the mattress. He knelt on the floor before her, slid his palms beneath her cheeks and lifted her, wasting no time in bringing his hot mouth down on her throbbing flesh and drawing her swollen pearl back into his mouth.

He ate at her with fierce possession, clutching her cheeks tight, lapping, licking, sucking, bringing her right to the edge of a precipice she'd never been to before. She arched her back and cried his name as the most powerful explosion of sensations flooded through her from her hot core to every nerve in her body.

Before she'd had a chance to recover and catch her breath, Troy stood and grasped one of her ankles, holding it up while he guided his engorged cock into her slick passage. Lily swallowed him eagerly, feeling deliciously lethargic and lazy. She licked her lips and smiled up at her wonderful man. He met her gaze, his expression fierce as he sank into her. Hooking her ankles over his shoulders, he started moving, in and out, slowly, building that exquisite pressure again.

Lily had to fight to hold his gaze. The incredible feelings coursing through her were like a drug. And she wanted more. So much more. A lifetime's worth of nights like this with the man she loved.

His hips pumped harder and faster. He dropped her ankles and covered her, positioning her legs around his waist. She wrapped her arms around him and met him thrust for thrust as he drove into her. Their mutual cries of satisfaction filled the room as Troy delivered her to heaven for a second time.

They lay in each others arms, breathing heavy and ragged. Lily had never been happier. Troy loved her; she was sure of it and could finally say the words in her heart. "Troy, I lo—"

"I'll leave at first light. I'm..." He squeezed her tight for a brief moment, then sat up and climbed out of bed. He wouldn't meet her gaze. "I'm sorry, Lily."

Heart pounding furiously, Lily watched him shrug into his clothes, pull on his boots, and adjust his Stetson on his head. Dear God, this couldn't be happening—not after what they'd shared. How could he intend to just up and walk out of her life after loving her so completely? She scrambled to her knees, clutching the sheet to her throat. "Troy, you can't mean this! I need you. I *love* you!"

"Lily, you feel beholden to me because I stayed on after John died. You feel indebted because I stopped those two—"

"Troy Hammond, don't you dare tell me how I feel." Lily nearly choked on her anger. "I've been in love with you since the moment I laid eyes on you. Even John..."

He finally turned to face her, his expression guarded. "Even John what?"

Tears pooled in her eyes. Her husband had known

how she felt about Troy and had been oddly approving of it. He'd never confronted her, but John had respected Troy, had started to think of him as the son he'd never had. "John knew how I felt about you. He told me you were a good man, that if you became my husband, you'd make sure the Triple M prospered and became the biggest cattle ranch in Texas."

Troy looked truly stunned. "John told me if I ever hurt you, he'd make me pay, even from the grave." He swiped a hand through the air, encompassing the bed. "I took advantage of you, Lily. You were vulnerable and I—"

"You loved me, Troy. I had no idea a woman could feel such pleasure." Her cheeks flamed at the admission.

He took a step toward her, his expression guarded yet hopeful? "Tonight you thought someone was peeking in on you, and instead of comforting you, I ravished you."

"You did exactly what I wanted you to do." Lily caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "Troy, I have a confession to make, I never saw anyone peeking in the window."

A slow grin spread across his face. He took another step toward her. "You mean...you seduced me?"

She gave a slow, pleased-with-herself nod.

Troy tossed his Stetson onto the chair and closed the rest of the distance between them. Lily squealed with delight when he grasped her ankle and flipped her over, positioning her on her hands and knees. He bent over her to whisper, "You've been a naughty girl, Lily. I think someone needs to teach you a lesson." He gave one cheek a soft slap.

"And that someone would be you?" She heard his trousers hit the floor and throbbed with anticipation.

"Damn straight." He opened her slick passage and entered her with one possessive thrust. "You're branded now, Lily. Mine, now and always."