

Worth the Wait

A *Worth It* Series Short Story

By

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Chapter 1

Lucy Wilson was in for at least another hour of torture. She smiled and pulled her parka a little tighter as she followed her son Braden through the sea of ice climbers and enthusiasts.

He'd been counting down the days to the Ouray Ice Festival, and now practically flew from one vendor tent to the next, brimming with questions about the sport for anyone willing to talk with him. He had adapted so well to life in their little mountain town, especially since he'd developed a fascination with ice climbing.

A fascination she wasn't crazy about.

He dashed into the EEW Gear tent. Equipped for Extreme Winning if the signage was to be believed. As she slipped into the tent, she found Braden looking longingly at the crampons on display.

The guy working the tent finished up with a customer and turned to Braden. "Hey, buddy. Having fun today?"

The deep timbre of the man's voice drew Lucy's attention. Hidden behind sunglasses, she took a moment to appreciate the sight before her. Everyone at the event seemed to be athletic and fit, but this guy...wow.

Braden nodded enthusiastically. "Trying to talk my mom into letting me climb the Kid's Wall."

Gorgeous amber colored eyes shifted from Braden to her. "Is that right?"

Oh, that honey-smooth voice.

"Still in negotiation." Lucy removed her sunglasses and walked toward them.

The man extended his hand. "Scott Murphy."

The solid strength and warmth in his grip made Lucy forget they were standing inside a thin tent in freezing cold temperatures.

"Lucy Wilson." She hooked a thumb toward her son. "Braden's a ten on the climbing idea. I'm at about a four."

Braden tugged on her arm. "Can I please get one thing?"

Lucy met her son's earnest gaze. One of her parenting goals was to keep him occupied with things other than electronics as much as possible.

Ice climbing, though?

She sighed. "So, Mr. Murphy –"

"Scott."

His ready smile disarmed her further. "Scott. If he were going to give this a try, what would he need?"

Scott winked at Braden who bristled with energy. "Hypothetically speaking, the park requires a minimum of crampons and a helmet. Pretty low entry point to the sport. The park is supplying the ropes and safety equipment for the kids."

"Mom, please." Braden's big brown eyes beseeched her.

“You’re turning nine next month. Is this what you –”

“Yes!”

She caught Scott’s grin and shrugged. “In for a penny, in for a pound I guess.”

Scott turned to Braden. “All right, champ. You wearing your boots?”

Braden nodded. “Yep.”

“Well, let’s find you the right crampons then.”

Braden let out a whoop of excitement then peppered Scott with questions as he fitted Braden’s boots with the steel contraptions.

Scott talked through safety with Braden, impressing Lucy by his patience with Braden’s pestering. Once the crampons were boxed up and they had picked a helmet, Lucy fished her credit card from her purse.

“Do you know if they’re offering any kind of lessons or training?”

Scott nodded as he completed the transaction and returned Lucy’s card. “Several of us are taking shifts throughout the weekend.”

“You’re a climber?” Braden’s eyes widened, and his voice moved into hero worship territory.

“Sure was. Back in the day.” His gaze slid to Lucy. “I’m volunteering at the Kid’s Wall from nine to noon tomorrow.”

Her heart fluttered like a trapped bird in her chest. That couldn’t be interest in his eyes, could it? Lucy broke eye contact and slipped her parka zipper down a few inches. The temperature inside the tent must have risen ten degrees in the past few minutes.

“We’ll see you then. Right, Mom?”

By the look on Braden’s face, he currently believed Scott Murphy hung the moon. And the knowledge and patience he’d shown so far made her feel marginally better knowing he would be helping Braden.

She had twenty-four hours to rein in this stupid man crush she’d suddenly developed before bringing Braden to the Kid’s Wall. She could handle that. After this weekend, Mr. Murphy and the entire group would be gone. And considering the influx of visitors this weekend, the last thing the Sheriff of Ouray County needed was distraction. Even a tall, strikingly sexy one.

She mustered a smile and nodded. “I guess we’ll see you then.”

Lucy tossed her laptop aside and slipped out of bed. She had gotten Braden to bed an hour ago after he finally wore himself out telling her everything he’d discovered about Scott Murphy on the internet, only to find herself Googling the man for the last thirty minutes.

So much for ignoring her crush.

She padded to the kitchen and made a cup of tea. She hadn’t so much as thought about anyone the way she was thinking about Scott Murphy in longer than she could remember. He had been so unassuming and kind to Braden.

Not to mention humble.

Article after article had discussed his successes first in ice and mountain climbing competitions then in business. She had no idea he had grown the business he was repping today into one of Forbes fastest-growing companies. Most men she knew, including both her ex-husband and her former boss, were notorious for flaunting their wealth and power.

Lucy sipped her tea with a frown. Could he really be so different?

Chapter 2

Braden pulled Lucy along toward the ice climbing area. Despite the low temps, the sun shone brilliantly, reflecting off the massive frozen cascades covering the face of the gorge. Lucy had been in Ouray for a little more than three years, but this was the first time she'd been to the Ice Festival outside of work duties.

They hosted forums throughout the day at the Community Center and social gatherings in the evenings. She wasn't interested in any of those events though. Her entire focus was on getting through Braden's first climbing experience without chewing off every single one of her fingernails.

As they neared the Kid's Wall Braden moved even faster. "Look, there's Mr. Murphy."

Scott was wearing sunglasses but the smile that lit his face when he caught Braden's frantic wave warmed Lucy's cheeks and her heart. She checked her embarrassment and followed Braden as he made a beeline to his new instructor. Hopefully the poor guy didn't think they were too crazy.

"You're famous," Braden said in greeting. "Wow. Me and mom read all about you last night. You've even won competitions in Europe!"

Heat crept up Lucy's neck. *Well if he didn't think they were crazy before, that stalker-ish tidbit probably sealed it.*

Scott didn't seem phased though as he squatted to eye-level with Braden. "That means you're going to listen well to all my instructions, right?"

Braden's head bobbed like it was on the dash of an old convertible. "Yes. I sure will."

"Good." Scott stood and turned to Lucy. "And I hope that means you'll trust me to keep him safe."

Lucy swallowed hard. She hadn't trusted anyone in so long, she surprised even herself by nodding her agreement. There was something about Scott's surety and calmness that invited confidence.

Braden paid rapt attention as Scott taught him basic ice climbing techniques. Her heart leapt to her throat the first time Braden's foot slipped, but Scott was right there, as promised, to steady him. Lucy wasn't sure exactly when she stopped worrying and started to enjoy watching Braden challenge himself on the wall. But when Scott helped Braden remove his crampons, she was shocked that it was already Noon.

Braden skidded to a stop in front of her and ripped off his ski cap. His curly dark blond hair waved in every direction. "That was so awesome, Mom! Did you see me?"

She smiled at his enthusiasm. "I did! You looked like a natural up there."

Braden looked at Scott with something close to awe. "You're the best teacher ever." He held up his gloved fist which Scott bumped with his own.

"Well, you made my job easy."

"I'm starving. Mom, can we go to the B&B for lunch?" His head swiveled back Scott. "They have the best fries. You gotta come with us."

Scott's gaze flew to Lucy's face. "I hate to impose."

Oh, that the ground would open right now and swallow her whole. She was way out of her league here. Somehow, she rallied and shot him a smile. “We insist. Let me buy you lunch. It’s the very least I can do to repay you.”

Scott raised an eyebrow. “You sure?”

“Sure, she’s sure.” Braden grabbed Scott’s hand. “It’s only a couple of blocks. Let’s go.”

Lucy fell into step with Braden between them. He talked ninety miles an hour, which was fine with her. Generally, she didn’t have a problem making small talk with people in town, but at the moment the skill escaped her completely.

The restaurant was bustling. Not surprising given the number of tourists in town. But Eugenia, the restaurant owner’s wife, spotted them in the lobby and waved them over.

“Good afternoon, Sheriff.” She smiled. “Three today?”

Lucy ignored the twinkle in Eugenia’s eye. “Yes. Eugenia, this is Scott Murphy. He’s here for the weekend with the Ice Festival.”

“He taught me to climb ice,” Braden added. “It was so cool.”

Eugenia ruffled Braden’s hair and gave Scott her sweetest smile. “Welcome to our little slice of heaven, Mr. Murphy.”

“Very happy to be here.”

As they followed Eugenia to a table near the wide windows facing Main Street, Lucy did her best not to read into Scott’s words. After they were seated and gave their drink orders, Scott cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Sheriff? How did that escape my notice?”

Lucy smiled. “You caught me on my days off. I’ll be wandering around town tomorrow in uniform.”

He grinned. “Gotta love a woman in uniform.”

Lucy’s cheeks heated. She dropped her gaze to study the menu she’d seen a hundred times. “Braden, cheeseburger or chicken tenders?”

“Chicken tenders.”

Lucy set her menu on the table and looked at Scott. “One of the basic food groups, you know.”

“Absolutely.”

Eugenia was back moments later to take their orders. When she retreated, Braden continued his playback of the entire three hours of instruction, with Scott interjecting comments here and there. Their interaction fascinated Lucy. If she hadn’t already researched him online, she would have assumed Scott had children of his own.

Braden dug into his food like he hadn’t eaten in days, but before long he leaned back in his chair, eyelids drooping.

Lucy finished her meal quickly then nodded toward Braden. “Looks like you wore him out this morning. He was also up way past his bedtime. We should get out of here before his face ends up in his plate.”

She flagged Eugenia for the ticket, but when it arrived Scott wrested it from Lucy’s hand. “My treat.”

Lucy’s eyes widened. “No way. You were fantastic with him today. And we invited you.”

Scott shook his head. “Sorry.” He handed his card and the ticket back to Eugenia. “I guarantee you I had just as much fun as he did.”

Lucy rolled her eyes but couldn’t stifle her smile. “In that case, thank you. That’s very sweet of you.”

By that time, Braden's elbow was on the table and his head rested in the palm of his hand. Eugenia brought back the ticket and Scott returned his card to his pocket. "He's wiped out. Are you parked up the road? I'll carry him to the car for you."

As Lucy stood, Scott shrugged into his coat then picked up Braden who settled against him with a soft sigh.

"Oh. Our house is only a few blocks from here. We walked to the wall this morning. It's a small town. We walk pretty much everywhere." She was babbling. But watching Braden's head rest on Scott's shoulder as she stuffed his arms into his coat sleeves made her tense and a little freaked out. "It's okay. Really. He's almost nine. He can walk."

Scott touched her shoulder with his free hand. "I'm happy to carry him, Lucy. He's out like a light."

Waking Braden up at this point could mean a bit of a scene so Lucy relented and grabbed Braden's backpack. "Once again, I am in your debt."

"Not at all. It's always so busy at these events. It's nice to have some down time."

Lucy glanced at him as they walked down the sidewalk toward her home. "Are you on the road a lot?"

"Have been the last several years. When competitive climbing got too tough for an old guy like me, I jumped straight into the business. It was a great opportunity and I wanted to stay connected." He shrugged. "But all the travel during rock and ice climbing seasons wears on you. I'm hoping to be able to scale that back."

According to Lucy's creeper skills, or investigative skills as she preferred to think of them, Scott was thirty-five and not looking at all like an *old guy*.

"So, what's it like being Sheriff here?" he asked.

Lucy wasn't a fan of talking about herself, but she didn't want to give him a flip answer either, so she pondered the question for a minute.

"I love this community. The town has embraced both Braden and me." She took a deep breath of fresh air then glanced at the grand mountains surrounding the town. "I never get tired of this view, plus it's mostly quiet. A great place to raise a kid. Even when tourists are in town, there's just such peace here. It's hard to explain."

"You explained it perfectly. Braden's a fan, too." Scott paused. "I hope I don't offend you by bringing this up, but he talked about his dad some this morning. Sounds like a tough situation."

Lucy stumbled then quickly righted herself. *Oh, Braden*. "I'm so sorry. That boy's filter goes missing sometimes." Scott didn't rush to fill the silence that grew awkward for Lucy, so she kept talking. "My ex has sent nothing but mixed messages to Braden since we divorced. We agreed to a shared custody agreement. Within a year, Tom planned to remarry and proclaimed that he was suing for full custody."

She still shuddered when she thought about that day. "I was devastated. Braden was confused. Then before the request was even before the judge, Tom and his fiancée broke up. He took an offer at Deutsche Bank in Berlin and, from what I understand through his infrequent calls to Braden, he doesn't have plans to return home and is too busy for Braden to go to him. Which I wouldn't allow anyway. No way in hell."

Scott grinned at her. "I like your fire."

They turned the corner onto her street, and she pointed toward her little house, the second on the left. "Here we are." She stopped at the path leading to her door. "I can take him if you —"

"Nah. He's okay. Just point me in the right direction and I'll try to get him down without waking him."

Lucy unlocked the door then led Scott through the living room and down the short hallway to Braden's room. "He was so excited this morning it looks like a cyclone came through here," she whispered.

She got Braden's arms out of his coat while Scott pulled off his boots. He laid her son down on Buzz Lightyear sheets and covered him with his comforter before following Lucy out. Seeing Scott handle Braden so gently did funny things to her insides – definitely not helping to get her crush under control.

Lucy removed her coat and set it on the sofa. "Thanks again for everything." She wiped her palms on her jeans then stuffed her hands into her back pockets. "I, um, have coffee or tea if you have time for a cup."

Scott checked his phone then sighed. "Unfortunately, I have to get back. I'm speaking this afternoon on gear trends."

"Oh, of course." Lucy swallowed her embarrassment and quick-stepped to the door. "We took up enough of your time today."

"Hey." He walked toward her, stopping mere inches away. His eyes were dark, serious. "I promise you Lucy, there was nowhere else I would've rather been today."

The air between them crackled as they stared at each other. Lucy swallowed hard. It was impossible to move away.

Scott leaned in, his lips a brief touch on hers. "Nowhere." Another kiss. "Else."

Lucy sighed then closed her eyes, giving herself up to the desire that swept through her. Scott pulled her close, his tongue invading her mouth. The kiss exploded and his hand reached into her hair, tugged slightly to mold her lips more completely to his.

Fireworks burst in her brain. Scott's other hand moved to her waist, his fingers beneath her sweater, hot on her bare skin. It was as if every thought, every look, every motion had drawn them to this moment. This energy. This intensity.

He finally broke the kiss, his lips moving along her jawline to her neck just below her ear, his breathing as labored as her own. "As sweet as I knew it would be," he whispered.

She shivered but regained enough sense to step away from him. Already missing his heat, she wrapped her arms around her waist. What was she doing? This was insane. They'd met less than twenty-four hours ago. And he would be gone in a couple of days. There was no way she could or would have a fling with him with Braden not ten feet away on the other side of a wall. But oh God, she wanted to. Her body was furious with her brain, but her decision was made.

"You should probably go so you're not late for your talk."

"Unfortunate, but true." Scott took her hand in his then raised it to his lips, his eyes never leaving hers. "See you soon, Sheriff."

Lucy shut the door with shaking hands. The certainty in his parting words and his eyes petrified her. What had she gotten herself into?

Braden woke up a short time later and joined her on the sofa. She was grateful for his near-constant chatter but had to put her foot down about going back to the wall tomorrow. Fortunately, she had the perfect excuse.

"Baby, I have to work, and you'll be at Sandi's."

Braden frowned. "Will I get to see Scott again? He said he had more stuff to show me."

Lucy ruffled his hair. "We'll see, okay?"

She had no intention of seeing Scott again, that much was certain. That kiss had proven she couldn't think straight when he was near. But Braden's non-stop adoration certainly made it difficult to put the man out of her mind.

Chapter 3

Lucy regretted giving her deputy the day off because that meant she had to go out to the festival when a report was made of a possible stolen car. She had hoped to stay in the office and keep a low profile. Not hiding, exactly. It was just better if she didn't see Scott today. And by tomorrow, he'd be gone.

She finished up with George Parker, the reporting party. Not ten minutes after she arrived, he figured out that he'd simply forgotten where he parked. Lucy shook her head as she watched him climb into his vehicle.

"Good afternoon, Sheriff."

She closed her eyes as a shiver went through her. She wished she could ignore it and that voice, but she lacked the will. She turned and faced Scott. How was it possible that he looked even more gorgeous than yesterday?

"Hey there. How's it going out here today?" She hoped her voice didn't sound as breathless to him as it did to her.

"Better now."

The innuendo in his tone turned her legs to rubber. She had to stop this madness before it went any further. "Scott..." She looked down at his feet then back into his face. "I'm sorry. I'm just not in a position to," she waved her hand between them, "do whatever this is."

Scott tilted his head to the side, and she wanted to hide from the openness in his gaze. "I'm going to be honest. I haven't stopped thinking about you since the minute you and Braden walked into my tent." He paused. "Have dinner with me."

She shouldn't. She couldn't.

"Since we're being honest, you have to know that I'm not free to do whatever I want." She bit her lip then forced herself to meet his gaze again. "I have Braden. And the town."

"And that's all you're allowed?" Scott took her hand in his. "All I'm asking is that you don't shut the door on this."

She stiffened, pushing down every impulse that clamored at her to throw caution to the wind. "Thank you for the invite. For everything." She slipped her hand out of his grip and walked away while she still could.

After work Lucy picked up Braden, fixed a quick dinner, then had him shower and get to bed. She was determined not to regret her earlier decision but once the house was quiet, she sat in her living room, second guessing herself. No, not second guessing – her priorities were vividly clear to her. She had established a home here where she and Braden felt safe and connected.

As tempting as Scott Murphy was, she wouldn't sacrifice that security. And though she knew that truth to her soul, she allowed herself to be a little sad that she would never get to explore the intense chemistry between them.

She was searching for the remote to find a sappy love story on Netflix when a knock sounded at her door. With a sigh, she rose and wrapped her sweater tight around her middle. After flipping on the outside light, she opened the door. Her heart did a slow roll in her chest. Scott stood there, a simple white box in his hand and a charming smile on his face. Fool that she was, her lips curved into an answering one.

She stepped back and allowed him in. "What are you doing here? It's too cold to be wandering the streets."

"I figured if you couldn't do dinner, maybe you could do dessert."

Lucy shook her head but led him to the kitchen. How on earth did he know her biggest weakness? Her mouth watered at the sight of the gorgeous cake he unboxed. She had a sweet tooth so strong that if she indulged it as often as she liked, she wouldn't fit into her uniform.

She set out two plates on the bar that served as their table while Scott took a knife from the butcher's block on her counter and cut thick slices from the three chocolate layers.

It was just dessert. Surely there was no crime in that.

She forked up a bite. "Oh my God, this is ridiculously good. Mrs. Beasley's, right?"

"Yep. Cool bakery." Scott settled on the stool next to hers. "Plus, she gave me all kinds of tidbits about the town's beloved sheriff."

Lucy raised an eyebrow as she licked thick fudge frosting from her fork. "Oh boy."

Scott's gaze followed her tongue. He swallowed hard then cleared his throat. "Her favorite story was the one where you saved a tourist's life while helping bring the former sheriff to justice for his part in some kind of drug operation."

Lucy smiled. "Urban legend."

She struggled to accept praise for her work. Her husband had divorced her over it, and her former boss almost drove her out of the job.

They finished their slices and Scott rubbed his flat stomach. "That was delicious. My mouth wants more but..."

Their eyes met and Lucy's heart beat in triple time and the heat she saw there. Scott trailed a finger along her jawline, leaving a wake of chills. "Tell me again why you won't take a chance on me, Lucy."

She closed her eyes briefly. All of her reasons sounded tinny and distant to her ears.

He leaned toward her. She had time to shift away, but she stayed where she was.

His lips tasted sweet and dangerous.

Finally, he broke the kiss and blew out a breath. "You must feel that don't you? There's something powerful here."

Lucy stood and gathered their plates, backing away from his challenge. "I'm not going to lie and say no. But I have Braden and obligations to this town. I'm committed here. There's no sense in starting something that can't go anywhere."

He followed her around the bar. "That's it then? Deny your own happiness, assuming it's best for all involved?"

Lucy put their dishes in the sink then stepped into his space. She placed her hand on his strong jaw. The day's beard growth teased her fingertips. She tried for a smile. "Please understand. I just can't."

He turned his head and kissed her fingers, disappointment in his eyes. Several moments passed before he spoke again.

“Braden asked me if I would stay in touch with him. Do you have any objection to that?”

Her heart stuttered at this man’s kindness. “Of course not. He practically idolizes you.”

Scott twined his fingers with hers. “That means I stay in touch with you, too.”

She nodded. “I know.”

Scott’s slow smile eased the pressure in her chest. “Good.”

Although Lucy gave him her number, she was a realist. Tomorrow Scott would be gone, back to his real life. And she would be here.

Two evenings later, much to her surprise, Scott called. Braden danced around her like a crazy person. She wouldn’t have any peace until he got to talk, so she handed him the phone. After several minutes and a promise from Scott to call again soon, Braden reluctantly returned her phone and headed off to his room.

“I missed hearing your voice.”

Her eyes slid closed as she pressed the phone tight to her ear. Scott’s quiet words spread warmth through her chest and prompted fantasies that could never come true.

For the next few months, they talked several times a week. Lucy found herself opening up to this stranger who had become a friend. She told him about what ended her marriage and about the issues she had with the former sheriff. In turn, she learned about his family and previous relationships. Knew how hard he’d worked to build his company. Knew what made him tick.

He was funny, creative and wicked smart. But he was also several states away. There was no getting around that reality. So, when he asked about coming to Ouray to hike with Braden since the weather had turned warmer, she knew what she had to do. Braden didn’t need another man waltzing in and out of his life on a whim. As much as her heart wanted to say yes, she had to end things. For real this time. She’d figure out how to break the news to Braden.

The brilliant wall of blooming red flowers outside her office usually lifted Lucy’s spirits. But nothing had seemed quite right in the two weeks since she asked Scott to stop calling. Braden was dejected, her head was fuzzy, and she hadn’t slept a single night through.

She was more than ready for this day to be over so she could go home and crawl into bed. So far, she had dealt with a domestic situation and a vandalism report at the museum. She marched straight to her office and closed the door. Not five minutes later, her receptionist tapped lightly and leaned in.

“Hey, Lucy. Sorry to bother you. But there’s a guy in the lobby who wants to make a report and Gray’s out on a call. Can you help him?”

Lucy rolled her shoulders to ward off the headache building at the base of her skull. She stood and came around her desk. “Of course. Send him back.”

She sat on the edge of her desk and closed her eyes, praying for a quick turnaround. When she opened them again, she gasped. Scott's lean body filled her doorway. Her stomach lurched and she blinked a couple of times to make sure she wasn't hallucinating.

"Good afternoon, Sheriff. I'd like to file a formal complaint."

Three steps later, he was close enough to touch. His outdoorsy scent took her back to their last beautiful kiss, a memory so powerful it hurt.

"What's your complaint?" she whispered, certain he could hear the misery in her voice.

"I have this issue, and it's just not going away. I'm really hoping you can help me." He caught her hand and laced his warm fingers with her cold ones. "See, I met this incredible, selfless, amazing woman. And for some reason, no matter what I did, I couldn't stop thinking about her. Here's the thing though. This woman's been hurt before so she's doing everything she can to protect her heart and her son from getting hurt. While admirable, that very issue is at the crux of my complaint because from day one, her honesty and bravery stole my heart."

Lucy's eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head. "I'm not brave. I'm terrified."

He touched a finger to her lips. "I'm not finished with my grievance."

A quiet sob broke from her throat, but she nodded.

"Anyway, I'm crazy about her kid, and I think he kind of likes me too. So, the only person standing in the way of our happiness is this obstinate woman I'm in love with. It's a real problem."

"I can see that," Lucy whispered around the tightness in her throat. "But this woman's life is in Ouray and –"

"So is mine. With her."

Lucy shook her head. "I don't understand."

Scott's gaze held so much love she struggled to catch her breath.

"I sold a majority interest in my company. Finalized it yesterday. No more traveling for me unless we're all together. You're looking at the new director of the Ouray Ice Festival."

Her gaze searched his face. "Really?" The kernel of hope she'd buried deep in her heart unfurled, bursting with joy.

"Really. Turns out the former director wanted to retire. Good timing." Scott's smile faded and his gaze turned serious once again. "I'm out of my mind in love with you, Lucy. And I need you in my arms. I need you and Braden in my life."

Lucy released a shaky breath and allowed all the love and strength and joy that radiated from him to envelop her, heal her. She placed her hands on his cheeks and saw her future in his eyes. "I love you, Scott Murphy. And so does Braden. There's no one else I would entrust our hearts to, and nowhere on earth I'd rather be than in your arms."

THE END