



Mapping the Forest

Brandon Witt

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Happily ever after has no map, but sometimes fate sends a guiding light.

Gabe Rice, a seasonal ranger at the Rocky Mountain National Park, can't seem to get his life on the right trail. He loves the rugged beauty of the land, and there is no place he would rather live than the mountain community of Estes Park. But after six years, Gabe is beginning to wonder if he'll ever get a full-time position or find love. When Gabe sees Luis—and hears his gorgeous singing—he's compelled to meet him.

Luis Martinez, the new owner of a hotel and steak ride business in Estes, left California and a career as a therapist for a fresh start in Colorado. But even the beauty of the mountains can't help him forget the past or move forward. Unprepared for his strong attraction to Gabe, Luis is ready to run and hide from emotions he never thought he'd have again.

Suddenly the path ahead opens to a future that looks brighter for both of them, if they can find the courage to walk forward—together.

Mapping the Forest Details

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From Reader Review Mapping the Forest for online ebook

Eli Easton says

I really enjoyed this story by Brandon Witt. There were some laugh aloud lines in this but also some very deep sadness. I loved the Rocky Mountain National Park setting. Definitely an author I will buy again!

Pavellit says

Oh no,so many buts!I really wanted to like this, considering how much I love previous Brandon Witt's works, but I found myself wanting more. This just didn't work all that well for me. Others may see things that I missed. Possible!Probable! But, I found myself, after the second half of the book, having to put it down several times before I could carry on with it. Overall, the characters were good, and the story was enough to keep my interest, but there were some awkward things that bothered me.

The alternating narration was one of them. Switching between Gabe's first person to Luis' third person was odd. As a result, I felt only emotionally connected to Luis. Truth be told, I had tears on my face when he held his dead husband's ashes. *'Luis once again ended up on his knees, cradling the urn, begging for forgiveness.'* Loneliness, and pain, and regret, and guilt were driving him insane.

Next thing that left me confused was the secondary cast (not only but most of them Gabe's friends being part of Gay Boy Christmas Dinner). Their complicated ties (who with whom) were introduced somewhere in the beginning, but as the story progressed their names, situations, conversations grew progressively as some of them were just random, without elevating something to the story.

And last awkwardness was something new for me from this author, his implementation of body's indication and the sex-content. There were thoughts and introductions coming from 'under the zipper', which is very common for the genre and I don't mind, but stayed somehow a bit dislocated for men in their thirties and forties. I giggled on'*After he'd come and Gabe continued to ride him, having Luis stay inside until his erection started to fade.*' in a way Anderson Cooper did to Kellyanne Conway's 'Alternative Facts'. I didn't get dildo's things, and 'a power bottom and newly discovered power top' cliché, and the repetition of 'ass play' status. But I do like crowning of 'having belly could be sexy'.*'Gabe patted Luis's belly again. "Come on, sexy."*' A Hispanic man in his forties, less than six feet, with a solid body, firm belly is hot 'in a normal hot dad kind of way'. But, something that will be stay a little longer in mind will be the moment when he was singing in Spanish for Gabe- all about love and living by somebody's side- surrounded by mountains and gorgeous trees. They were in paradise. And it was time. Time to risk living again and move on. I was totally captured by the beauty of this magical little mountain town.

I really wanted to like this, you know, reviewers who really care about their favorite authors want to give them the best reviews possible. So, with all this I said, give it a try! Maybe I need to give it another try. I'll update this review when I've had a chance to read this again.

'He repeated the process countless times. Walking all over that special section of mountainside. Until the pile was no more. Until Chris was one with every inch of that beloved place. He would be part of the spring flowers, feel the summer sun, hear the golden aspen leaves quake before they fell, and then be covered in the snow. He would be there, and he would be free. And he would watch over Luis. Luis and Gabe.

Heather Martin says

Copy provided to Bayou Book Junkie by Dreamspinner Press for my reading pleasure in hopes of an unbiased opinion, a review was not a requirement.

Gabe Rice is a seasonal ranger at the Rocky Mountain National Park, in what he thought would be his dream job. But working as a ranger with the kind of boss he has is not easy for a gay man which is why he's still seasonal and part-time after 6 years. Gabe needs some excitement in his life and forces his best friend to go with him on a steak ride. The crazy ride up the side of the mountain in a jeep may not have been what Gabe anticipated, but at the top of the mountain, he gets his wish. When Gabe is served steak by Luis, he's attracted to the bear of a man. And though the steak is horrible, when Luis picks up his guitar to sing, Gabe is enthralled. Luis Martinez is the new owner of the hotel and steak ride. Luis ran to the Colorado mountain town to escape from his devastating loss and to hide from his emotions. He didn't expect to ever be attracted to or want another man and is appalled when he can't get Gabe out of his head. It's going to take work from both men to create a future together.

These characters are so well written, both supporting and main! Gabe has no family after the death of his grandfather but has created his own family with the Gay Boy Christmas Dinner (GBCD) group. He works with his best friend as a ranger, and he works part-time for her grandmother in a bookstore but he needs more. He's spent six years crushing on Todd, a friend from the GBCD and is still missing his chance with him. Gabe is an active member of a hook-up act called Scruff and is very vocal about his preferences. I loved that Gabe embraced his sexuality and made no apologies for what he wanted or liked. Luis can't stay away from Gabe's Scruff profile after stumbling across it and he can't forget Gabe's preferences or any other information he shared on the app. He doesn't realize Gabe can see who's viewing his profile and is thrown when he receives a message from him. Luis is skittish, grief-stricken and has to figure out how to date and do the things he didn't think he'd ever have to do again. He works hard to overcome his grief, so he can take a chance with Gabe, but it isn't easy. I want to say their dating attempts are hilarious but they really are just so awkward, even for the reader!

There are so many supporting characters that I loved and would really love to see their stories happen. Gabe's best friend, Jordan, loves being a ranger but is faced with similar difficulties as Gabe with their boss. She's not gay, but their boss doesn't believe women should work in his office any more than gay men. And her grandma, Rosalind is a hoot! She is old and says whatever she wants to whoever she wants. She's a great supporter of both Gabe and Jordan and is all for Gabe finding his man. She's just a great lady to have in your corner. I'd love more from the GBCD group: Rob, Paxton, Steve and Todd. They deserve their happily ever afters too!

I absolutely loved this book! Once I started it, I couldn't stop reading and stayed up too late to finish it. Then I was sad I had finished and considered just rereading it over again so I didn't have to let it go! There was a little instalove with these guys, but totally believable in my opinion, plus, trust me, this does not go immediately to an instalove relationship. These two men have to work for it, Gabe has to have patience, empathy and acceptance and Luis has to accept loving someone else. And there was no angst about being gay. These are two adult men who have lived a life, not teenagers. They are out, their families know they're gay and they have no need to stuff themselves back into a closet. Honestly, it's not something that common in reading gay romance, so when I'm treated to it in such a beautiful story, I want to acknowledge and appreciate it! I highly, highly, highly recommend that you put down what you're reading to read this book or at least read it next.

Rating: 5++++ Stars!

Natalie says

Brandon Witt has such a great way of writing characters that slip right into my heart and mind. I loved Luis and Gabe, the GBCD guys, and Rosalind and Jordan, all such well-rounded, fully developed characters. When Gabe meets Luis, he was a mess. The saying is that doctors make the worst patients, and so do therapists I guess. Luis's deep, prolonged grief over his husband's death was something he was completely unable to help himself with. His first dates with Gabe were awkward and awful and I couldn't begin to see how they'd get past it. The spark he gets from Gabe is a catalyst though, and with persistence, they do move forward. I got all the feels and squishy emotions that never descended into sappy or cheesy. There's just the right levels of humor, with narrative and dialogue that's always intelligent and thought provoking.

The secondary plot, with Jordan and Gabe's horrible boss was a perfect complement to Gabe and Luis' relationship saga. Adding snippets of the dynamics of Gabe's circle of close friends, make it a multifaceted story. And the gorgeous setting emanates from the pages. I visited Estes Park a couple of times when I was quite young, so an extra bonus was revisiting favorite memories of my own. I'm so glad I was finally able to read this. Highly satisfying and I'm excited to read the sequels.

♣ Irish Smurfétté ♣ says

Group Reviewage on Prism Book Alliance® ! Christine, PizzyGirl, and Me, and we've all got things we just had to share. :D

When this book came up for pre-order, I went ahead and ordered the paperback: that cover, yo, and I knew I'd want to have it on my shelf along many others that have become favorites. It also has many notes, written in different colors of ink, like purple, green, and blue, circling and highlighting and recording how these characters made me feel and think.

Having just experienced this story and these characters, this book has become just that: a favorite, and for meaningful reasons. A large one is the way grief is alive in Luis, his roller coaster journey along its path, how it changes one and changes itself along the way, how breakthroughs arise just as unexpectedly as setbacks, and the way it alters one's view of the world even before we're prepared to recognize it. That Brandon Witt does this with a storytelling approach that feels free of any barriers to all of Luis's emotions, I'm still kind of reeling. And simultaneously filled with joy.

They might barely know each other, but Gabe was his chance to live again.

No. That wasn't quite it.

*Gabe made Luis **want** to live again.*

Another reason is Gabe. His patience, and strength, and his devotion to the family he's made with his friends. Sometimes we don't even realize change is what we might need until someone comes along and, even while living with their own misery, alters the beat of our heart. My heart. All at once, fear and

excitement and insecurity and bravery jostle for dominance while also trying to work together to make sense of what's happening.

This story is a conversation, in all forms, between two people in current states of flux. Witt's choice to give us both points of view, both sets of emotions, both uncertainties and hopes, both triumphs... *both* is the only way this story can be shared and give us this extraordinary level of intimacy. Our storyteller knows these people. *I* know these people. Witt trusted us, and himself, with this truth and the trust is all over the pages of this book. In humor and love, in the very real way friends and lovers discuss and share their lives, navigating the challenges and successes, worrying if they're doing the right thing, assuring each other when they are and helping each other survive in order to live.

Can we talk about Rosalind? And Jordan? They're almost two sides of the same coin but playing very different roles, especially in the lives of Gabe and his friends, this family they've made. Unrelenting, intelligent, funny, omigosh funny, and in ways only someone who knows you really well can pull off without you wanting to bop them in the nose, let alone actually making you love them even more for it. Their hearts are huge right along with their proverbial balls.

I want more of them. More, more, more.

There is one series of scenes that I'm still trying to figure out if they were necessary. I know the points and emotions they were meant to bolster, but I'm not sure they benefitted the story? Really, it's one scene in particular that felt out of sync with the rest of the book and the characters, including the scenes that immediately precede and follow this one which definitely belonged and strengthened the story, continuing a couple of storylines.

Otherwise, every word of this story is necessary and meaningful and purposeful.

Can we say mature discussions about sex? Oh yes, we can. What a refreshing thing. What a relief! This is one of the duh kind of benefits to a story involving characters in their 30's, 40's, 50's and beyond. Now, mature doesn't mean absent of the awkward because there's plenty of that up in this joint. And it all feels so right, and so real. I snorted. It's true. And each time it made me love all of these people even more. Maturity also doesn't preclude those butterflies fluttering in the tummy when someone expresses their interest. Gabe, my man, thank you for sharing that.

Relatedly, and important to highlight, is the way HIV is portrayed. This is also real. And right. Living with HIV does not automatically translate into someone's life becoming nothing but a tragedy. Living with HIV is a thing, and it's happening, every day, 24-7, amidst work and family and relationships and sex. Hugs and humor and suffering and disappointment and sharing meals and jokes and everything else are parts of Rob's life, just as they are with all of his dear, loving friends.

Miseducation and misconception are encountered and addressed in regular ol' conversation. As they should be. Without fake histrionics or overblown consequences. A serious thing but not the only thing in someone's life.

Witt's writing is some of his best. Expressive, filling scenes with crystal clear physical beauty and emotions that shoot right to the heart of the matter. Dialogue that rolls along the peaks and valleys of Estes Park, creating an atmosphere of distinct connectivity between these people and the breathtaking landscapes around them, living as a part of each of them.

Emotions. I'm not even sure how I'm writing this right now. All throughout this story, accessibility is wide open to everything these characters are feeling. Inescapable. Walls exist and shake and crumble between them but we are never denied what's happening on either side, through every moment as they work to break

them down. What a gift. I'm so thankful.

There is so, so, so much more I want to say about this book and these people. If I did, we'd be here many, many, many pages from now. Read this. And know there's more to come. ;)

Cover Reveal on Prism Book Alliance® !!!!!

Candice says

I wanted to love this, but I just couldn't get into it.

I didn't like Gabe's friends. *hide* I know they're kind of based off of Witt's friends and that kind of hurts me a little to say that I didn't them.

I found the pace to be slow between Gabe and Luis. I wanted to more time with them together. I think I needed that. I didn't mind Luis crying so much, but the freak outs got to be a bit much. Who am I to say what's too much though? Everybody grieves differently, I know that, but watching Luis grieve got to be too much for me. Then there's Gabe not knowing whether to run for the hills or grab Luis and pull him closer.

I HATED how Gabe opened up to his friends about Luis. To me, that felt like a violation of privacy. Maybe that's me?

I did like Jordan and her Grandma though. That was kind of a weird dynamic though, Gabe's besties with Jordan and her dad? or was it her dad's boyfriend? I forget, but it was just weird.

Overall, I'll read on in this series.

Sheri says

Mapping the Forest is one of those hopeful and authentic stories that tugs on your heartstrings from the beginning to the end. It worked for me, for the most part. I enjoy Brandon's stories and I claim to be part Lorax, so I anticipated a solid read. It wasn't as smooth sailing as I had hoped but it certainly wasn't a disappointment. There were some distractions that held this back from knocking my socks off but I was smiling as I finished the final page and that's what truly matters to me.

First let's get to what shined in this story. Brandon paints such a gorgeous backdrop that I had to restrain myself from hoping on Expedia and booking a vacay to Colorado as I read. Breathtaking views pave the way for a vivid journey. It was extremely well done and I loved it. I am partial to the forest (I studied forestry until I discovered the career difficulties at the end of my degree) and felt a sense of ease and peace wash over me throughout their hikes. The main characters were solid, real, and lovable. Brandon has a gift when it comes to his characters, I yearn to hug them. He's the master at creating huggable men. And there's so much genuine emotion surging through the pages, it's as if the book has its own heartbeat.

As far as the distractions I mentioned earlier, the alternating narration was one of them. I don't mind first person and I like alternating voices but I found myself stumbling with Gabe's first person *and then* the

switch to third person for Luis. It was strange. It also felt cluttered by the secondary cast. As the story progressed they grew in such numbers I fumbled with their distinction. What friend was dating who and the past relationships confused me. I understand this is a series and often the first book in a series is weaker than the subsequent books, but the 'setup' was an interference I could have done without.

What's to like: Luis has been beaten by life and is attempting to regain some control....claim his happy back. Gabe is trying to plant roots and find a partner to join him. Their paths cross and they try to tango but it seems they have four left feet. They fumble and bumble and it's absolutely adorable. They are hardly perfect and that just makes them so damn perfect for one another. They both have incredible friends and I adored the brief snippets of family. There is a lot of agony and mourning but there is also comfort and hope. I also enjoyed the humor sprinkled throughout as it offset the sadness.

What's to love: Great men in great places overcoming great losses. A moment in time smashed Luis' life to smithereens. His body continued to live despite his broken heart. Clinging to memories allowed him to survive the days and weeks but as months became years, his grief threatened to remain forevermore. Gabe's bright eyes, pure smile and runaway mouth broke through his shroud of despair. Gabe was his second chance...at love and life. It's a difficult but beautiful awakening.

Beware of: Sharp pain from a grieving husband. A few false starts. And a couple of disturbances in the story.

This book is for: Fans of nature, fans of Brandon Witt and anybody willing to take a bumpy ride with the Rocky Mountain Boys...they are sure to provide a smile and chuckle or two.

4 stars

Book UNfunk

Lindsay M. says

Ugh, I'm bummed. This started out so well for me, but the further I got, the less I enjoyed. I got to 80%, but I had to throw in the towel. No rating.

Teri says

This was a total Momo book and I loved it.

Gabe and Luis were awkward and sad and adorable. It was perfect for me.

Great secondary characters that I can't wait to see more of. Rosalind-just too much! Loved her!

Highly recommend.

Don Bradshaw says

I am on the fence about this book. I enjoy the way Mr. Witt weaves a story by taking from his own life.

ROMO was idyllic and the descriptions were beautiful. I had a problem with the insta-love especially

between two such damaged men. I loved Rosalind and hope that she pops up in book two. I have never been

a grieving husband so will not judge Luis's thoughts but they seemed over the top to me personally. Like I said earlier, I'm on the fence.

Becky Condit says

The Rocky Mountain Boys is a series with many characters and great depth. The first book, "Mapping the Forest" takes a look at the story of Gabe Rice, a seasonal ranger at Rocky Mountain National Park, and Luis, the new owner of the Steak Ride company and a quaint hotel in the town of Estes Park.

Luis has recently lost his beloved husband Chris. They shared a love of the Rocky Mountain State Park, where Chris was killed in a skiing accident. After Chris died in a skiing accident, Luis, a therapist in San Diego, bought a boutique hotel, sight unseen, in the town of Estes Park, and the steak ride business that takes guests into the mountains on jeeps to be thrilled by a scary ride up the mountain and fed a steak dinner in the open. Unfortunately, Luis can't cook anything but burned steaks. Luis had Chris cremated and has brought his ashes in an urn, intending to scatter them at a favorite spot in the park. However, he can't bear to part with the ashes and continues to mourn Chris to the point he is barely functioning.

Gabe is a part time park ranger who longs to be a full time ranger. He and his best friend Jordan long to become full time rangers but are thwarted at every turn by their homophobic, misogynistic boss. Gabe has many gay friends who gather monthly for dinner with the Gay Boys Christmas Dinner club, and we will get to know all of them better in future stories. Gabe has his eye on one of the men who is unavailable to him, so when he starts lusty after the heart broken Luis it seems as if this romance will go nowhere.

In fact, it's going to take a while, actually the entire book, for them to find common ground. There is no insta-love here, just longing. There are a couple of secondary plots, almost main stories, centered on who is poaching protected elk and another about Gabe's homophobic boss. So, there are a couple of things that have to happen before a romance between Luis and Gabe can go forward. First, can Luis get over the loss two years ago of his husband Chris and secondly, can Gabe's cruel boss either change or leave the park service. It's kind of a toss-up whether Todd, Gabe's boss, will stay or go before Gabe loses his temper and does something drastic.

The story appears to be an HFN for Gabe and Luis, but you can see it as it starts to turn towards a rock-solid HEA. I love Brandon Witt's style of writing and his character development. Definitely 5 stars. I can hardly wait for the stories of the other members of the GBCD.

Breann says

Some stories make you work for that HEA. But when you get there... it's glorious.

Mapping the Forest is one of those quieter romances. The pace is organic and natural. The characters are real and likable. You know the books that sneak up on you? You think everything is moving along nicely and then BAM! you're crying your eyes out? Yeah. That's *Mapping the Forest*.

Heather K (dentist in my spare time) says

3.5 stars

I really like Brandon Witt, and so I really wanted to LOVE this book. I didn't *love* it, but I liked it, even with its flaws.

I always like how Brandon Witt writes books that **feel intensely personal**. He truly writes what he knows, whether he is writing about locations that he is familiar with (like in this story) or incorporating characters inspired by real-life friends, or just including life experiences that he has had. Every time, I get such a sense of *him* in his stories. I feel his love of food, family, and friends, and I really like that I get that intimacy from his stories.

That said, I wish Brandon would write some stories that showcase his funnier side, like Christmas Miracles of a Recently Fallen Spruce, because Mapping the Forest, like so many other recent books from Brandon, was **very serious and somewhat sad**. (Take a chance, Brandon! You CAN do funny!)

Luis Martinez, one of the MCs of the story, is going through a rough, emotional time. I liked his character, but for the first half of the story I swear he **cried in every single scene**. It was a LOT of crying, and that is coming from a girl who cries at Kleenex commercials! Though I understood that Luis was experiencing some very painful and difficult emotions, it got a little overdone and heavy for me.

Gabe was a brighter character, and I liked his openness. I didn't quite get why he tried so hard with Luis, because, frankly, Luis seemed a little unhinged at times. I admired his consistency and doggedness, even if I didn't know what drove it. I also liked Gabe's **close relationship with his friends**, another thing we see in many Brandon Witt stories.

I also saw Brandon do some stuff in his stories that I haven't seen before in gay romance. For one, he has a character (Gabe) who is open to HIV partners (not that Luis is HIV+), and I got an candid discussion of the use of PrEP for the first time in a story, at least that I can recall. I liked that Brandon took a risk here and talked about something current in real life gay relationships. Kudos to him for that.

I thought that Mapping the Forest got better and better over time, but I found the pace to be a bit too slow and the "I love yous" to be a bit too quick. I think some things could have been tweaked to make the story a bit tighter.

Overall, this was a promising story in a new series from a talented author. I think that this series has a lot of potential, and I'll be looking forward to the other side characters' books.

ARC provided by the publisher

Morgan Skye says

So this is a spin off(?) from Brandon Witt's Christmas story "Christmas Miracles of a Recently Fallen Spruce" (<https://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/boo...>) that was included in last year's Dreamspinner Advent Calendar. If you haven't read it – you should – it's a really sweet story and includes a bit about the Gay Boys Christmas Dinner [Club]. These guys get together to be the "family" that they choose and are really tight friends. (Brandon said it's based on a true event!) In any case, you don't need to have read it to appreciate this story, but it's a nice bit of background.

Gabe and Luis are two very different people. Gabe is a park ranger at Rocky Mountain National Park in Estes (does NOT rhyme with testes!) Park, Colorado. He loves his job but hates his boss and his really only angst is that he's been pining (pardon the pun) after his BFF for years to no avail.

Luis is far more broken. And he remains broken for most of the book. He's just lost his husband (2 years ago) and is trying to make a go of a rashly purchased hotel in Estes.

What I liked about this was the unique take on their instant attraction. They don't deny that it's ridiculously fast or inappropriately intense, but embrace that fact. They also both jump into bed, but then regret the timing, only to do it again because they're so hot for one another. It felt both "wrong" but honest and awkward but real.

For the most part I really liked their relationship and how it moved forward. I really felt badly for poor Gabe – he had a lot to contend with in a dead lover – but also poor Luis – who only wanted to honor both his "loves".

What didn't work as well for me – and what might just be because this is book one in a series – is the fact that a lot of the book is spent on secondary characters and their "partial" stories – which I'm sure become full-fledged later on in the series. It just felt distracting and not that integral to Gabe and Luis' story and like it was just setting the scene for future books without being an important part of this one.

I also wasn't sure why the drama with Jordan was thrown in there at the last – it was a pretty big thing to have happened and I'm not sure why it did.

But... I've always been a fan of Brandon's writing style – it's both provocative and yet down-to-earth, poetic without being flowery. He writes really good sex scenes and their scarcity makes them that much more powerful. As a Coloradoan I appreciated his depiction of the "sights" and know that lots of people will want to take a trek up to RMNP when they go to GRL next year!

I really enjoyed this and was glad to see a "lighter" story from Brandon Witt again after his more "heavy" stuff of late.

Mercedes says

4.5 stars

Second book by this author that I have thoroughly enjoyed. His stories are just so well rounded, they are captivating. I stayed til 3am reading this book I was so entertained. Only knowing I had work the next day made me put it down.
