

I WAS
BLIND
(Dating),
BUT NOW
I SEE



*my misadventures in dating,
waiting, and stumbling into love*

*Stephanie
Rische*

If you've ever been brave enough to outright ask God for the desire of your heart only to be met with what feels like stony silence, this book is for you. Whether you've prayed for a husband or kids or dream job or healing or hope or home and haven't heard back, this book is for you. Stephanie asked and God did not answer in any of the ways he could have. Through eight blind dates, God did not change his answer. Instead he changed Stephanie. And if you read her book, I'm pretty certain he's going to change you, too.

LISA-JO BAKER

Author of *Surprised by Motherhood* and community manager for (in)Courage

In *I Was Blind (Dating), but Now I See*, Stephanie's funny, tender, and insightful words take the reader on a journey that points to God's faithfulness and kindness at every stop along the road. You'll have a blast reading this book—you'll laugh, you'll nod your head, and you may even cringe at some pretty spectacular awkward moments. More than anything, though, you'll be encouraged by the compassion and the care of our very good God. Well done, sweet Stephanie!

SOPHIE HUDSON

Author of *Home Is Where My People Are* and *A Little Salty to Cut the Sweet*

This is not just a book about dating: It's about living, about not putting your life on hold. But more important, it's about surrounding yourself with a spiritual posse—mentors, friends, prayer partners, family—who will walk with you through the valleys and around the blind corners. Stephanie Rische is one of those people: honest, hilarious, and wise. Her book is a treasure!

SARAH ARTHUR

Author of *The One Year Coffee with God* and *Dating Mr. Darcy*

I've known Stephanie Rische primarily as a fine editor, but it was fun getting to know her as a skilled and entertaining writer! Not only singles but marrieds will readily identify with this engaging book. Stephanie is refreshingly honest as she addresses, with good humor, life's awkward moments and unwelcome emotions. Her transparency, charm, and faith in Christ are magnetic. I really enjoyed this book, and highly recommend it!

RANDY ALCORN

Author of *Happiness* and *Heaven*

Finally! An honest look at the journey we call dating. With the winsomeness of a “pit bull in a tutu” (her words), Stephanie opens her heart and soul to the twists and turns, the anticipation and disappointment of this daunting endeavor. She has the courage to let us in to the parts of her world that most of us work hard to keep hidden, and that is the best gift of all.

NANCY ORTBERG

Author of *Seeing in the Dark*

If you're struggling to hope that you will ever find “Mr. Right,” Stephanie's story is proof that God is a good Father who gives good gifts to his children. In her book, Stephanie tells honest and humorous dating stories from her single days and the lessons she learned. An encouraging and thought-provoking read for anyone navigating singleness and dating.

PERRY NOBLE

Senior pastor of NewSpring Church and author of *Unleash!* and *Overwhelmed*

This book has a piece of my heart, and Stephanie now feels like a dear friend who knows my Starbucks order and shows up at my front door in her pajama-pants just to talk because she knows I've had a rough day. I laugh-cried through every inch of this book and felt every feeling right along with Stephanie. She has such a gift of

bringing each “date” off the page and into full, living color for me to hold and learn from. I adore her vulnerability. And as I leaned into every story, I was once again reminded of the beauty found in life when we allow our relationships to teach us something deeper about ourselves and how we love.

KASEY VAN NORMAN

Bestselling author of *Named by God* and *Raw Faith*

Wise, warm, funny, and deep—Stephanie Rische writes in a way that will draw you in and keep you reading. Honest about the ache of being single when you long to be married, she has written a story that will deepen your hope and delight your heart. I loved traveling with Stephanie on her journey from one harrowing blind date to another, with loads of surprising experiences along the way.

ANN SPANGLER

Author of *Wicked Women of the Bible*

Bad dates, confusion in faith, real sin, fumbling around for grace: It takes guts to lay bare stories like these. It takes wit and charm to do it in a way that reads so endearingly. This book is a delightful telling of how God, in his kindness, allows himself to be seen.

LISA VELTHOUSE

Author of *Craving Grace* and coauthor of the *New York Times* bestseller *Your Beautiful Heart*

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Author's Note

THIS BOOK IS NOT PRIMARILY A HISTORY, but rather a story, and as such, some of the timelines have been condensed or tweaked. This is fortunate for you, because it means you'll be spared from the really long, tedious stretches of my life when nothing interesting happened and I just did laundry and ate cereal and nearly missed my turns for work because I was so engrossed in whatever audiobook I was listening to.

Some names on the following pages have been changed. For example, I actually have four friends named Sarah, but I've reduced the number of Sarahs from four to one since I was concerned you'd need their Social Security numbers to keep them all straight. (Mom, I should mention that you're still Mom in this book, because there really just aren't many good pseudonyms for Mom.)

I also changed a few details to protect the privacy of my blind dates, although I have done so with a mixed conscience, because in a few instances, these guys should not be at large on the dating field. Please date at your own discretion.

Foreword

IS IT JUST ME OR DOES THE TERM *BLIND DATE* make you want to curl up in the fetal position due to post-traumatic stress? Anyone who has ever experienced that particular brand of awkwardness won't soon forget it. And if any subject is worthy of a book, this is it. Especially when most blind dates are set up by well-meaning married people who happen to know two single people and decide they should be totally compatible simply because they're both single. What could possibly go wrong?

But as I read this book, I realized Stephanie Rische has given us so much more than just a tale of looking for Mr. Right in a world of Mr. You Are So Wrong. It's a different kind of love story . . . a story about a God who pursues us, challenges us, and lets us wait on what we want most in life because he knows that the journey with him will ultimately teach us so much more than the destination.

So even if you are way past your dating years, there is a message for you within these pages about being faithful, staying true to who you are, and not waiting for that "big thing" before you live your life. Stephanie tells her story in eight sections: Waiting, Faithfulness, Community, Hope, Prayer, Gratitude, Joy, and Journey. These categories describe our life experience no matter where we are, where we've been, or where we're going. Each one is so crucial to the journey.

Stephanie shows us her longing for a husband; her fear of being left behind by her married friends; her disappointment in God during the waiting; her sense of being alone in the big, scary world; and the joy and gratitude that she found along the way. Because she writes with such tenderness, humor, and honesty, I found myself laughing out loud while reading one page and wiping away the tears running down my cheeks the next. I consider myself a funny snob, so I have deep, abiding love for anyone like Stephanie who can make me laugh out loud. (I'm like Cuba Gooding Jr. in *Jerry Maguire*, except my line is SHOW ME THE FUNNY.)

The characters Stephanie encounters as she goes on eight different blind dates in her quest to find a husband ring (no pun intended) so true to all those people and things we think look good on paper but turn out to be not quite what we wanted. *I Was Blind (Dating), but Now I See* is about a God who knows us so much better than we know ourselves, who pursues us and challenges us in ways we never could have imagined because He is a good Father. He wants to see us become who He created us to be and not just give us what we think looks best.

I'm excited that you have picked up this book and are about to go on this ride with Stephanie. Whether you are still in the world of blind dates or have finally met your match, you are in for a delightful experience.

Stephanie is that honest, funny, wise friend we all hope to have as we go through life. So grab a cup of coffee (or a Diet Coke), curl up, and prepare to laugh, to cry, and to see glimpses of your own life embedded in these words. You will walk away grateful for the experience and even more in love with our God.

Melanie Shankle
New York Times bestselling author of
Nobody's Cuter than You

INTRODUCTION

Stumbling Blindly toward Grace

Break us with Thy grace.

DONALD BARNHOUSE

SOME PEOPLE COME UPON GRACE rather, well, gracefully. They seem to glide through life with wit and charm and perfect hair, and you get the sense that even if they have skeletons in their closets, they're filed away alphabetically in Rubbermaid totes.

I'm not one of those people.

I tend to be oblivious to grace until I stumble headlong into it. It's only when I'm on the ground, groping blindly in the darkness, that I recognize the unexpected beauty amid the brokenness. And as much as I'm smarting over the fall, I owe something to the pain and the downright clumsiness that brought me there in the first place.

I spent years on a quest for one thing, but God, in his circuitous grace, derailed me and brought me on an altogether different journey than the one I was expecting. And it was precisely during those moments when I was stumbling about that I began to recognize the grace all around, if only I would open my eyes to see it.

This is the story of how I tried really hard to find someone to fall in love with and get him to fall in love with me back—but how I mostly just ended up falling flat on my face. It's also the story of the unexpected ways God showed up when I finally admitted I couldn't pull myself up on my own.



I had my first lasting crush on a boy named Kevin when I was in fourth grade. With his floppy auburn hair, crooked grin, and pegged jeans, he was an '80s heartthrob. I, however, was quiet and unsure of myself, with a gap-toothed smile and corduroy pants that didn't quite hit the cool threshold. I never actually talked to Kevin, of course, but I was convinced that if he got to know me, he would surely like me back. That is, until the slumber party at Jasmine's house.

We were playing one of those slumber party games unique to ten-year-old girls wired on too much Mountain Dew, too little sleep, and scant parental supervision. The idea was to pass around a vase with a fake rose in it, and whenever it was your turn to hold the flower, you had to tell the other girls whom you had a crush on. When I was up, I shyly admitted I liked Kevin and then ducked my head, feeling the pink creep from my neck all the way up to my eyebrows.

Almost as soon as the words crossed my lips, one of the girls exclaimed, "Kevin? He would never like *you!*"

"Yeah," another girl chimed in. "He likes Stacey. She's cute."

I passed the vase to the next girl, desperately hoping I could blink back the tears before anyone noticed.

As elementary school marched into middle school and high school, things didn't change much for me in the boy department. I was still quiet and a few Esprit shirts shy of being popular. I didn't go to the homecoming dances, and no one asked me to prom. I tried to make the best of it my senior year by throwing a "non-prom" party for everyone else I knew who wasn't going, but truth be told, I wished a boy would notice me, think I was special, choose me. And although my little group of friends ended up having fun at our own party, the occasion wasn't exactly worthy of renting a limo for.

I went to a Christian college, where I was surrounded by a number of eligible, like-minded (and attractive) guys. But somehow I still felt

invisible, and with the exception of one short-lived summer romance, I managed to get through all four years without being asked out on a single date. After I graduated and started navigating my twenties, I reached some significant milestones, like getting a job that morphed its way into a career and moving out of my rental unit into a place of my own. But as my friends and siblings started getting married, one summer after another, I still found myself decidedly alone.

I couldn't help but wonder if there was something broken in me that was apparently keeping all the men at bay. Was I not pretty enough? Not fun enough? Not engaging enough? Not dateable enough (whatever that meant)? And at another level, I wondered what to make of God's role in all of this. I longed for someone to do life with, someone to serve with, someone to love and to cherish—and someone who would love and cherish me back. Those seemed like good things—God things, even. I couldn't figure out why he was being so quiet about something that was so close to my heart. And so I started praying in earnest for God to bring the right man into my life.

Instead, he brought me matchmakers. Eight of them, to be precise.

So this is how a girl with practically zero dating experience and a shyness around boys that dated back to circa 1987 mustered up the courage to say yes to not one but eight blind dates over the course of five years. And how she did so with all the elegance of a pit bull in a tutu. But perhaps most of all, how God revealed so much of his amazing grace to her along the way that it left her lovestruck.

And although my story and my blind date adventures may be different from yours, my hope is that as you walk with me through these pages, you too will catch a glimpse of the one whose grace is enough to catch you when you stumble and whose love is deeper than you can fathom.

PART I

Waiting

*When I'm in the cellar of affliction,
I look for the Lord's choicest wines.*

SAMUEL RUTHERFORD

Blond Date



“HAVE FUN ON YOUR BLOND DATE,” Nhu told me as she headed out the door.

Clearly there had been a communication breakdown somewhere along the way.

Nhu had been an even giddier version of her usual eighth-grade self when she found out about my date scheduled for the next day. I’d met Nhu at the church youth group, where I mentored her and a handful of other junior high girls. That day she’d come over to work on an essay for her English class since she and her mom didn’t have a computer and she was still catching on to the nuances of the English language.

But once she got wind of my “blond date”—and when she discovered it was my first one, at that—all thoughts of homework quickly vaporized. She started peppering me with questions and offering advice about everything dating related—where we should

go, what I should wear, and what she predicted this guy would look like (beyond the obvious blond hair).

We eventually got the definition worked out—that this guy was not necessarily blond, nor blind, for that matter. And then, to my surprise, Nhu blurted out, “What do *you* hope he’s like?” She said it like it was the first time it had occurred to her that I might get some say in the matter. I suppose that’s how you roll when you’re thirteen.

I seized the teachable moment, telling her what was important to me when it came to someone I’d want to date. I was looking for a man with integrity, I said. Someone who loved God and did the right thing, even when it hurt. Someone who was serious enough to work hard but could also laugh himself silly. A man who would honor me and love me at my best and my worst.

At some point I looked over at Nhu and realized her eyes were glazing over. Sure enough, I’d surpassed the thirty-second teenager-accessibility window.

“One more thing,” I added. “I guess I always pictured myself with a brown-haired guy.”



As it turned out, Blond Date did, indeed, have blond streaks in his hair. Unfortunately, that was where the highlights ended. So to speak.

I arrived at Jamba Juice a few minutes early, so I wasn’t surprised Blond Date hadn’t arrived yet. Truth be told, I was a bit relieved, as it would buy me time to dry my sweaty palms and figure out what drink I should order to convey that I was neither a glutton nor a calorie counter. Perfectly natural, of course.

Five minutes ticked by. I had my order down by now. Ten minutes. I was eyeing every male who approached the door, alternately hoping it would be him and praying it wouldn’t, based on whether his car looked like a candidate for the scrap metal yard, whether his shoes clashed with his pants, and other such deep inner qualities.

Fifteen minutes. The girl behind the counter was now giving me pitying looks. Twenty minutes. I wished I'd done more research on blind-date etiquette. *How long do you wait before conceding you've been stood up?*

And another thing: What role did the matchmaker play once the ball had gotten rolling? I'd feel like the worst kind of snitch to call her with a report about my date's AWOL status, and I couldn't think of a way to pull off a casual check-in, where I'd nonchalantly fish for hints as to whether he'd lost interest somewhere between Tuesday and the nearest Jamba Juice.

The truth was, I didn't even know Debbie, the matchmaker, all that well. My brother and sister had played sports with her kids in high school, so we often found ourselves cheering together on the bleachers at basketball and softball games. Several years had passed since then, but Debbie thought of me one day when she was talking to her friend (Blond Date's mom), who was fretting over her son's bachelordom. As they were lamenting over how "all he needed was to meet a nice girl," my name popped into Debbie's mind.

I'm not entirely sure why I agreed to the setup, since for me, even answering a call from an unknown number felt like an act of daredevil-esque courage. I'd always assumed blind dates fell into the category of Things I Just Don't Do, right up there with cliff diving and juggling knives. I wasn't sure I could sit and make small talk with a stranger for an hour, let alone do said scary activity with a *date*. As I tried to figure out how to respond to her voice mail, I thought through the booby traps of saying yes: (1) I'd have to navigate the tricky, alien world of dating, with its unwritten codes and expectations; (2) in a short window of time, I'd have to try to represent myself accurately yet winsomely enough that this person would go out of his way to see me again; and (3) I'd have to try to eat something while looking cute and preferably not getting anything stuck between my teeth.

All the tallies seemed to be lining up in the "con" column, but there was one potential pro that had the power to outweigh them all:

the *what-if*. This probably wouldn't go anywhere . . . but *what if* it did? This guy probably wasn't my soul mate . . . but *what if* he was?

There was something else I had going for me: I never bumped into Debbie in the course of normal life. So if things blew up or fizzled out, I'd be able to wallow in anonymity.

Of course, I hadn't counted on Blond Date not showing up at all. Twenty-five minutes. By now I was moving from twinges of disappointment to bouts of indignation. But each time I got angry, I'd picture him in a fiery crash somewhere between his house and Jamba Juice and cut him some slack. I decided to give him thirty minutes, and after that I was out of there.

As my eyes flicked compulsively between the parking lot and my watch, I heard a voice behind me. "Excuse me," the girl behind the counter said. "Are you waiting for someone?" So much for my play-it-cool strategy.

I nodded lamely.

"Well, he just called and said to tell you he's running late."

Forty-three minutes after the prearranged time, Blond Date showed up.

"Did you get the message I'd be late?" he asked. "I was in the middle of a really intense game of soccer."

Soccer? Not a fiery car crash? I took a breath, determined to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Oh," I said. "Do you play on a team?"

"No, it's just a bunch of guys who play pickup in the park near my house."

At least I was getting a Banana Berry Smoothie with a boost of vitamin C for my efforts. And he *had* showered, so that showed some effort, if not time-management skills.

As soon as we ordered (to his credit, he paid), it was time to face the dilemma I'd had plenty of time to ponder since arriving. The thing is, this particular Jamba Juice had no seating. And it was a brisk November day in blustery Chicagoland.

I'd scoped out our options and figured our best bet was to sit on a bench just outside the building. I pitched the idea to Blond Date as we walked out of the place, but he countered with the suggestion that we chat in my car instead.

"In my car?" Something about having this person I'd never met (and someone I'd spent the past forty-three minutes being peeved at) in my vehicle felt awkward at best. Maybe even a little creepy.

But he was persistent. "It's too cold out here."

I resisted the urge to say something about it not being too cold for pickup soccer.

And so it was that we ended up sitting in my car and making awkward small talk while drinking our smoothies.

"So, tell me about yourself," he said.

I swallowed, willing myself not to feel like I was at a job interview.

But it was a fair question. We had covered the subjects we knew we had in common (i.e., our matchmaker) in the span of about thirty seconds. When you go on a normal date, you theoretically already have some common ground to start from. But we were starting from scratch. How could it *not* feel like an interview?

Please don't ask what three adjectives I'd use to describe myself!

I lobbed some questions to Blond Date about soccer, but my knowledge of the game was limited to fourth-grade gym class and how I thought Mia Hamm had a cool name, so that didn't go very far.

Our humor styles were in different orbits too. Despite my best attempts to make him laugh, he remained stoic. *Does it only make things worse if I explain that was a joke? Or should I just move on?*

I decided it was better to abort and reroute the conversation.

"I'm hosting a birthday party for my friend next weekend," I said. "I'm thinking of having fondue."

And *that's* when he laughed.

Wait—that wasn't the joke! We passed the joke exit several mile markers ago! I hoped my face didn't betray my indignation.

“I didn’t know anyone did that anymore,” he said by way of explanation.

Eventually Blond Date looked at his watch. “Well, it’s been an hour,” he said, “which is my rule for first dates.” He reached out his hand for an inelegant side-by-side handshake.

“It was nice meeting you,” he said. And that was that.

Well. I’d always pictured myself with a brown-haired guy anyway.