

BEST STAGED PLANS

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Sandy Sullivan is a professional home stager who lives and works in the Boston suburbs. So getting rid of her own house and downsizing should be a breeze, right?

Well, best staged plans and all, Sandy's husband, Greg, is dragging his feet and their son, Luke, has returned home and moved into the "bat cave" in the basement.

Sandy reads them both the riot act and takes a job staging a boutique hotel recently acquired by her best friend's boyfriend. The good news is that she can spend time in Atlanta with her recently married daughter, Shannon. The bad news is that Shannon soon receives a promotion and heads back up to Boston for training, leaving Sandy and her Southern son-in-law, Chance, as reluctant roommates. And Sandy finds herself in another delicate situation when she suspects her best friend's boyfriend may be seeing another woman on the side. Fixing up houses may turn out to be easier than fixing up lives.

Read an Excerpt

Excerpted from *Best Staged Plans* by Claire Cook.
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Chapter One

Okay, so I accidentally wrapped my reading glasses in one of the packages I mailed.

"It could have happened to anyone," I said to my daughter Shannon.

"Wow, that's pretty lame. Even for you, Mom." The all-knowingness of her three-and-a-half months of marriage reverberated through the phone line.

I ignored it. "If you get them, just mail them back, okay, honey?"

The minute life starts getting easier, your eyes go. So the time you once spent looking after your kids is now spent looking for your reading glasses. I hated that.

"Good one, Sand," my best friend Denise said when I called her next

*"Sandra is a professional home stager based out of the Boston area. Knowledgeable about home design and full of ideas, she somehow can't manage to get her own house ready for the market, thanks to her slacking-off husband and son. When she gets an offer to stage a boutique hotel in Atlanta, she leaps at the chance to run away and get some distance and perspective. She soon starts to wonder whether her whole life, not just her home, needs a makeover. Fans of HGTV and of Cook's previous charming fiction (*Seven Year Switch*; *Must Love Dogs*) will adore this light, funny read."
-**STARRED Library Journal review!**

"Conflict between happy family memories and the need to move forward is tempered by a great running gag about reading glasses, realistic relationships with friends and children, and much needed perspective from a stranger in need... Addicts to HGTV marathons will drool over Sandra's tips for paint samples and thrift-store bargains. Cook's likable heroine is charming without being silly, and her story is very well paced all the way to a genuinely delightful conclusion."
- **Booklist**

"Midlife craziness...crowd-pleaser for empty nesters...charmer...Cook knows the territory of secret longing and snappy dialog." -**Publishers Weekly**

BEST STAGED PLANS is a June Indie Next pick!

Many thanks and much love to these booksellers (and to the others I don't know about!) for taking time out of their busy lives to write these amazing nominations. Click on the links to find their stores - and please tell them hi for me when you get there!

"Claire Cook has knocked it out of the park with **BEST STAGED PLANS!** Everything she has written previously has been entertaining, fun, and funny, but this novel made me cry as well, then laugh again. Every page of this story of an almost-empty nester "Home Stager" trying to sell her own home is filled with humor, warmth, insight and humanity. Plus great tips and tricks! ... And a homeless woman named Naomi will steal your heart. I loved it!"
- **Joan Lang, Front Street Book Shop, Scituate MA**

"Claire Cook is back with another gift for beach readers and book

GOOD ONE, SANDY. My best friend Denise said when I called her next.
 "Remember that time you left Luke at the pediatrician's office in his baby carrier?"

"Your point?" I said.

As if summoned by the decades-old reference, Luke lumbered into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. He nodded once, either by way of thanks or a belated good morning, then turned and thudded his way back down to the bat cave.

"Good morning to you, too, honey," I yelled after him.

I was packing up our old life in order to drag my husband kicking and screaming into a new one. The rest of the morning's boxes were still sitting on the kitchen island, so I rifled through them quickly. Styrofoam packing peanuts fluttered to the floor like a dusting of snow. As soon as each box proved itself glasses-free, I tore a strip from a mammoth roll of packing tape and sealed it shut.

It's not like I didn't have other readers. There were at least a dozen pairs scattered throughout the house. Somewhere. But this pair had been my hands-down absolute favorite. Midnight blue with subtle black stripes and a little extra bling from some silver detailing on the sidepieces. The perfect strong rectangular shape to offset my swiftly sagging jaw line. Unique in a world of boring drugstore glasses, they were my go-to readers whenever I needed to see anything smaller than a breadbox. The only thing about them that drove me crazy was their tendency to fall off my face when I leaned forward.

It turned out to be their fatal flaw.

Once I'd determined that they'd left the premises, I'd retraced my steps to the post office. The man who'd waited on me earlier was a total jerk. So, of course, wouldn't you just know he'd still be working when I walked back in.

A kind of angry arrogance radiated from this guy, maybe fueled by the inadequacy of a spindly gray ponytail that petered out inches after it began. "Anything liquid, fragile, perishable, or potentially hazardous?" he'd always ask in such a bullying tone that he'd manage to convince me I was a closet pyromaniac and he was the first to catch on.

I thought my best bet was to strategize so I'd get the nice woman at the other end of the counter. I counted the people in the single line, divided by two, and gave up my place to the person behind me.

Somehow I still got the mean guy.

"Anything liquid, fragile, perishable, or potentially hazardous?" he sneered.

"Yeah," I said. "Apparently my life." I laughed my best laugh, the one designed to melt the heart of even a great big bully of a jerk.

His flat eyes scanned me like a barcode. "This. Is. Not. A. Joking. Matter." He took a slow step back and reached for something under the counter. An alarm? A can of Mace? A double barrel shotgun?

I held up one hand like it might actually protect me. "Sorry," I said. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. It's just that you're not going to believe what I—"

His hand was still under the counter. The crowded post office had gone quiet. I seemed to have fallen into a Seinfeld episode. The guy behind the counter was the post office Nazi. I was Elaine. At least I hoped I was Elaine and not George. Or even Newman. Oh, God, please don't let me be Newman.

"Answer. The. Question."

"No," I said.

One gray eyebrow shot up. "No? You're refusing to answer the question?"

"No," I said. "No is the answer to the potentially hazardous question."

The whole room was staring. I tried to imagine a graceful segue to getting my packages back just long enough for a quick peek inside. No post office rules about once you send them, neither rain nor snow nor sleet nor reading glasses can impede your packages' journey to their final destination. No extra charge for double mailing. Ponytail Guy would even help me tape my packages back up with federally funded tape.

clubs everywhere--**BEST STAGED PLANS**...you'll find fun, heart and hilarity from cover to cover. This is yet another winner for Cook, most certainly."

- Jackie Blem, [Tattered Cover](#), Denver, CO

"BEST STAGED PLANS is jam-packed with trademark Claire Cook wit and wry observations on those everyday situations that would be really comical if you could just slow down and view them from afar - or if they were happening to, well, someone else! You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll tell all your girlfriends that **BEST STAGED PLANS** is THE beach read of the summer. I know we are!
 - Jill Miner, [Saturn Booksellers](#), Gaylord, MI

"Another wise and witty novel from Claire Cook. There are some real nuggets of knowledge here on home staging, clearing your life of clutter and 'recipes' for creations made from prepared foods from Trader Joe's. I know this will make for some lively book club discussions for ladies of a particular 'stage' of life!
 -Karen Vail, [Titcomb's Bookshop](#), Sandwich, MA

"In true "Claire Cook form" **BEST STAGED PLANS** is thoroughly enjoyable from start to finish...fun, light-hearted but moving at the same time. An uplifting and fun read".
 -Lisa Kennally, [R. J. Julia](#), Madison, CT

"At the beginning of bestselling author Claire Cook's newest novel, professional homestager Sandy Sullivan has reached a mid-life crossroads, realizing that while she spends her time making other people's homes look picture-perfect, her own life could use some rearranging. Desperate for a change but with her husband dragging his feet, she takes on a job out of town staging a new hotel acquired by her best friend's boyfriend. But even the best staged plans are never perfect, leaving Sandy living with her son-in-law (minus her daughter) and wondering if her best friend's man is straying. Claire Cook has done it again with another fantastic, breezy summer read! -Whitney Spotts, [Schuler Books and Music](#), MI

"I'm really looking forward to recommending "Best Staged Plans" as well as your other titles, especially to our summer tourist crowd. Though I'm not a "reader in readers" quite yet, the novel spoke to me in ways I didn't expect when I read the first chapter. You provided a richness and a message within a story, subtle and powerful, without beating people over the head with a moral. Nice job!" - Kasey Cox, [From My Shelf Books](#), Wellsboro, PA