



Ellie Campbell

# Playing dead

The woman on my right screams, 'I'm dying, I'm dying!'

The woman on my left screams, 'Help! Someone's killed my freakin' baby!'

But she's strayed from the script. In the script she doesn't have a baby and the assistant director person was very clear when he told us we had to stick to the script. He said a little improvisation among the injured was okay. But this woman's meant to be dead, like me.

And besides, who says *freakin'* anyway?

We're extras in a movie of the week about an explosion in an office tower block. We've all run to the rooftop to wait for the helicopters.

My career transition counsellor doesn't know I'm here. Her name is Karen and her advice is: *Be practical, Sara*. We first met one week ago. She stood in the company boardroom, clipboard in one hand, tissue box in the other and ushered us away from the manager who had just said: *Sorry, these redundancies are company-wide, nothing personal*. Karen's here-to-help smile made me think of summertime and watermelon, sweet and perfectly sliced, and of lazy days on the beach, far from the strained getting and keeping of a job. Her smile was misleading.

Yesterday I signed up as an extra, knowing Karen might not approve.

Now fake police race across to the fake mother suddenly alive. They calm her then race to me. One takes my pulse. I have to keep my eyes shut, but I picture the policeman shaking his head saying, *No, too late*.

The cement against my back is warm from the sun and hard like the chairs Karen made us all sit on as we thought through the next stage. A workmate complained it was too soon. 'We've only been redundant one hour,' he said.

Karen agreed. 'Take this questionnaire home. Answer it honestly,' she said. 'We'll start from there.'

I took my questionnaire home. It asked me: Responding honestly, what would you like to do next?

Lie on the floor, I think. Play dead?

But Karen's voice is rich like a newsreader's and I hear her saying: *Set some realistic goals, Sara*.

I open my eyes. The policeman's still above me. He jumps. The helicopters haven't arrived and he looks a little lost.

I stare at him.

'You're supposed to be dead,' he whispers.

'I know,' I say. 'Isn't it great?'

He shrugs then looks away, perhaps concerned the cameras will catch him talking to a dead person.

Karen had asked me if I felt angry or sad or ashamed. She leaned in close. 'You're allowed to be angry,' she said. 'Scream, if that'll make you feel better.'

The screamer on my left starts over; that miraculous recovery subplot gone mad.

I close my eyes. I don't want to be brought back from the dead. I don't want to scream. I want to lie here, in this warmth, while we wait for a helicopter to save us all.

Karen, how can I even begin to explain?

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Ellie Campbell works in film and TV production, and has a Masters in Professional Writing from the University of Technology, Sydney.

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