

## CORKSCREW

PATRICK CULLEN

Cate was just out of the shower, reaching for a towel when she first heard it. She turned toward the door and, when the telephone rang again, nodded to herself saying, 'Yes. Yes.' She pulled the towel loosely around her ribs, pinned it there with her elbows, and went down the hall to the lounge room. She picked up the receiver. 'Hello?' she said, and waited. 'Hello?'

Nothing. She replaced the receiver and waited for the telephone to ring again but when it didn't she went back to the bathroom. Small pools of water had gathered along the hall. Steam hung in the light that angled out of the doorway.

Cate stood in front of the bathroom mirror, let the towel fall to the floor and wiped her palm across the mirror. She leaned toward the mirror, struggling to find her place in the steam. She swung the door back against the stop and went to the window and eased it open. Out along the street, the fig trees moved heavily with wind, and the steam began to shift.

She pulled her hair back, circling it with her thumb and forefinger, and ran her hand along the length of it. Her hair hung like black rope and water trailed down her spine. Cate leaned to open the vanity drawer and took out a small bottle and unscrewed the lid. She poured some of the white lotion into her hand and began to work it into her skin, her hands moving purposefully over her thighs. With her foot up on the edge of the bath, she was working the lotion into her ankles when she heard the telephone again. Cate went to answer it.

'Hello? Who's calling?' Cate said and, when the caller replied, she realised she was naked.

'Who did you want?'

'No, I'm sorry. I think that you have the wrong number,' she said, shaking her head, her wet hair clinging to the side of her face. She tucked her hair behind her ear. 'There is no Catherine that lives here. Are you sure you dialled correctly? What number are you after?'

'That is this number but there is no one here with that name. Did this Catherine give you the number?'

'She did? Well, I'm sorry all the same.'

'Me?' she said. Laughing, she sat on the arm of the lounge. 'I'm Cate.'

'Of course I'm sure. I did know a Catherine when I was younger, though. It's a younger woman's name, don't you think? A young girl's name.'

'Yes, you're right,' she nodded. 'Or an older woman.'

'Me? I'm somewhere in between.'

'No, I'm not,' Cate said. 'Not yet anyway.'

'I mean that if my partner asked me I would probably say yes.'

'No, not probably. Almost certainly.'

'Okay—definitely. I would definitely say yes. But I don't think he'll ever ask.'

'No, I doubt it,' she said. 'I'm starting to think that I'll have to be the one to do the asking.'

'He's not here right now. He's away with work,' she said. 'He'll be back at the end of the week, though. When I heard the telephone earlier, I thought that it might have been him but I got you instead.'

Cate wound the telephone cord around her fingers. 'You know what?' she said. 'I don't mind if he doesn't call tonight. I can talk to him some other time. Maybe we could just talk tonight. Just you and me.'

'I'd like that, too.'

*(end of excerpt)*