

CORKED *by* CABERNET

MICHELE SCOTT



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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SADDLED WITH TROUBLE
DEATH REINS IN
TACKED TO DEATH

CORKED *by*
CABERNET

MICHELE SCOTT



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*To Jessica Park,
who is a dear friend and without whom I think
I may have either wound up
totally insane or—yeah—
totally insane.
Here's to you, J.P., and the dream.*

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NIKKI Sands dropped the box in her arms onto the kitchen counter, not believing what she'd just heard. "What did you say?" She turned to her friend Simon Malveaux. Ollie the Rhodesian ridgeback who was sleeping smack dab in the middle of the kitchen floor, lifted his head. He looked up at Nikki, obviously sensing that she didn't sound thrilled.

"I know, isn't it exciting? I'm kind of thinking a lot of curry dishes on the menu. You know, even lean toward more vegan meals—gotta keep things green. And there is this wonderful New Age musician, amazing with the flute, lives up the road in St. Helena. I thought he'd be great for entertainment. It'll be wonderful," he rambled. The realization that maybe Nikki wasn't thinking along the same lines made him stop. Placing a hand on his juttled-out hip, he frowned. "I know the look, Snow White. Why are you looking at me like that?" He waved a hand in the air. "All pissy-like like I'm bugging you."

"You are bugging me. I can't do this right now. In case you hadn't noticed, I have several events to prepare for. We're already into March and in only a few months harvest and crush will be on us. Plus, can't you see what I'm doing? I am a little busy." She opened the box and started unloading a set of plates—all white and traditional, a stark contrast to the eclectic kitchen done in a Spanish style that matched the ranch house. The walls were painted a turquoise and enhanced by the rustic-colored Spanish tiles that paved the floor. This room was a feel-good room where Nikki could cook and entertain—two things she looked forward to doing in this home—her new home.

Ollie stood up and walked out of the kitchen, heading to the sofa where Nikki had given up trying to make the dog understand that he was a dog and not another human. Ollie had decidedly made the couch *one* of his beds.

"I can see, you're busy making your new *love nest*, but Derek said that you'd help us." Simon smiled his pretty-boy smile and ran his hand nervously through his platinum-dyed buzz cut.

"He did not. He wouldn't do that to me. He knows I'm behind and swamped."

"Yeah, he did. He said so," he replied, punctuating his words with a loud cluck of the tongue.

She unwrapped one of the plates and opened Derek's cupboards. Oh jeez, she was going to have to rearrange everything in the kitchen. The man had been a bachelor far too long. Nikki couldn't believe she was standing in Derek Malveaux's kitchen moving in her things—because yes, they were doing it. "shacking up," as her aunt Cara had put it to her over the phone when she'd told her. She preferred "living together." It didn't sound seedy that way.

Since their trip to Australia they'd spent almost every waking hour together. Slowly but surely he'd *stuff* gravitated to his house. It seemed to make sense to both of them to do the right thing and share

up. Well, live together. It was a financially and logistically sound idea. Even though she only moved from the Malveaux Boutique Hotel on the property.

Simon, Derek's brother, also lived on the vineyard with his partner, Marco. They were two of her good friends, but could definitely be royal pains when they wanted. This latest antic they were pulling on her was bee-lining them smack dab onto that pain-in-the-ass list again.

She sighed, not believing that Derek would do such a thing. This was only Simon trying to manipulate her. "Let me get this straight. Your guru, the Guru Sansibaba"—God, that was the most ridiculous name she'd ever heard—"his family, his people, and some of his followers are planning to come here for a weeklong workshop?" She shook her head. "And the Malveaux Spa and Winery are hosting them?"

"No, now it's not like that. We're not *hosting* them. It's big money, and it'll be good promo for us. Think of it like that. It's the Baba himself and his crew, which apparently does include his wife and three grown children, but we aren't talking about hordes of people. See, Marco and I just joined the Source Enlightened Elite group, otherwise known as S.E.E. Get it—as in see the light. Isn't that clever?"

"The what group?" She took a couple of empty jelly jars out of the cupboard. Interesting. She doubted Derek ever did any canning. Recycles.

"It's the *it* group for enlightened souls, and we made it in." Simon clapped his hands together.

"Uh-huh, why don't you *enlighten* me, and explain what your joining this group means exactly regarding to this workshop thing? And what did this cost you guys? An exclusive club is never free."

He sighed and she could tell by the way he fidgeted around, moving like a kid needing to pee, that he was considering telling her a lie. "It was a little expensive. But we had to go through an application process. It's not like just *anyone* can get in. It's like the Harvard of enlightenment teachings."

She frowned. "Harvard? A *little* expensive? Like how little?"

"A hundred thousand dollars," he muttered and lowered his head.

"A hundred thousand dollars! You better have a ticket straight to heaven for that kind of cash. Does your brother know about this?"

"No." He shrunk back. "I don't have to tell Derek how or where I spend my money. And don't you say anything. I only told you because I trust you."

Ooh, he knew how to get to her. "Tell me, Simon, what do you get for that kind of money? I hope you get a contract stating that it'll be God himself, not Saint Peter, who'll be opening the pearly white gates for you. And you get an automatic 'Go on through' pass."

He rolled his eyes. "Please. We don't follow any one religion. We believe all faiths have validity to them. But I'm so glad you asked about the money, because after I tell you, you'll see how great all of this is going to be. For the big hundred thou, we get to be with only a handful of other people in our group. We get all of the guru's books, CDs, and DVDs for free, plus we get to be seated in the first front rows at all of his celebration seminars. That means we get to be seated first *and* we get our photos taken with him at each event."

"Ooh, a picture. Impressive."

“Come on,” he whined. “You haven’t even heard the best part.”

“Do tell.”

“Well, three times a year we get to go on vacation with him to some exciting locale and learn from the master himself.”

“Oh yeah, I can see how that would be the best part.”

He smiled as if he were the cat who swallowed the canary.

She stared at him. “Come on, Simon! You’re kidding. My God! When are you going to see that the guy is simply a master in making money?”

“You are so not hip or fun anymore. Now you’re like Suzy homemaker and I can see it, you’re gonna be a buzz kill from now on. You’ll be all brownies in the afternoons with a glass of milk, and watching soap operas. Your ass’ll get wide and, gawd, just no fun. Domesticated. That’s what you’re becoming.”

“Sounds like me. Actually sounds kind of good. I like brownies.” Except for the expanding backside. That didn’t sound too appealing. “Soap operas, I don’t know about. Reruns of *Will & Grace* maybe.”

“Oh I loved that show. I wish they’d never taken it off TV. See what happens when you settle down. Next thing you’ll be like Debra Messing, baby and all and blah, blah, blah . . .” He lifted himself up onto the counter and sat on the edge.

Nikki stomped her feet. “Shut up!” Simon went wide-eyed. “Look, I’m only trying to help you see that this guru Sansibaba nut knows how to market and sell his product, which he labels ‘enlightenment.’ That’s crazy. Enlightenment comes from within.”

“I know that. But he’s not what you think. And you know what? It doesn’t matter what you think. The plan for S.E.E. was to go to Bali, but then a typhoon hit and so the winery is what we’ve come up with. You be a good girl and play nice. You don’t have a choice anyway. Since Marco and I are the newest members, we thought it would be good to start off by giving back. You know, paying forward from the get-go. Everyone will be here next week, and you are going to help me and Marco see that it runs smoothly. Just ask the boss man himself. He said it would be no *problema*.”

Excuse me? Nikki found herself speechless. Simon never took that tone with her. He could be bitchy—yes. He was always that way and she played right along—it was just Simon. But downright bossy? That was new. “Good, I’m glad we’re in agreement.” He glanced at his watch. “Gotta run. I have a manicure scheduled. I’ll be back at six for a little powwow. I can see the wheels churning, Snow White.” He jumped off the counter. “I know you. You’re already getting on board, aren’t you? That’s what I love about you. You’re a regular Pollyanna. Good karma coming your way. Before long you’ll have the domesticated gig down and it’ll be everything you ever dreamed because you are a good person. See you later, love.” He blew a kiss at her, scrambling to get out the front door.

She watched him, unable to grasp the entire reality of what he’d just told her. Next week? Next week this freak show and his cronies were coming to Malveaux Estate? She shook her head and picked a plate up off the counter. Without another thought, she threw it against the wall and watched it shatter into pieces while yelling out, “Simon!” Ollie let out a loud yelp as if he’d been kicked. It wasn’t the dog who was going to get a swift kick in the rear. But Simon was another story.

Derek had gone into the city to personally take care of a larger account that they'd recently had problems with, making him incommunicado all day. He'd called on his drive home, but his cell died right after he said something about being on his way home. Nikki's irritation had reached a high note after hanging up the phone. By the time Derek got home, she had worked herself into a tizzy.

"Did you tell Simon that I'd help him out with this guru thing he and Marco have going?" Nikki asked as she set aside the onion she'd been chopping. "Because if you did that, well, first of all, what are you thinking letting those two have that, that, guru guy and his entourage here? We can't have that. Think of all the work. I mean one week, plus I understand this guy is gaining in popularity. We don't need a bunch of tourists coming in here all at once. We can't handle that. We don't have the staff right now."

Derek had barely closed the door, wine bottle in hand, which he set down on the table. As irritated as she was at him, she couldn't help noticing his golden looks. Her stomach sank. Don't pay attention to those blue eyes, wavy blond hair, and that six-pack she knew was under the suit. Don't even think about it. He had some questions to answer first. Ollie had finally gotten off the couch when he'd heard Derek's voice and was now stuck to his side. The dog was smart enough to understand Nikki's state of mind.

Derek walked over to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Hi to you, too, and I don't think I'll ask how your day was. Should I? I hope you had nothing to do with this." He glanced down at Ollie, who cocked his head to the side.

"I'm serious. What's the deal?" She picked the onion back up, but while slicing through it, the knife nicked her thumb. "Dammit!" She pulled the knife back and blood trickled down her hand. Ollie hightailed it back to the couch.

Derek rushed over and looked at her thumb. He quickly grabbed a paper towel from the rack and ran it under cool water, then began dabbing at the injury.

"It's only a little cut. I wasn't paying attention." She tried to yank her hand away from his. She knew she shouldn't jump to conclusions about him telling Simon that she'd handle the details of the event. But she had and she was kind of grumpy from moving boxes all day, her back now hurting.

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her thumb, then turned it over and kissed her palm. "Better?"

She looked at him and realized how horrendous she'd just behaved. Man oh man; he was sure easy on the eyes—all blond and rugged-like, and blue-eyed, and sweet and sensitive. Maybe it was time to lose the attitude. "A little. But one right here would make me feel even better." She pointed to her cheek.

"Ah, now c'mon, I think I can do better than *that*." He kissed her hard and long on her lips. "Better now?" She nodded. He walked over to one of the cabinets above the sink, and got a Band-Aid to wrap around her thumb. "I know it seems strange to keep my medicine cabinet in the kitchen but this is where you'll find all of the antacids, pain relievers, and vitamins you might need."

"I already discovered that."

"You've been snooping."

"Snooping in what is also my house is sort of impossible. You did say that it was my house, too."

now. Even when I said that it was still your house . . .” She lowered her voice, mimicking him. “ ‘Nik, my house is going to be your house. Our house. You know the saying, *mi casa es su casa*.’ ” She winked at him, imitating him. “Ring a bell?” She couldn’t believe how comfortable their relationship had become. Joking with him like this less than even a year ago wouldn’t have happened.

He laughed. “Do I sound like that?”

“Exactly.”

He put the Band-Aid on her thumb and opened the wine, handing her a glass. “Now would you like to get back to the interrogation? By the way, what are you making for dinner? It smells delicious. Garlic, onions, hmmm. Girl, with you around, something tells me I won’t starve.”

“Ah, a little something, something, like portabella mushroom drizzled with a balsamic sauce, classic Caesar, and braised pork loin with pearl onions and grapes.” She smiled proudly, leaning back against the counter.

“A little something, something, huh? Yeah. I think I can get used to having you here. Go ahead and call it your house, too. I think I do remember that *mi casa es su casa* part.”

“Good. So, do you also recall telling Simon that I would help him and Marco out with this even though their guru wants to have here? Or should I assume what I have been all day and know that Simon was trying to undermine me?”

He sighed and set his wine down. “Yes,” he said slowly. “I did do that. Simon wasn’t trying to work you.”

“Well, do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Come on; let’s go sit down in the family room. I don’t want you chopping off your hand, much less my head, in case you get mad at me.”

“Are you thinking I might?”

“You might.” He smiled sheepishly and grabbed their wineglasses, taking them into the ranch-style family room, replete with leather sofas, a cow hide rug, and wooden floors. “Look, sweetie. First here’s to you. To us. Our house. *La casa*.”

Please. Oh yeah, he so knew he was busted. He never called her sweetie. Neither of them was into mushy name-calling. She sat down on the couch and smiled back at him. “Okay, sweetie. Here’s to us.”

“To us.” He clinked his glass with hers. “I see you got some more things moved in today. I told you to wait until the weekend and we can get it all in here.”

“No you don’t. I’m not falling for that. Don’t try to change the subject. Lay it on me. What did you tell your brother dear?”

He sighed and set his glass down on the coffee table. “Okay, I did tell him that you would help.”

“What? Do you realize how many orders are going out right now? Plus, I have three major restaurants breathing down my neck because they’re all sold out of the Cab, and with our change of distributor last month, things are screwed up. Oh, and that charity event I promised to take care of. You know, the one you said would be good for Malveaux to be a part of? Now I’m going to have to

play cruise director for a group of lost souls! Lovely. People who have enough money to buy the bliss at seminars that teach them how to breathe and chant.”

He held up a hand. “Wait. I think *you* need to breathe. Hear me out. I know this is short notice, and trust me, I wasn’t exactly keen on it either, but then I got a call from Alan’s people.”

“Alan?”

“Yes. Believe it or not, the Guru Sansibaba is really named Alan Sansi.”

She closed her eyes. “Why do I have this sick feeling in my stomach that I’m not going to like this at all?”

“Here’s the deal. You know how much I sank into building the spa and hotel?”

“Yes.” Nikki did know exactly what Derek had put into it, and how he’d also absorbed the cost of the gourmet restaurant on the vineyard after the famous chef, Georges Debussey, who’d partnered with Derek, met an early demise. It hadn’t been a cheap endeavor when Derek committed to building a world-class spa and boutique hotel on the vineyard. On top of all the promotion in glossy magazines, he’d shelled out a pretty penny to make everything top notch.

“The company is not recouping the costs as quickly as I’d like. We’ll be fine, but I can’t take money from the winery and funnel it into that end of the business right now because of the major promotion with the Hahndorfs in Australia and the Salvatores in Italy.”

Derek had also taken on international enterprise by importing wines into the United States and giving them the Malveaux label.

“Okay, what are you saying?” Nikki asked.

“This Alan Sansi is becoming pretty big, what with law of attraction being so popular these days along with holistic medicines and aromatherapy.” He sighed. “Alan gave me a call after talking to Simon and he explained why he needed a retreat in such a hurry.”

“Yeah, next week.” She crossed her legs and leaned back into the couch.

“I know, I know you’re busy. I’m going to get you some backup. In return for holding the event here, Alan mentioned that he would be interested in licensing his name on our spa products. Right now he has one of the major cosmetic companies after him to do this, but he claims that big commercial business doesn’t interest him.”

“What does he think we are?”

“I know, but you know that we’re totally organic and green here, and he likes that about us. He’s willing to put money into the spa and into the products. It might not be a bad idea if I’m going to continue to grow the place. He’s also interested in promoting our wines because they’re organic. You know red wine is good for the heart.”

“So is less stress—something I need. And I thought you didn’t want huge crowds at the spa and hotel. I thought they were supposed to be a rare luxury. A treat. Now you’re talking about promoting to the masses?”

“Nikki, I’m a businessman, and yes, the spa and hotel will stay a top-of-the-line luxury. They have to. As you said, we can’t accommodate a lot of tourists here. I have no intention of expanding

Twenty-five rooms are what we have, and we can only treat a handful of guests at a time at the spa. ~~But everything we do here is costly, and to maintain that kind of expense, I need cash flow. The spa products with Alan Sansi's name on them could do that for us. Besides, we actually don't have any rooms booked that week because it's our downtime. We could use this.~~

She took a sip of her wine, and setting it back down, she rubbed her sore thumb, seeing his point. She didn't want the hotel and spa to tank. They meant a lot to him, and her as well. "What about the wine? You say this guy is interested in promoting it, too. What are you thinking? How would you go about that?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I've got Simon and Marco working up a campaign now for me to present to him. But I think this guy is going to go big like Dr. Weil or Wayne Dyer. Before long we'll probably see him on *Oprah*. It could be a nice boost for us. I've been going over our demographic and we have expensive wines that are selling well, but our ten- to twenty-dollar wines aren't. We've spent a lot of money advertising to luxury and wealth and now we need to look at a mass advertisement scale. You know, the mom who goes to yoga in the morning. The family man who likes to barbeque on the weekend for his wife and kids. Couples who get together and talk about the day-to-day stuff over a glass of wine and dinner."

"You mean normal people." She laughed, because she was normal. Okay, a little crazy normal—but normal as in driving an economy car, buying most of her clothes at Target, clipping coupons, and becoming anxious when the checking account dipped below five hundred dollars. She'd had enough bounced check charges during her acting days that keeping money in the bank meant she'd go without a meal or two if need be. That was why Derek's wealthy world was so different and, yes, exciting. Thankfully, he wasn't a pompous egomaniac.

"Yes. Normal." He punched her lightly on the shoulder. "Like us."

"Us. Yes, and *us* is going to help Simon and Marco."

Derek cringed. Not because he didn't want to help, but because he was about to get in more trouble. "Um, babe . . . ?" *Yep. Another endearment.* "You're going to hate me, so I'm going to say it quickly and get the pain out of the way."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've got to fly out to New York on Thursday, so I'll be here when everyone first arrives, but after that . . ." Derek wrinkled up his nose. "Don't look at me like that with those baby blues. You're killing me. I don't have a choice here."

"New York!" Nikki shouted.

"I know. Look, I planned to take you, but this came up. You remember meeting old man Vicente a few months ago? The Italian winemaker and owner of the Salvatore Winery?"

Nikki knew her face was turning red because the heat spanned all the way to her ears. She remembered old man Vicente from the Salvatore Winery. The man had more money and power than Caesar had, and he ruled in the same fashion. *And* he'd had the gall to smack her on the butt when they'd all gone out for dinner after a business meeting. She'd about cold clocked the old fart (who had to be somewhere in his eighties) when Simon convinced her to chalk it up to the antics of an old Italian Romeo. "Please don't patronize me. How could I forget Vicente? So, what's the New York

thing about?”

“The deal isn’t sealed with him. He’s balking at some of the prices.”

She frowned. “You think you have to go and deal directly with him in New York?”

“He likes the Big Apple, and it’s halfway. And he has some family there. He didn’t want to come to California and I can’t take the time to go to Italy right now.” He shrugged. “Pretty much, if we want the deal, I have to meet with him. I’m sorry. I wanted to take you. I’ll be home Monday night, so it’s not like I’ll be gone the entire time this group is here. Only a few days.”

“A few days?” she whined. The sound of her voice even annoyed herself. She sighed, knowing that ever since Derek had walked through the door, she’d kind of sounded like a brat. She hadn’t always been his girlfriend. She’d started out as an assistant and manager of the winery, and a couple of years ago she wouldn’t have balked if he’d told her he needed her to manage this large affair by herself. Well, she might have a little on the inside simply because she hadn’t exactly started out as best friends with her gay pals. But things had changed, and no matter what type of personal relationship she had with her lover/boss—lover (she liked that description much better)—she still had a job to do for the company. “Okay, I give, what do you need me to do?”

He kissed her cheek. “Thank you. I won’t leave you hanging. In fact, I begged off the charity event with Alyssa and she said she could handle it.”

“You planned all along for me to say yes, didn’t you?”

“I was hoping.”

“Stinker.”

“I’m getting off easy. With Alyssa taking care of the charity deal, I’ll take care of the distribution issues myself. I’ve read all of your notes about the problem, and since we’ve gone over it, I don’t see why I can’t give them a call and try to use my finesse to work things out.” He winked at her.

“Bad. You are bad.”

“To the bone, baby.”

“And cheesy, too.”

“Like a slice of Felipe’s extra cheese.” He smiled.

They finished their wine and he detailed what he needed for the Alan Sansi event. It wasn’t going to be easy, but she’d do it, and she’d do it to the best of her ability. “You do realize that Simon isn’t likely to be much of a help?” she asked.

He nodded. “I know, but Marco is the best. He’ll dive in.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he will. Thank God he’s there for Simon.”

“And thank God you’re here for me,” he said.

“Oh, no, there you go with the cheese ball crap again.”

He took her face in his hands and shook his head. “I know it sounds like a line from a soap opera, but I mean it, Nik. I wake up every day and the first thing I think is how grateful I am for you.”

She swallowed hard, and then smiled. “You are a lucky son of a gun, aren’t you?”

He laughed and kissed her, and she kissed him back, thinking she was damn grateful and lucky she had him, too.



Pork Loin with Pearl Onions and Grapes with *Tablas Creek Vineyard* *Côtes de Tablas*

What is Nikki about to get herself into? All she wanted to do was get moved in with the love of her life and get all domesticated, as Simon put it. And she had a decent start there with that pork loin meal she was preparing for her honey. But Nikki is a sucker for those baby blues of Derek's, and when he said the word, she didn't need much more convincing.

When you want to impress your other half, put this meal together with some sliced tomatoes on the side and rice pilaf. This is one of those dishes that are so tasty and unforgettable that it will likely become a requested meal in your household.

A great wine to drink with the pork loin is the *Côtes de Tablas* by *Tablas Creek Vineyard*. It has a wonderful blend of 43% Grenache, 24% Mourved, 18% Syrah, and 15% Counoise. It's similar to French Rhone. It's not too fruity and has a nice peppery spice flavor on the palate.

SERVES 4.

3 lb boneless pork loin
salt and pepper
1 cup balsamic vinegar
2 tbsp honey
2 cloves garlic, chopped
1 tsp red pepper flakes
10 fresh thyme sprigs plus 1 tsp chopped fresh thyme leaves
¼ cup red wine
3 tbsp warm clarified butter (recipe follows)
1 lb small pearl onions
1 lb red seedless grapes (about 3 cups)

FOR CLARIFIED BUTTER

unsalted butter, cut into 1-inch pieces

Prepare the pork loin by trimming off any excess fat except for about an 1/8-inch layer on the outside. Salt and pepper pork on both sides. Combine vinegar, honey, garlic, red pepper flakes, and thyme in a small bowl. Marinate pork in ingredients for 4 hours up to overnight.

TO CLARIFY BUTTER

In a heavy saucepan melt butter over low heat. Remove pan from heat and let butter stand 5 minutes. Skim froth and strain butter through a sieve lined with a double thickness of rinsed and squeezed cheesecloth into a bowl, leaving milky solids in bottom of pan. Pour clarified butter into jar or crock and chill, covered. Butter keeps, covered and chilled, indefinitely. When clarified, butter loses about 1/4 its original volume.

When ready to cook pork, drain marinade and add 1/4 cup red wine into a small saucepan and boil over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until reduced to about 1/2 cup, about 5 minutes. Pour glaze through a fine sieve into a small bowl, discarding thyme, and reserve. In another small bowl stir together 2 tbsp reserved glaze and 2 tbsp clarified butter.

In a saucepan of boiling salted water, blanch onions 3 minutes. Drain onions and peel.

Heat a flameproof roasting pan, 15 by 10 by 2 inches, in oven 10 minutes at 350°. In the heated pan toss onions with remaining 1/2 cup clarified butter, and salt and pepper to taste and roast in upper third of oven, stirring occasionally, about 15 minutes. Take onions out.

While onions are roasting, prepare pork loin. Brush pork loin with about 1/3 glaze-butter mixture.

Roast pork loin for 15 minutes at 350°. Add grapes and onions to the roasting pan. Arrange pork loin over onions and grapes, and roast 15 minutes. Turn pork loin over and baste with about half of remaining glaze-butter mixture. Roast pork loin, basting with remaining glaze-butter mixture, 15 minutes more.

Transfer to a platter. Arrange grapes and onions around pork loin.

To pan, add reserved glaze and on stovetop boil over high heat 5 minutes, or until thickened and reduced to about 1/2 cup. Season sauce with salt and pepper and drizzle over pork loin.

sample content of Corked by Cabernet (A Wine Lover's Mystery)

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