

## Imaginary Affairs: Sex, Drinks & Getting Older

**Robin Z. Arkus**

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*Imaginary Affairs is a champagne-filled romp that navigates love and lust with abandon.*

In Robin Arkus's indulgent, humorous, and dramatic romance *Imaginary Affairs*, a middle-aged woman looks for love after loss.

After losing two husbands—one to divorce, the other to death—Mallory finds herself in her most serious relationship yet, though it's with a married man who will never leave his wife. Approaching her fiftieth birthday, she decides that she's going to redirect her energy into finding her next Mr. Right.

On vacation, Mallory thinks she's found him: she shares champagne, long nights of lovemaking, and fantasies of a future life with Brad. When Brad starts bailing on their plans, though, Mallory second guesses her devotion and decides to have fun with other suitors, of which she has plenty. Her fast-paced, high-class single life in Cannes is full of drinks, gossip, and men who are never quite who they seem to be.

Though painted as strong-willed, Mallory also exhibits weakness when it comes to men. Her relationships drive the story; descriptions of her encounters are juicy, dramatic, and excessive, though the text steers away from erotic details. Her sexual empowerment is depicted as positive, but in practice it's problematic; her encounters and belief system are affected by rape culture, and the text employs fetishizing language when it comes to nonwhite characters. Some such problems are recognized and explored as part of Mallory's development; still, more universal are the text's thoughtful idealizations of relationships.

The supporting cast is made up of the men with whom Mallory has flings. Their antics are entertaining and are the text's main source of theatrical tension. In her inner monologues, Mallory grapples with social expectations in a way that ends up being compliant; she considers herself in debt to most such social mores. Her relationship with Brad is the story's central feature, but it is underdeveloped and emotionless. Mallory's girlfriends are important, if most so because they help Mallory to reflect on situations. Their conversations with her are funny and natural, but they, like Mallory, often come across as superficial, judging others based on appearances in ways that cross the line from funny to insensitive.

Mallory's breezy story mostly takes place in Cannes; her love for luxury means that the town is painted as a place built around lunching and spending money. Settings, from restaurants to homes, are described with an emphasis on designer names and elegant elements. The Cannes Film Festival plays in, too; the story celebrity name drops, embellishing its general atmosphere of wealth and fame.

Approachable prose moves fast through Mallory's affairs; the end effect is that the novel reads like a tabloid, building anticipation around Mallory's love life. A hasty last chapter catches the audience up on where characters landed, but it's too short on details.

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DELIA STANLEY (October 9, 2019)

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