

# CHRISTMAS CRUISE

LANA MALLOY PARANORMAL MYSTERY  
BOOK 4



KIM COX

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# Table of Contents

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**Chapter One**

**Chapter Two**

**Chapter Three**

**Chapter Four**

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE & ROMANTIC MYSTERY NOVELS

LANA MALLOY PARANORMAL MYSTERY SERIES

BOOKS BY KIM COX

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

# Chapter One

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As Lana shielded her eyes from the sun with the back of her hand, she gazed up to the eighth floor of the Princess Angeline Cruise Ship. The black, aqua, and gold colors of the Bahamian flag shifted in the sea's breeze atop the massive ship. She'd learned from the brochure that the black represented the force and vigor of the united people of the Bahamas. The triangle pointing toward the body of the flag symbolized their determination and enterprise. The aqua and gold represented the rich resources of the sea and sun, in that order.

This would be Princess Angeline's maiden voyage out of Charleston. Queen of the Atlantic Cruise Line originally operated out of California but had recently set up operations on the east coast.

She caught Tony studying her and she smiled to let him know she felt fine. She'd feared the large ship and had had to psych herself up for the cruise. Tony had taken her fishing last summer to familiarize her with the to-and-fro of the waves. When she told him that although she'd lived in Charleston all her life, she'd never been out on the ocean in a boat, he'd thought she was joking. It became evident the first time they ventured out that she wasn't kidding at all.

Lana couldn't believe she'd finally agreed to take a seven-day voyage across the Atlantic to the Bahama Islands. Nervous excitement supplied her with a giddiness like she'd never experienced.

Before leaving home, she'd made sure to pack Dramamine just in case she became seasick. She'd heard many stories about trips being ruined just because someone hadn't realized they'd be affected. Tony laughed at her, but of course, he'd been on cruises from the time he could walk.

As she neared the ship, her legs became heavier, hindering her movement. Dread filled her heart, and she wondered if it was an omen that the trip would be plagued with sickness, or could it possibly be a doomed ship that would sink into the vast ocean. "Something's wrong," she said, exhaling.

Tony placed a hand around her arm to lead her onto the ship. His blue eyes pleaded with her. "Come on. There's nothing to be afraid of."

He pulled harder but Lana planted her feet firmly, refusing to move. "I'm not afraid. It's a feeling, an omen, that something's wrong. Definitely wrong." But as suddenly as the dark cloud had descended upon her, it was gone—a heavy burden lifted from her shoulders. Perhaps the most foreboding was her fear of the large vessel, of being in the middle of the sea without any land in sight. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves, determined she wouldn't go there.

Tony frowned with apparent concern. "Are you okay? Should I cancel the trip?"

She forced a smile. "No. I'm fine now. Besides, it's too late to get your money back. I can do this."

"I don't care about the money. I just want you to feel safe. I've done this many times, although, it's been a while and I can assure you it'll be okay." He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her to him, and she laid her head onto his shoulder.

She snuggled deeper into the curve of his neck and placed a light kiss on his jawbone. "I trust you. I don't know what happened. A deep-seated dread came over me and all of a sudden I couldn't move."

"Where did it come from?" he asked, cradling her head to his chest as she turned in his arms.

"I don't know. But as suddenly as my imagination went wild, it stopped. At first, I thought it was a sign that we shouldn't go, and now I feel an urgency to board like something is beckoning to me, like someone needs my help."

"Will there ever be a trip where someone doesn't need your help?" he asked with irritation but continued to strum her long brown hair.

"Please, Tony, don't be like that. We've been married for over a year. By now you should understand that I have no choice. It's a calling and if there was anyone else to do it, I would step aside and let them have at it."

His frown turned to a smile. "I'm sorry. I know. It's just . . . I don't know. I guess I'm just hardheaded sometimes. I'd hoped this would be one trip taken without any ghost drama. I should've known better."

"You're normally so understanding about my ghost drama," she said, mimicking him. "What's with you today?"

He shook his head as if trying to clear it from an unwanted thought. "I sense something sinister myself. I've never felt this before now. Could your gift be rubbing off on me?" True concern spread across his face.

"It doesn't work that way, but it's possible for a spiritual presence to change another person's mood just by the person being in close proximity to the spirit's negativity." She rubbed his upper arm, causing heat to radiate through her fingertips. "Having a spiritual lightning rod, so to speak, meaning me, standing beside you could land you in the crossfire of electrical charges bouncing across the realm."

"Let's do this if we're going to." He picked up their luggage and placed it on the cart where it could be loaded onto the ship and then taken to their room.

Lana wrapped her arm around his and walked to the gangway that would lead them to the main deck. Dread started to wash over her again, but instead, she whispered, "Not now," and she pushed it away with her mind. She smiled. "Let's go up top and pretend we have loved ones below seeing us off."

Their friends wanted to come to see them off, but she'd told them not to. She hadn't wanted to disrupt their lives since, due to recent Homeland Security concerns, it could take a long while to get through security to board.

His smile spread wider as he took her hand and traipsed along beside her. They climbed a narrow staircase. Once on top, they waved to the crowd below, letting themselves go. They laughed at their pretense.

Lana yelled over the side to the people, "Bye! See you in a few days."

Tony followed suit. "We'll miss you!" he said, chuckling loudly.

"Feels good to just let go and relax a bit, doesn't it?"

"It does. I don't know how I lucked up and found Gina to take care of the business so I could take this time off. She's a godsend."

"Should I be jealous?" Lana cocked her head to the side.

He gave her that look that said she was being silly. "Gina's almost young enough to be my daughter."

His words weren't meant to harm her, but they did just the same. She felt her eyes well up but pushed her emotions aside. They'd been trying to get her pregnant for a few months now with no luck, and she hoped this trip would relax her enough to make it happen.

## Chapter Two

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Lana's doctor had asked her if she wanted to try more extreme measures, but she'd opted out. If it didn't happen naturally, she could be happy with just the two of them. Tony would be all she needed, although a child would complete their little family.

Tony stopped waving, turned to her, and took her hand. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head, afraid words might cause too many emotions, and she would begin to cry. Smiling momentarily, she squeezed his hand, turned back to the crowd, and waved once more, committed not to let negative thoughts ruin their trip.

The horn blew, signaling their time to go. Soon the vessel began to move slightly away from the dock. They hurried into the elevator to search for their cabin. They were on the sixth floor above the main deck.

Christmas had passed a week ago; nevertheless, they saw through the glass door the green garland with red and gold spheres spread over each floor's railing. Dark red bows were positioned every foot or so, while gold and red orbs decorated an eight-foot artificial tree standing on the main deck.

They found their room, number 2120. After Tony opened the door to their cabin, Lana's breath caught in her throat. The room's color was mostly dark beige with burgundy-colored trim. It wasn't the largest cabin, but still huge. Yellow roses and wildflowers, her favorites – six arrangements set along the tables around the room. The bed had a light shade of beige sheets with a burgundy comforter.

"It's gorgeous, Tony." She placed her fingertips to her lips as she turned in a slow circle, absorbing it all into memory.

Tony moved beyond the living room area to the double-glass doors. "Look at the balcony's deck," he said as he opened the room to the cool breeze.

The deck was almost as large as the living space. Four lounge chairs lined up along the side facing the sea. A table with four chairs stood in the corner. Lana could see herself spending much time on the deck, reading her favorite books. She'd brought a paranormal romance, *Shadows in the Mist* by Maureen McMahon, and a romantic comedy written by an up-and-coming author, Elaine Hopper, that she'd not read before. Besides those two, she also had a mystery novel, *Since All Is Passing* by Elizabeth Delisi. Lana had read this book multiple times but never tired of it.

\* \* \*

They unpacked before going in search of a mid-morning snack.

"What do you want to wear this evening for dinner?" Lana held a navy, long sleeve polo shirt in one hand and a dress shirt and tie in the other.

"The polo shirt and khaki pants tonight, I think." He grabbed their toiletry bag and headed to the bathroom.



Lana hung his dining clothes on a hook outside the vast closet and hung the rest of his garments inside. She pulled a small package from her suitcase and hid it deep inside the closet. They weren't supposed to buy gifts, but she'd picked up a nice tie clip for Tony, anyway. It was a surprise, and she didn't want him to know about it until after they set sail. The trip itself was their holiday present to each other. However, she wanted to buy him something with her own money since he'd paid for their cruise. Giving it to him a week after Christmas would be even more of a surprise. He'd never suspected it.

A chill filled the air in the room and Lana shivered. There was a presence here, but she or he hadn't elected to show itself yet.

"What do you want to do first?" Tony talked around the toothbrush hanging out his mouth as he walked into the main living quarters, then back into the bathroom, not waiting for her to answer.

Lana heard him turn on the water. "After we get a snack, I thought we could explore the ship for a bit. You can show me around, tell me what's what and that sort of thing." She knew that would give his ego a boost. He loved showing off for her. "Once we're closer to the Bahamas, we can check out the pool. It's still a bit chilly of the South Carolina coast."

"You did bring your swimsuit?" he asked, raising his voice from the other room.

"You betcha sweet . . ." Lana began, yelling back.

"Lana Ann Malloy Calabria!"

Startled, she jumped, then looked around at the unexpected sound that was too close to be Tony, then smiled. "Crap!"

Her aunt always called her by her full name when she was in trouble. It sounded funny hearing her add Tony's last name to her full name.

Tony ran into the room. "What! What's wrong?"

## Chapter Three

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"Nothing. Lovely Lucy is here."

"Love you, Lucy," he said to the elderly ghost he couldn't see.

"She says she loves you back, but she urgently needs to discuss something with me and doesn't have much time. She apologizes for the intrusion, though."

"That's nice of her. I'll just finish washing up." Tony left them to their privacy.

"Well, it's so nice to see you, sugar, but like I said, my business is urgent, and I have to get back before I'm missed."

"Snuck out again, did you?" Lana laughed.

"Hold your tongue, Missy," she said, fading away, then becoming brighter. "I swear. These earthbound ghosts bug me more now than they did when I was alive." She shook her translucent head. "Have you been contacted?"

Lana's great aunt Lucy also had psychic abilities during her life, but hers hadn't been as pronounced as Lana's.

"Not yet, but I've felt something. A couple of somethings. One was sinister and the other fearful."

"Well, honey, I hate to tell you, but there are more than two spirits on this ship. More than I've ever found in one place during my experience." Lucy floated around the room in a nervous, shimmering spray of light. "Some are out for revenge, and some are scared of whoever killed them?"

"Whoever? They don't know who killed them?"

"No. I want you to watch your back. There's a serial rapist and killer on this ship. He attacks from behind, covering the head of his victims with a pillowcase and they never see who he is. At least that's the impression I got from the ones I've heard from."

Lana plopped on the bed. "Well, that narrows it down to a man," she said sarcastically. "How do you know he's still here?"

Lucy stopped in midair. "Since there are so many ghosts of the women he's killed in this one place, he would have to work on staff, wouldn't he?"

"Probably, but not necessarily. He could be a guest who takes lots of cruises, and that would be pretty easy to check out if I can get my hands on the passenger list." She pulled her hair back, then up from her neck and into a ponytail, using a silk scrunchie to hold it in place.

"I see what you mean. Well, good luck. I gotta go."

Lana wrapped her arms around Lucy's transparent form, and they pretended to hug and kiss one another. "Love you, Auntie. Give Mom, Dad, and Davide mine and Tony's love."

"Will do, my girl! Keep those eyes and ears open and don't get into trouble investigating this guy. I know you feel obligated to help these ghosts, but it's not worth your own well-being."

"You sound just like Tony."

"Then you got yourself a smart man there, Missy," she said, as she faded away.

Lucy seemed nervous about this one. This could be the most dangerous case Lana had been involved in, and besides Tony, she would be flying solo. At least he would be the only other heart-pumping human with her on the case. Perhaps she could get some help from her best friend, Demi, if she could get a call out to her from time to time. She wasn't sure how calls worked on a ship, but Tony would know.

## Chapter Four

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Lana and Tony stopped by the buffet for a snack of cake and coffee before exploring the ship. They ate outside where tables and chairs were spread out along a section of the promenade. A few sightseers walked around, and a few other passengers had the same idea as she and Tony had had. A couple with small children, a boy and girl of about five and two respectively, sat at the next table. The five-year-old boy fussed over his food and refused to eat while the two-year-old girl ate pieces of her food with her fingers, chasing it around the plate before plopping one piece at a time into her mouth.

Lana felt a tug at her heart and her throat tightened. She couldn't eat another bite. She turned her head away from Tony, pretending to observe the others walking around, hoping he couldn't see the tears forming in her eyes. She closed them tightly and willed herself not to cry. She felt Tony's touch on her arm, and she turned to face him.

He smiled, his blue eyes sparkling. "Ready to take that tour?" His dark hair tousled in the sudden strong breeze as he stood.

Lana and Tony walked along the walkway and gazed out over the vast sea before them, no land in sight. The ship split the water that rushed against and around the side of it. The wind became stronger, and Lana's hair whipped around her eyes.

"So, what did Lucy want?" Tony asked, pulling her hair away from her face.

"Can't you guess?"

He cleared his throat. "A ghost?"

"No."

"No?" he asked, his tone indicating his happiness at the prospect of no ghosts.

"I'm sorry, I meant not *a ghost* but . . ."

He ran a hand through his hair and said, "As in more than one. How many?"

"Not sure yet. None have contacted me, but I've felt two different attitudes."

"So, two?"

"Not according to Lucy." She exhaled.

"What are you not saying?"

"She said many. More in one place this size than she's ever seen in her experience."

"That's not a number, Lana." He turned away sulking.

She turned him around and cupped his elbows. "I know, but it's all I know, and Lucy didn't really know the exact number."

"How can that be?"

"Ships appear to be great places for people to go missing, either by choice or not, and many times without a trace." Lana normally told him everything, but she didn't want him to worry about her unnecessarily. She would wait to tell him the murderer also raped his victims before killing them.

"So, you're looking for someone who takes a lot of cruises."

"Could be or could be one of the crew, musicians, stewards, fitness instructors, etc. The list goes on and on."

With a hand through his hair again, he closed his eyes and said, "So it could be anyone."

Lana nodded her head and smiled. "Sorry, honey."

Tony pulled her into his arms and smiled back. "I guess we should make the best of our time while it is our time then." He kissed her before she could respond.

With the tour forgotten, they ended up back in their cabin, in what would be their bed for the next seven nights and made love like they may never have another chance.

Afterward, Lana lay in his arms, cuddling his body with her own.

Oh, how she loved this man, her husband, for better or worse. Had he really known what he'd gotten himself into almost two years ago when he proposed, or months later when he bugged her to set the date while she was liberating Ellie and Dan's house from Adam—their angry ghostly inhabitant—or even a little over a year ago on their honeymoon when they trekked through the Tennessee Mountains, searching for an abducted woman and the madman who'd taken her?

She rolled over on top of him, arousing him again, and trailed kisses over his cheek and down the hair line on his belly. He wrapped his arms around her, pulled her the length of him and kissed her full lips. Then he picked her up and carried her to the shower as she tightened her legs around his waist. They continued their love making in the shower.

\* \* \*

As Lana slept, she suddenly woke with a start. She opened her eyes to an apparition standing in front of the mirror.

*The room changed as she raised herself from the bed. Dark paneling covered the walls. A dressing table stood on the other side of the room. Large light bulbs circled around a large mirror.*

*Lana glanced back at the bed. Tony was no longer there, and the bed was made with a flowery spread. There was a port hole where sliding glass doors used to be. It was night. A young blonde woman, who appeared to be about twenty-five, sat in front of the mirror.*

*Another woman with very fair complexion and auburn hair strolled out of the bathroom. "Chelsea, are you about ready?"*

*Chelsea jumped at the interruption. "Lisa, you scared me. I must've been lost in my own thoughts. Yeah. Give me just a minute." Chelsea finished putting on mascara and ran a brush through her hair.*

*The two walked out the door hand-in-hand while Lana followed.*

*At a scarcely lit nightclub, they danced side-by-side with a couple of men. Chelsea pulled away from her dance partner long enough to give Lisa a thumbs up.*

*At the table, Chelsea got up and whispered to her friend. Lisa shook her head, mouthed 'No' and Chelsea walked away.*

*Lana shadowed Chelsea to the ladies' room. She didn't know why but Chelsea seemed to be the owner of this vision.*

*As Lana walked back toward the lounge behind Chelsea, she somehow became her. Someone grabbed her from behind, put a hand over her mouth and dragged her down a long corridor. She tried to scream but the hand over her mouth muffled the sound. She kicked and tried to bite the*

*hand that kept her from calling out. But he had all the control, and she couldn't fight him. She could tell this wasn't his first time.*

*The man slammed her face-first against the passageway wall. A strong aftershave choked her as he leaned into her back and rubbed himself against her. He hauled her skirt upward. She kicked and stomped behind her, eventually connecting with a shin. The man let out a yelp. Then he slammed her head into the wall over and over until she almost passed out.*

*And from what happened next, she wished she had. He tore her silk panties from her body. They cut through her tender flesh before breaking free. He entered her from behind, holding her now blood-soaked head against the hard wall. The pain throbbed through her as she finally lost consciousness.*

*The next thing she remembered, she was lying on the floor with some type of cloth over her head. Warm, sticky liquid ran down the side of her face. Something different was being pulled over head. She tried to focus but her eye was swelled shut. It was plastic, a plastic bag. As she gulped for air, she kicked her feet and punched at his chest. She scratched her long fingernails along a bare, hairy arm.*

Lana awakened, gasping for air. Her fingers wrapped around her throat as she tried to remove something that had been there.

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# LANA MALLOY PARANORMAL MYSTERY SERIES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

--

Kim Cox, writes fun, action-packed cozy paranormal mystery novellas, and spine-tingling romantic suspense novels with fast-paced suspense and tender, yet passionate love stories. Her characters are fresh, humorous, and gutsy.

She's best known for her Lana Malloy Paranormal Mystery series. Lana helps the haunted as well as the ghosts haunting them--an investigator for the unusual.

Kim lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains with her Chainsaw Artist husband and their fur babies. She has two sons and two grandsons. All boys . . . ahem, men.

### **Visit her at the following sites:**

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