

‘I’LL ALWAYS MISS MY SISTER’

Ultimate
EDITOR’S CHOICE
Meredith Kercher’s sister Stephanie

Five years ago, Meredith Kercher was murdered in Italy. Here, in her first interview, her sister Stephanie, 29, reveals how she’s supported her family and fought to keep Meredith’s memory alive

“I want to tell you about my little sister, Meredith – or Mez, as everyone knew her. She was beautiful, loving, funny and one of the bravest people I’ve ever met. Mez was the kind of girl who’d do anything to put people at ease; who could make friends faster than anyone I know, and who always had something interesting to say.

“And I’m also sure that she was the kind of girl who could have made her mark on the world. She was fiercely intelligent and knew everything about politics. She wanted to work in a foreign embassy, or maybe as a writer. But instead, five years ago, she made headlines worldwide in a way none of us could have imagined.

“One evening in November 2007, Mum rang, sounding worried, to tell me a British student had been killed in Perugia, which is where Meredith was studying. After a moment of panic, I scanned a news website – and was relieved to see the victim was 22 years old.

“Meredith’s 21, it can’t be her, I reassured Mum. Just a day or so earlier, she’d sent a chatty text to tell me about a Halloween party she’d been invited to. How could it be her? But just to be sure, I copied the link and emailed it to Mez, before trying to call her.

“When she didn’t answer, I sent her a text: ‘Be careful, and give me or Mum a call, because

everyone’s worried. Love you.’ Then, I carried on with my evening, not realising that Meredith would never read my message – or that our lives would never be the same again...

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“Mez was one of those girls whose enthusiasm was infectious. She was so excited when she found out that she’d be spending the third year of her European politics and Italian degree studying in Italy, and during our last summer together in 2007, we spent hours in the library, poring over guidebooks and discussing all the things she wanted to see and do.

“She was nearly three years younger than me, but far bolder than I could ever be. I’d have struggled to leave our close-knit family – Dad, who’d lived nearby since his divorce from Mum, and our brothers Lyle and John – to live abroad. But Mez was fearless and determined, and I was so proud of her.

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“Then, when I left to go on holiday with friends the next day, she burst into tears, which set me off, too. ‘I’ll see you soon,’ I told her, laughing. When I got back from holiday, Mez had left for Italy, and three weeks later I moved out too.

“We kept in touch regularly by email and phone. So when, just a few hours after I’d asked Mez to contact us, Dad called with the terrible news that the girl who’d been found dead in Perugia was my sister, it seemed impossible.

“Feeling sick, and shaking all over, I knew I couldn’t drive. So while I cried in the passenger seat, a friend gave me a lift home to Surrey, where Mum, Dad, John and Lyle had gathered. Still not quite believing it, all I could do when I arrived was collapse in tears in my parents’ arms.

“That evening we sat staring at the news, desperate for any information. When Mez’s picture appeared on the TV screen I thought at first it wasn’t her. But maybe I just didn’t want to believe it. She was in a Halloween outfit, with straight dark hair and red lipstick – taken at the party she’d been so excited about.

“My sister had been found in her bedroom, sexually assaulted and with 47 different wounds, including stab wounds to her throat. I couldn’t stop thinking about what she must have been through.

“It was three agonising days before Mum, Dad and I could travel to Italy to identify Meredith’s body. I held on to a glimmer of hope that a mistake had been made and that it wasn’t her.

“But, above a crisp white sheet, it was Meredith’s face I had to kiss goodbye. She seemed so peaceful – except for a look of determination that told us how hard she’d fought to stay alive. Somehow I managed to draw some small comfort from the fact that she’d been my brave little sister to the end.

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“Later, Rudy Guede, an immigrant from the Ivory Coast, was also arrested. His DNA and a bloody handprint were found at the scene, and he’d fled to Germany before being caught by the police. But while we waited for his trial, we had to find a way to carry on without Meredith.

“After her body was flown home, we held the funeral in Croydon. More than 500 people – friends, relatives and even strangers – listened as, through my tears, I read out a poem I’d written, called *Don’t Say Goodbye*: ‘Close your eyes, I’m with you still, I haven’t left you, I never will’. Memories of little things, like Mez and I dancing round our bedroom

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between Portsmouth and Croydon to help prop them up. I tried never to cry in front of them – if I was having a bad day, I didn’t want to set them off too.

“Because I know some Italian, I was also able to help them liaise with our representatives out there. Together, we prepared a victim impact statement to be read out in court, and a press statement in both Italian and English, explaining how deeply Meredith’s death had affected us.

“Staying strong in the glare of the media, when Meredith’s sparkling brown eyes were appearing on the front page of every newspaper, was near impossible. In Italy especially, the press were always there, rushing us each time we left court. But nothing could have stopped me from being there.

“Mez was such a thoughtful person – she’d do anything for anyone. After she died, her university friends commented that she was always happy to help with their coursework, or even cook for them. And I knew that in my position she would have done all she could to see justice done too.

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Ultimate Women Awards

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“In a way, it was a relief that at least one piece of the puzzle had been slotted into place. But the prosecution felt that marks on her body showed that Meredith had been killed by more than one person, so Amanda and Raffaele were also due to stand trial. Each stage of the case meant a few exhausting days for us in court, and there was a long way to go.

“In December 2009, Knox and Sollecito were eventually convicted on charges of sexual assault and murder, and sentenced to 26 and 25 years respectively. By then, I’d moved back to Croydon to be with Mum, and was with her and Dad in Italy as the verdicts were read out in court.

“Even then, we knew it wasn’t over – but we were still crushed when, in October 2011, Knox and Sollecito’s convictions were overturned. We didn’t want innocent people to be jailed but it felt like we were back at square one, facing a future desperately looking for answers that might never come.

“As is often the case with the Italian legal system, there will be a third appeal

against the overturned convictions, which will take place later this year or early in 2013, and might lead to a retrial. But ultimately, only the person or people who were there that terrible evening will ever know the whole truth. And whatever happens, nothing will bring back my little sister.

“It’s been an agonising five years. But the hardest thing to deal with has been how Mez’s vivacious, funny, smart, loving personality has been eclipsed by how she died and the fight for justice. That’s why I decided to tell *Cosmo* my story – and why I asked them not to print any photos other than the ones you see here.

“When I met my boyfriend Stuart, 32, in 2010, he already knew my story. So I told him all about Mez – who’d have loved his sarcastic sense of humour – and now he feels almost like he knew her. But I have to accept that she’ll never know my future husband, or the children I might have, and they’ll never know her. That hurts.

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“That’s also why I’ve decided to set up The Meredith Kercher Fund, in the hope of creating something positive out of this tragedy, and letting her personality shine through. “So far, our family haven’t received any financial aid, which has been tough – but we know people want to offer their support. They’ll even leave letters at the cemetery where Mez is buried, saying, ‘We don’t know you, but would love to help.’ The fund will be somewhere people can donate money to contribute to our expenses as we continue to fight. But when we’re done, I want it to help other people faced with the horror of a court battle in a different country, and the fight for justice for a loved one.

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“However much time passes, I’ll always miss my sister. Winning an Ultimate Women Award is a real honour, as it’s given me an opportunity to bring my sister to life on the fifth anniversary of her death. The thing I miss most about Mez is her laughter, but I can imagine her looking down at me now, smiling and giggling. I think she’d be as proud of me as I am of her – as well as finding it hilarious.

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EXCLUSIVE



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Meredith and her dad during their last Christmas together in 2006



The girls took their mum on the London Eye for her 60th birthday

BY ROSIE MULLENDER; MAIN PHOTOGRAPH THOMAS WATTS; HAIR AND MAKEUP VICTORIA BARNES; USING YSL; STYLING JARED GREEN