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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Amanda Knox: the first in-depth interview with her parents

While Amanda Knox is locked away in an Italian prison accused of murder, her parents are living in a state of limbo, powerless to help her. Here they give their first in-depth interview about their daughter — and the rapidly unravelling case against her

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[Watch footage of an interview with Amanda Knox's parents](#)

At 4am on November 2 last year, on a cold dark morning in the American city of Seattle, Edda Mellas was woken by a phone call from her daughter Amanda Knox, calling from Perugia in Italy where she was studying Italian and creative writing. "Mom, I'm home and I'm okay," Knox told her. Her mother said: "Okay, what's going on?" Knox replied: "Well, something strange is going on."

"Something strange" turned out to be the murder of Knox's housemate Meredith Kercher, 21, a student from Coulsdon, Greater London, who was on an exchange as part of a European studies course. Italian investigators allege that the killer or killers forced Meredith to her knees to make her take part in a sex game and, when she refused, stabbed her in the throat three times. The blue-eyed Knox, together

with her former Italian boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito, 23, and Rudy Hermann Guede, 20, from the Ivory Coast, are in prison on suspicion of sexually abusing and murdering Kercher, but have yet to be charged.

In their first interview with non-American media, Knox's parents and her younger sister, Deanna, who live in Seattle, have agreed to talk in detail about the investigation; they have finally persuaded Knox's Italian lawyers that it is in her best interest to say what they think of the probe. None of the family have been questioned by Italian detectives. After a flurry of headlines and articles such as *Hidden Dangers Lurk in Quest for Extreme Sex High and Foxy Knoxy's Wild Sex after Murder*, implying that Knox was sex-mad, they are friendly, but understandably wary.

Edda Mellas, 45, her ex-husband, Curt Knox, 47 - both remarried - and Deanna, 19, sit close together around the end of a long table in the office of their publicist in downtown Seattle. The parents divorced in 1989 when Amanda was two, and both have children from their second marriages. Edda, a maths teacher, has cut short a training workshop to be here. Curt has taken the afternoon off - he is a vice-president at Macy's department store - and Deanna, a biology student and an amateur photographer, has interrupted her exam revision. She and her family are determined that her sister's fate won't affect Deanna's studies; she has been able to travel to

Perugia and see Knox only a couple of times.

The diminutive Edda is braced for an emotionally tough ride, a box of Kleenex at her side. Curt, who speaks in a slow, measured tone, sits ramrod-straight, sipping Coca-Cola. Deanna, blonde, attractive and bubbly, nibbles at chocolates for comfort. The family has built up a small but determined team from scratch; they have hired the Seattle PR veteran David Marriott, a former TV journalist, two Italian lawyers and two forensic experts. They can count on the moral support of Knox's university friends. But they have no powerful contacts and are considering appealing to their congressman for help.

When Knox, 20, was jailed in Perugia after Meredith's murder, a senior police officer proclaimed: "Case closed." Knox had "confessed" to being in the cottage when Meredith died, investigators said, and forensic evidence marked her out as guilty. Rejecting last month a demand that Knox be moved from jail because of the weakness of the case against her to a shelter run by the Catholic charity Caritas, Judge Claudia Matteini, in charge of preliminary investigations, wrote that Meredith was "subjected to several violent acts characterised by extreme cruelty in a hideous crescendo, surely a sign of personalities who were perverse and without any inhibitions".

The judge added: "There was first an act of suffocation, probably to stop her shouting, then of strangulation, given the marks of ruptured blood vessels found on her neck, then repeated cuts with a sharp weapon also in the neck area, one of which brought about her death." The judge wrote there was "serious evidence" against Knox and expressed her "dismay and apprehension" at her cold, detached manner following the murder; the judge was struck by a woman so young "finding it so easy to govern her state of mind".

But today, part of the investigation is unravelling. The same judge threw out Knox's "confession" in April, doubts have been raised about the alleged "murder weapon" and DNA traces linked to the suspects, and the prosecutor leading the case is accused of wrongdoing in a separate probe. There is still no precise explanation of why, how, at what time or by whom Meredith was murdered.

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Despite her parents' middle-class jobs, Amanda Knox grew up in a working-class area of Seattle. Asked how the divorce affected Knox, Curt says he moved only five blocks away and Deanna adds: "We walked backwards and forwards. Our neighbourhood was awesome. I wouldn't change my childhood for anything." The family recalls Knox as violent only on one occasion, when a boy was picking on Deanna at school. Knox, 7, gave him a bloody nose and was punished for it. "My sister can't kill a spider. When I'd find a spider in my room I'd tell her 'Kill it,' but she would get a glass and take it outside," Deanna says.

At the Jesuit-run, £5,900-a-year Seattle Preparatory School, Knox got top marks, acted in plays, sang in the choir and won an award for being an "extraordinary student" at 13. Curt says: "Amanda loves to find out new things, to have new experiences and to get to know people." Deanna adds: "She likes things that are new and exciting - the bigger it is, the more fun she has."

The way her family describe her, Knox sounds more a tomboy than a man-eater. She hated make-up and was keen on rock-climbing and soccer, among other sports. Her nickname "Foxy Knoxy" comes not from romantic conquests but from the soccer pitch - "She got that nickname when she was 11 because she was intense. She was a defender; she'd crouch and come out of nowhere to stop people," Deanna says.

Deanna snorts with laughter when asked about media reports that her sister is "a man-eater". She says: "That's ridiculous. Amanda didn't have her first boyfriend until university, when she was 19. She's kind of a late bloomer. We talked about guys because I had a serious boyfriend way before she had one. I'd feed her advice." The family says they know of only two boyfriends before Knox left for Italy; her American friends have refused to talk about her private life, but they too have denied she is "a man-eater".

At Washington University, where she studied Italian, German and creative writing, Knox was again the model student, achieving top marks. In December 2006 she posted a story on MySpace in which a young woman drugs and rapes another woman. It reads in part: "She fell on the floor, she felt the blood on her mouth and swallowed it. She couldn't move her jaw and felt as if someone was moving a razor on the left side of her face." Her family claims to have spoken to the teacher who made her write this as a course assignment. She was told to write everything that happens right up to a crime. Curt says: "Amanda was graded down because the story she wrote wasn't dark enough. It wasn't what the teacher wanted." University authorities have banned staff from talking publicly about Knox.

Knox decided to spend a few months studying in Italy. This got Edda worried because she saw her daughter as too trusting, seeing good in everyone. "I hoped she would learn a bit of fear before she left. I didn't want her to go through life afraid, but I wanted her to have a little fear as far as self-preservation goes," Edda says.

Edda and Curt took Knox out to dinner. Curt told her: "How are we going to be able to help you if something happens? What happens if you get sick? We're not a short distance away." Edda told her: "Try to be wary, to pay attention to what's going on around you. Don't trust everyone you meet." Knox answered breezily: "Okay, Mom, I will. I will be fine." The parents told her to be careful about Italian men, but didn't worry too much. They thought Edda's relatives - her mother is German and she has family in Germany, Switzerland and Austria - could step in if needed.

Knox travelled to Perugia in August last year, accompanied by Deanna. They visited relatives on the way. At a museum in Graz, Austria, Deanna photographed Knox as she pretended to fire a machinegun. The picture has been widely published as evidence of Knox's supposedly warped nature. "We were just goofing around," Deanna says. I ask her about the caption on the picture, which reads "The Nazi". Deanna replies cheerfully: "Oh yeah, she wrote that. We're of German descent - we were just goofing off."

Deanna makes short shrift of what the family sees as one of many slurs on Knox, an e-mail she sent to a friend in which she said she had sex with an Italian on a train during that journey. "That is so untrue. I was everywhere with her. It's true we met a guy called Federico and we had dinner with him. But nothing happened. I think Amanda was just making fun of Italian men. They stare at you a lot more than men do here. "

It was Deanna who found her sister the whitewashed cottage where Meredith was to settle two months later. "I was waiting for Amanda outside the university, and I saw a girl putting up a poster about an appartamento. I went up to her, then ran to get Amanda." The cottage, a short walk away and with a stunning view over the hills, bowled Knox over. "She was in love with the cottage. Her first words were 'Oh, my gosh!' She loved the view and having wilderness around her," Deanna says. After a few days the girls flew home, with Knox impatient to return to Italy.

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Knox started her course in Perugia in October, one of 40,000 Italian and foreign students drawn

to the picturesque city. She started a relationship with Sollecito, a urologist's son and engineering student. Knox told her mother: "Raffaele looks like Harry Potter. He's a nice quiet guy, really smart." "Amanda was infatuated with Raffaele, but I don't think you fall in love in just a week," Edda says. Knox told her family nothing about Sollecito's hobby, which he had had since he was 13, of collecting knives and unsharpened swords.

Knox couldn't have been happier. "I'm having the time of my life. I love my housemates, I love school and I love the job I'm doing," she told Edda. She said she had a new housemate: "Her name is Meredith. She's from England. She's really nice and I really like her," Knox told her sister. She went to Perugia's chocolate festival with Meredith in late October. "Meredith is fun. We had a great time," Knox e-mailed. She also described Meredith as "beautiful, nice and fun and caring".

Meredith, a European-studies student at Leeds University, was not as taken by Knox. Meredith's father, John, testified that she told him: "Amanda arrived only a week ago and she already has a boyfriend." The remark strikes Knox's family as odd. "I don't understand that. Amanda didn't date anyone before Raffaele," Edda says. Apparently, in this case at least, Knox had chosen not to tell her family everything: Daniel de Luna, a Rome student, has testified he slept with Knox at her home on October 20.

Knox began working in a bar called Le Chic two evenings a week. Edda told her to call her on those evenings when she got home. "I've always worried about my girls walking around at night," Edda says. Knox reassured her, saying students sat out on the steps of the cathedral late and the town was safe. Deanna says her sister often made social blunders, such as stretching herself in a restaurant because she was full, or failing to realise a man was flirting with her. "Amanda's book-smart, but not street-smart," Deanna says.

When Knox first called Edda to say "something strange is going on", she said she had spent the night at Sollecito's flat, where they watched a film. She went home in the morning to have a shower, but found the front door open. She thought someone may have gone out into the garden. The door to Meredith's bedroom was closed and Knox assumed she was sleeping. It was only when she stepped out of the shower that she noticed a few spots of blood by the sink.

Perhaps someone had cut themselves or one of the girls had her period. What really struck her as odd was finding the lavatory unflushed; the girls always flushed it. She said she went to Sollecito's flat, they had breakfast, then she took him to the cottage. Knox managed to call two of her three housemates: "I can't get hold of Meredith. Meredith's door is locked. We tried to pound on the door to wake her and she's not answering." Edda told her to call the police. There was no panic in Knox's voice, just worry. (Later, Edda asked Knox how she had felt then. "My mind didn't jump to murder: it's not something that comes into my life experience," she replied.)

Edda was sitting up in bed wide awake when Knox called less than an hour later. She heard shouting in the background as Knox burst out: "Oh my God, they're screaming about a foot near the cupboard, the cops are screaming. I'm outside the house. I don't know what's going on. I gotta go." She called back moments later - Edda says this time Knox was extremely agitated. She said: "It's not a foot, there's a body. They've found a body near the cupboard or in the cupboard, I can't make out which." Edda asked: "Who is it?" Knox replied: "I don't know, I haven't seen but no one can get hold of Meredith. It's Meredith's room. I gotta go, the police want to talk to me."

Meredith's family have spoken about their loss in public only once. Her sister, Stephanie, said she "was one of the most beautiful, intelligent, witty and caring people you could wish to meet".

Over the next couple of days Edda and Knox spoke many times. I try to press the family on Knox's

emotionless manner after the murder. Edda says she was more in shock than in tears, and she didn't like to ask her about Meredith's death so as not to upset her. "I asked her if she was okay. The fact that she seemed okay, that she was concentrating on helping the police, made me feel better." Knox told her mother: "I need to answer the questions to try to help the police figure out what happened. I can't believe someone would do this. They gotta find who did this." Edda said: "I'm so proud of you for trying to do something."

When police searched the cottage, Knox was filmed kissing Sollecito briefly three times while they stood outside. Deanna says: "That was for comfort. They're rubbing each other's backs for comfort. They're not french-kissing!" Nor does the family give any importance to another film, of the pair buying thongs for Knox. The shop's owner has said he heard Sollecito tell her: "You can put these on at home and we'll have wild sex." Edda says: "The cottage was sealed off. [Knox] needed underwear. I don't believe Raffaele said that, but when people are going through a rough time they find ways of making themselves laugh."

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On November 6, five days after Meredith's murder, Knox was interrogated by police for nine hours until she signed a statement at 5.54am. Her family says that despite her good marks at university, Knox was not fluent in Italian, but no professional interpreter was present, only a police officer who could speak English and who was not always there. She was given no food and no water for all the nine hours. "I've never been so scared in my life," Knox told Deanna later. Curt says: "Amanda was abused physically and verbally. She told us she was hit in the back of the head by a police officer with an open hand, at least twice. The police told her, 'If you ask for a lawyer, things will get worse for you' and 'If you don't give us some explanation for what happened, you're going to go to jail for a very long time.'" Edda adds tearfully: "She was told she wouldn't ever see her family again, and her family is everything to her." Knox gave them a description of the officer who allegedly struck her, but it cannot be published for legal reasons. The Perugia police have denied striking her and have said she understood what she was signing.

Only a small part of Knox's taped statement has been leaked to the media; the full transcript hasn't surfaced, but according to Curt, the police asked Knox to "visualise what could have happened". The family says it was the police who brought up the name of Patrick Diya Lumumba, the Congolese owner of the bar where she worked. She first told police: "I recall in a confused way that he killed her." Later she said: "I think I was in the kitchen. At a certain point I heard Meredith's screams and I was afraid and I covered my ears." She then wrote a four-page account going back on her previous statement, saying she was at Sollecito's house on the afternoon and night of the murder. Knox wrote she was "very confused" about those hours, that she was high on cannabis at Sollecito's house. She wrote: "I didn't kill Meredith. That's all I know for sure."

The family look genuinely embarrassed when I ask them about Knox claiming she was so high on cannabis that she couldn't recall precisely what happened. "She wasn't a regular smoker of pot. A pothead is someone who smokes every weekend; Amanda tried it maybe twice the whole time she was in Seattle," Deanna says. Her parents look as if they are hearing this for the first time. Doesn't it show Knox became "wilder" in Perugia, I ask? "She likes to try everything," Deanna replies.

Two months ago, the "confession" that Knox was in the kitchen of the cottage was thrown out by Italy's supreme court on the grounds she had no lawyer present - the first "win" achieved by the family since Knox's arrest. It is not the only hole in the investigation. Lumumba was first arrested, jailed for two weeks, then cleared in May of any suspicion. CCTV footage that investigators initially said showed Knox walking to the cottage at 8.40pm before Kercher arrived home on the night of the murder, has been dismissed; a judge ruled the quality of the footage was too poor to

be of use. The time of the murder is still uncertain, estimated by a forensic pathologist to have been "no more than two to three hours after the victim's last meal". The time of the meal is unknown, but Kercher left a friend's house to return to the cottage at about 9pm.

Now Knox's family challenges the way the investigation has been conducted, its findings and even the prosecutor leading it. The way the crime scene has been handled is "shoddy", Curt says. Two police videos dated November 3 and December 18, broadcast in April in the Channel 4 Cutting Edge documentary *Sex, Lies and the Murder of Meredith*, show the clasp of Meredith's bloodied bra, on which Sollecito's DNA was found, was moved about 4ft. "[Meredith's] mattress wasn't in the bedroom; it was in the living room on top of a couch and flipped upside down, and Meredith's clothes were piled up, so there could be cross-contamination. It's unbelievable. The whole room had been turned upside down," Curt says.

Investigators say DNA traces of Meredith and Knox were found on an 8in kitchen knife seized from Sollecito's home that they describe as compatible with that used for the murder - Knox's trace was near the handle and Meredith's closer to the tip. Details of how precise a match this was have not been released. But the forensic expert Carlo Torre, a respected professor who has done 6,000 postmortems and who has been appointed by Knox's family as part of the defence team, has had access to reports on the autopsy and on the knife's DNA traces by court-appointed experts. Curt says: "Amanda cooks, so there's nothing surprising about her trace on the handle. But the expert told us the trace of Meredith was on the side of the knife, not the blade, and it had a very small chance of belonging to Meredith - he said it could belong to half the population of Italy!"

In a resigned tone, Curt says: "The only choice we have is to believe in the Italian legal system." But he quickly adds that he doesn't trust the police or the prosecutor, Giuliano Mignini: "The approach has been to play the case out in the media rather than providing physical evidence. That blows me away. If this happened in the USA she would have been out months ago."

Edda adds: "It gets scary when you have the prosecutor accused of wrongdoing in another case." Mignini is to stand trial in November on charges of illegally bugging the phones of police officers and journalists, and obstructing an investigation by another prosecutor in Genoa. Mignini has said: "I would do again precisely everything I did and I'm sure the truth will emerge in the trial." A source close to the investigation says he is currently preparing to request Knox, Sollecito and Guede stand trial. Curt adds: "The prosecutor's reputation is at stake. You don't make an international incident in the way this was done, the wild-sex-orgy drugs scenario and then say, 'Oops, I kept your daughter in jail for six months.' I don't like it when people's reputations are at stake and it's them or a 20-year-old kid."

The family are reluctant to say how they think Meredith died. They believe the evidence points to Guede, the only suspect who consistently admits to being in the cottage when Meredith was murdered. But, as Edda points out, "I don't know Meredith or Rudy and I'm not going to speculate on rumours, because people are doing that about my daughter." Guede, in an account ridiculed by investigators, has testified that Meredith invited him into her bedroom, where they began to have sex but stopped because they didn't have a condom. He says he went to the toilet and when he came back he saw Sollecito rush out after killing Meredith. The latest report by a coroner, in April, found Meredith had been involved in sexual activity before she died but "it was impossible to tell whether it was consensual".

Is there anything Knox has said or done since Meredith's murder that makes her family believe she might be guilty? "Not the slightest smallest thing," Deanna says. "No, never," her parents echo. If she had been at the cottage that night, could Knox's excessively trusting character have

got her involved? "No, she wouldn't have let another human being get hurt," Deanna says.

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At the Capanne prison near Perugia, Knox is allowed two hours' exercise outside her cell a day. She spends her days taking guitar lessons and doing yoga, but mostly studying Italian, French, Chinese, German and Russian. The family says she has lost 15lb, and has developed near-sightedness because of confinement in her cell, and will have to wear glasses for the first time. She exercises her eyes by staring out of the window. What keeps her going, her family says, is that she is innocent. "Because she did nothing wrong, she believes she is going to be released," Edda says.

When they are in Perugia, the family can see her for an hour a week in the jail's cramped visiting room. At least, they say, there is no glass panel separating them from her and they are free to hug each other. Knox rarely speaks about Meredith, but she did say once: "I can't believe that this quiet, studious girl has gone. It's surreal.

I can't believe that someone broke into my house and killed my housemate." Deanna says: "I try not to talk to her about the case. I try to make her laugh more than anything. We joked about the mike we think is in the lamp above us - you can see the wires. I cry afterwards, not in front of her."

Curt says: "There was one time - the worst time I had in there. She cried in my arms for a half-hour out of the hour." He chokes up. Edda says, sobbing: "It is just the hardest thing to walk away and leave her there. It is unbearable."

Curt continues: "It was in January. She literally broke down. She couldn't understand why she was there when she hadn't done anything." Deanna says: "Amanda cringes when the door opens when the visit is over because she doesn't want to leave us. I was there with my mom. We were holding her hands. She held on tight. It's like she never wants to let go."

The family hesitate when I ask whether they have anything they would like to say to Meredith's family. Edda is the first to break the silence: "We're in a sticky situation because of what people have written about Amanda.

We'd like to reach out, but what will they think if we say to them, 'Your daughter was my daughter's housemate and we can only imagine your pain'? I can't imagine what they are having to live through. It's horrific, and every time rubbish comes out about the alcohol level in Meredith's blood or her sexual activity, my first thought is, 'My God, that poor family has to hear this again and again.'"

The family have thought long and hard about whether they could have done anything to save her from her fate. Curt recalls the meeting when he and Edda told Knox they would be too far away to help her themselves if something went wrong. "But we couldn't have said, 'You're not going to go and study abroad and live your life.'"

Edda blames herself for being too naive when a cousin called and asked: "The police are talking to Amanda an awful lot. Are you sure they don't think she's a suspect?" Edda called Knox and said: "Don't you want to come home?" Knox replied: "No, I'm helping and I want to finish school. I want to be here so I can answer questions." Edda says: "That's when I decided to go over there, but I wish I'd told her to come home."

As the interview ends after 3½ hours, I have no doubt the family have been forthcoming and

honest in their portrait of Knox. She remains innocent until proven guilty, and she has been ill-served, to say the least, by media coverage based on leaks from investigators. But it seems more than likely that Knox is hiding something even from her own family, as if she were covering for someone for some unknown reason.

Why has Knox failed to give a precise, consistent account of her actions on the night of Meredith's death? Knox has testified that she was "very confused" about those hours, that she was high on cannabis at Sollecito's house. Such confusion also underscores Sollecito's versions: he first said Amanda was with him all night, then said this was a lie and that Knox had made him lie, only to claim that he had no precise recollection because he was high on cannabis.

The facts are that there is no evidence against Knox other than the DNA on the knife's handle, which doesn't prove she helped murder Kercher; a trace of her blood on the sink in the bathroom, which her family say was due to her ears bleeding after they were pierced; the "confession" that has been thrown out by the judge; and the testimony of Guede, who says she was at the cottage, but his account has been ridiculed by investigators.

All there is is a suspicion that she is hiding something because she has failed to give a convincing account of her actions that evening and night, and because of her cold, detached behaviour in the days that followed. Surely she should have shown more emotion at the loss of a "beautiful, nice and fun and caring" friend?