



'Til death do they part: Greg de Villers and Kristin Rossum on their wedding day.

The Case of the Forensic Femme Fatale

Toxicologist Kristin Rossum is accused of murdering her husband with drugs obtained through her job at the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office—where her boss was also her lover. The TV reporter who broke this love-triangle story shares intimate details of the case here—many for the first time.

By Kevin Cox

IT WAS A MATCH made in Tijuana.

In February 1995, 21-year-old Gregory de Villers was crossing the border with his two brothers to spend the day in Mexico. He was taking a little time off from UCSD and his biology studies.

De Villers was about 6 feet tall and a little on the thin side. He had an easy smile that seemed to spread across his entire face. He was always doing something athletic, like tennis or snowboarding. His brother Bert kidded him about his obsessive personality. And he was about to meet the obsession of his life.

Eighteen-year-old Kristin Rossum was a blonde, hazel-eyed beauty. She was also a mess, according to those who knew her then. She was on the run from school, her family and a methamphetamine habit. Rossum literally bumped into Greg de Villers as they crossed the border.

"They took an instant liking to each other, and that was it," says Craig McClellan, the de Villers family attorney. "She said, 'Hey, mind if I hang out with you guys?'"

They didn't mind, and Rossum spent the day with them in Tijuana. They all came back across the border that night, and Rossum went home with Greg. She never left.

"After they met, they were never separated," McClellan says. "He's the one who got her talking to her parents

again, got her off meth and back in school. I don't think there's any question that he was crazy about her."

De Villers even defended his new love against his own family, according to McClellan, who says de Villers' expensive gold jewelry—given to him by his father—was missing soon after the relationship began. The family suspected Rossum, but Greg wouldn't hear of it. "She could do no wrong as far as he was concerned," McClellan says.

On June 5, 1999, they got married in an outdoor ceremony at Mount Baldy. Home video of the wedding shows the groom looking shy, almost awkward in his morning coat. The bride wore a modest white gown—no décolletage—with her hair braided around her head like a blonde halo.

A string quartet played the obligatory Bach. The guests sat in folding chairs. The courtyard was rustic, except for the strip of white satin for an aisle. It took exactly 25 minutes for Gregory and Kristin to become husband and wife.

For the reception, everybody moved indoors to a converted dinner theater. De Villers toasted his new bride the way all grooms should, and then some: "Kristin is the most wonderful person I've ever met, incredible in so many ways ... so intelligent, kind and caring ... I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with her."

Greg de Villers did spend the rest of his life with



Kristin Rossum's police booking photo.

Kristin Rossum—all 17 months of it. On November 6, 2000, Rossum called 911 from their University City apartment because her husband wasn't breathing. A paramedic, among the first on the scene, reported that de Villers appeared to be "way dead." They attempted to revive him anyway, then took him to Scripps Memorial Hospital. But the paramedic was right. De Villers was way dead.

He was six days away from celebrating his 26th birthday, and young men like him usually don't just stop breathing. Police were at the hospital, and they accompanied Rossum back to the apartment. On the floor, next to the bed where de Villers had been lying, they saw rose petals. It was a scene right out of *American Beauty*.

Police also found a framed photograph of the couple on the bedroom floor, and Rossum's journal on a table in the living room. Several passages described her belief that her marriage to de Villers had been a mistake.

Rossum told police her marriage was indeed coming apart, and de Villers was so upset he was unable to go to work that day. In fact, she said, her husband had taken some of the drugs she'd bought in Mexico to help her kick meth. (She was using again.) They were convenient for him, perhaps, but still a strange choice of sedatives. One of them, Clonazepam, is classified as a "date rape" drug.

An investigator from the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office arrived at the apartment. The medical examiner gets involved in cases like this all the time, when otherwise healthy people die suddenly. It's the M.E.'s job to figure out why.

Yet this was not a routine investigation, because Kristin Rossum worked in the M.E.'s office as a toxicologist. Her boss, Michael Robertson, had already been to the apartment and the hospital. But Robertson had more than a professional interest in Rossum.

He was also her lover.

And the investigator from the medical examiner's office—the one conducting the official investigation—was Rossum's friend and coworker, Angie Wagner. McClellan, the de Villers family attorney, says he discovered this as he investigated the case. (The following account of the events after Greg de Villers' death comes

On the floor, next to the bed where de Villers had been lying, they saw rose petals. It was a scene right out of *American Beauty*.

primarily from McClellan's investigation, which led to the filing of a claim against the county.)

At the hospital, Rossum had admitted to a doctor that she was using meth again, which the doctor noted in his report. But Wagner did not include that information in her report to the medical examiner himself, Dr. Brian Blackbourne.

Wagner also helped Rossum donate her husband's skin, eyes, veins and other body parts for transplantation. The skin and the eyes were especially notable. The skin can show needle marks or other signs of drug use, such as transdermal patches. The vitreous humor in the eyes can indicate what drugs were ingested, and when.

Rossum requested that Blackbourne perform an autopsy on what was left of her husband. There was a problem with that. It is the medical examiner's policy not to conduct autopsies in-house on employees, their relatives or their close friends. Even the people at the morgue, who've seen it all, might get squeamish about that.

But de Villers' body had already traveled from the hospital to the county morgue. And so it had to go out to UCSD, where the autopsy would be performed. There was also concern about specimens from de Villers' autopsy going back to the medical examiner's office, possibly upsetting Rossum. So Greg de Villers—or parts of him, anyway—made another trip, to the San Diego County Sheriff's Crime Lab.

Rossum had plans of her own for the rest of her husband's body. Once the autopsy was finished, she wanted to have him cremated immediately. The medical examiner's office—believing Greg de Villers had committed suicide by overdosing on drugs—was ready to go along. The cops agreed, since there were no signs of foul play.

The de Villers family says it had to get a court order to stop Rossum from cremating her dead husband. The family was going to pay for an independent autopsy, but relented after talking with Blackbourne.

In reassuring the de Villers family, Blackbourne made a crucial decision. To avoid any conflict of interest, he sent de Villers' specimens from the sheriff's crime lab to a private lab. Now, there would be no conflict of interest in determining whether Greg de Villers had any drugs or alcohol in his system.

A few days later, the results came back. Greg de Villers did have Clonazepam, the date-rape drug, in his system. But it was a powerful painkiller called Fentanyl that killed him. Medical literature says Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine. Because of its specialized use to manage chronic pain, Fentanyl is a fairly uncommon drug.

But not if you know where to find it. A police report describes how the medical examiner's office keeps all kinds of drugs. Some are evidence seized at death scenes. At least 15 doses of Fentanyl—contained in skin patches—were missing in a drug evidence audit three weeks after de Villers died.



Kristin Rossum frolicking with a puppy, celebrating Halloween 2000 with Greg de Villers and backpacking in July 2000.

Photographs used with permission of Rossum family for this article only.

According to the cops, there was a log in which toxicologists were supposed to document the drugs they were using in their work. But it was not up-to-date, and the toxicologists weren't using it the right way.

Police say Kristin Rossum was in charge of the log.

(Rossum's parents refused to speak with *San Diego Magazine*. They did answer a series of written questions for MSNBC.com. And they dispute all of the evidence against her. The Rossums say their daughter wasn't in charge of the drug log. They say there was an "honor system" and claim even visitors to the medical examiner's office had access to everything. The Rossums say de Villers had a history of using Fentanyl and had what they describe as his own independent access to it.

(Rossum's parents also say Kristin did not initiate the process of donating her husband's organs—de Villers had signed a donor card, and the hospital approached her. And the Rossums say it was the de Villers family who wanted Greg's body cremated.)

EXACTLY ONE MONTH after Greg de Villers' death, word leaks that Rossum and her boss, Michael Robertson, have been fired from the medical examiner's office. I call the San Diego Police Department. There is a special investigation into de Villers' death. They aren't calling it a homicide, but the homicide detectives are handling it.

It's time to go see Rossum.

She's living on Regents Road in University City. It's a typical Southern California apartment building, complete with red-tile roof. The balconies all face the parking areas, and the front doors face each other on both sides of a long, enclosed hallway.

I can hear my footsteps echo off the hall as I approach her second-story apartment. Outside the door sit several black plastic garbage bags, stuffed full. It looks like someone is really cleaning house.

I knock. Rossum answers.

She is wearing a bronze-color pullover and blue jeans. Her blonde hair is cut short, pushed back behind her ears. She is really cute, and she is really trembling. She looks like she's been crying all day and could start again any time.

"Kristin Rossum?"

She nods and manages a soft, breathy reply. "Yes."

"I'm Kevin Cox from News 8. I'm sorry about the loss of your husband."

This is when the door usually comes flying at me. But she just leans against it and sobs.

"Could you tell me what sort of man Greg was?"

More sobbing.

"I'm doing a story about his death, and I'd really like to hear what you have to say."

Finally, she speaks. "Would you like to come in?" she asks.

I walk into the living room, and there is stuff everywhere.

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Old newspapers, computer boxes and the unmistakable odor of a dog not housebroken.

"Sorry about the mess," she says. "I've got a puppy."

Some puppy. It's a Rottweiler named Bear, still trying to grow into its enormous paws. There is a framed picture of her with the dog, but I don't see any photos of her late husband. She moves to the kitchen, where she sits with the dog.

"The police are doing an investigation. They say you could be a suspect."

That makes her angry. "The detectives, they lie," she says. "I really can't talk to you, but the truth will come out."

The interview is over. She walks me to the door.

THAT NIGHT, December 6, 2000, I break the story on News 8—a possible love triangle at the medical examiner's office. Further investigation leads to Orbigen, the Sorrento Valley biotech start-up where Greg de Villers had worked.

The CEO comes down the hall and introduces himself. His name is Stefan Gruenwald, and he says he knew de Villers well. They had

worked together at PharMingen, another biotech company, and left to go into business for themselves.

Gruenwald also went deep-sea fishing with de Villers, and says his colleague had been excited about their next trip. He remembers de Villers saying, "Now the water's cold. There are more fish, so we should all go fishing."

Gruenwald is absolutely convinced de Villers didn't commit suicide. So is another employee at Orbigen, a woman named Esme Nguyen.

"He's such a happy guy," Nguyen says, speaking of de Villers as if he were still alive. "He makes lots of jokes, and he's just so positive about life. And he talked about his future here. So if someone wanted to kill themselves, why would they talk about that?"

Gruenwald says he talked to Kristin Rossum, and that made him even more suspicious. On the morning of de Villers' death, Rossum left a voice message at Orbigen, saying her husband was staying home sick. Later, she told Gruenwald she fed de Villers soup for lunch. But Gruenwald says he called him at the apartment around lunchtime. De Villers didn't answer the phone, Gruenwald says, and he didn't

pick up when the boss called again later that afternoon.

It makes no sense to Gruenwald. If de Villers had been home eating his soup, he would have answered the phone. De Villers never missed a phone call, Gruenwald says, because he was in the licensing side of biotech. Missing calls meant losing deals.

Gruenwald and his employees were so convinced de Villers didn't commit suicide, they wrote a letter to the police, urging them to investigate. "It's a suicide case, that's what they told us," Gruenwald says. So the cops hadn't bothered to get back to Gruenwald and his employees to find out what they knew.

And they knew a lot. Gruenwald says he was getting business information from de Villers' office computer, after his death, when he found an e-mail from Rossum. "You've hurt me beyond repair," she wrote to her husband, about a month before he died.

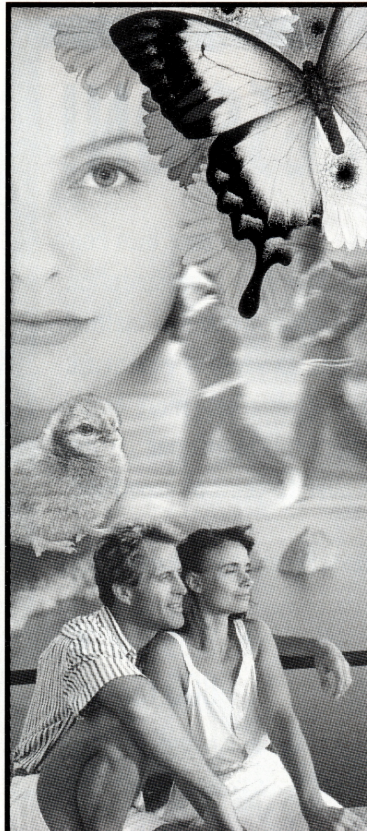
A few weeks after that message was sent, de Villers told Gruenwald on a Monday that he had become violently ill over the weekend. De Villers couldn't understand it, his boss remembers, because it wasn't a hangover; he'd only consumed a small amount of alcohol. And, Gruenwald adds, de Villers wasn't a heavy drinker.

Still, Rossum's parents say de Villers had volunteered to his coworkers that he had been drinking heavily, in the weeks before his death.

There was more from the work computer. Gruenwald called up the Internet sites de Villers had visited right before his death, and found hits for businesses that test hair samples. Such tests can determine if a person is using drugs. Was de Villers trying to get his own hair tested? Or was it for his wife, who had admitted she'd been using meth again?

The computer records indicate de Villers may have tried to set up an appointment for drug testing, but that was as far as he got. And according to court records, before de Villers died, he had threatened to tell the medical examiner's office that his wife was using meth and having an affair with her boss.

On December 11, I do another story on News 8. "Nobody believes that Greg



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de Villers committed suicide by taking drugs," I say. "Not his family, not his friends, not his coworkers." The next day, however, the cops tell the de Villers family that "everything is pointing toward suicide."

But everything really seems to be pointing toward the relationship between Kristin Rossum and Michael Robertson, her lover/boss from the medical examiner's office. Robertson was the manager of the forensic toxicology lab. He had spoken at an international toxicology conference almost three years ago in Albuquerque. His topic? How a certain chemical will hide drugs like morphine in a urine test.

I call Kristin Rossum and get her answering machine. She calls me right back. I get right to the point.

"It's about Michael Robertson, your boss. It's about the research he's done, about how drugs show up in bodies."

"Yeah, he's a toxicologist. That's what he does. Is that all?" she asks.

"Well, it's about your relationship with him. You were having an affair with him."

Silence, and then: "I'm not at liberty to speak with you about anything at this point. I wanted to give you the courtesy of giving you a call back."

I've never met such a polite murder suspect.

NOW, MICHAEL ROBERTSON is becoming a much bigger part of the story.

A couple of weeks before de Villers died, Robertson wrote a letter to Rossum, expressing his love for her and saying he was upset about not being able to be with her during the upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Someone at the medical examiner's office found the letter and turned it over to police.

That's not all they found. On Robertson's computer at work, the M.E.'s chief administrator found a file titled "kr—the night." A police report says the file contains a chronology of the night de Villers died.

Robertson was the one who called de Villers' boss, Stefan Gruenwald, the morning after, to tell him de Villers had died.



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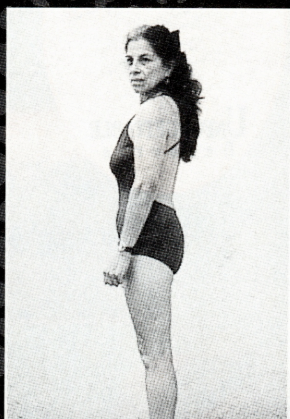
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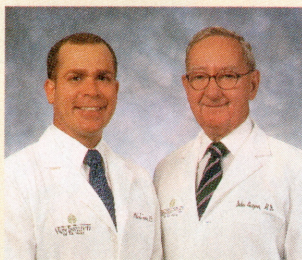
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"I asked him, 'Who are you?'" Gruenwald says. "And he said, 'Well, I cannot really explain.'"

The medical examiner's office also has some explaining to do. McClellan, the de Villers family attorney, filed a wrongful-death claim against San Diego County in July. He says the medical examiner's office hired Kristin Rossum, a known drug abuser, without conducting any background investigation. And Rossum, who was in charge of the logbook for the drug evidence locker, wasn't subjected to any random or even scheduled drug tests. (The county declined to comment on the de Villers family's charges, citing legal reasons.)

The wrongful-death claim lays out the sequence of events leading to Greg de Villers' death. According to the claim, the medical examiner's office knew Rossum was having an affair with Robertson, who was also married. Because of the sexual relationship, the claim says, Robertson gave her free rein with the drug locker.

With easy access to the drugs, Rossum started using them again—and Robertson knew it, according to the claim. On November 5 and 6, 2000, the claim alleges, Rossum was under the influence of meth she obtained from the medical examiner's office. With Robertson's knowledge and assistance, Rossum administered drugs to de Villers, putting him in a catatonic state—then, the claim continues, she finished him off with Fentanyl, the powerful painkiller.

While de Villers lay dying, Robertson and Rossum spent several intimate hours together, de Villers' family claims. The family also says Rossum stole the Fentanyl from the medical examiner's office to kill her husband. The claim further details that Robertson and Rossum had seen a presentation of an article at a conference in Milwaukee, discussing the use of Fentanyl. The presentation and article revealed cases in which people had overdosed on Fentanyl, resulting in unintentional death or suicide.

That conference was held one month before de Villers' death.

The de Villers family also says Rob-

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ertson knew the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office did not routinely check for Fentanyl in cases involving a suspected drug overdose.

But it was a private lab, not San Diego County's, that performed the tests in the de Villers case. Oops.

POLICE SPEND SEVEN MONTHS investigating and finally arrest Kristin Rossum as a murder suspect in late June. When she makes her first appearance in court, I see she's put on some weight. She is trembling and sobbing the entire time she is in the courtroom. Rossum is getting a new lawyer, so her arraignment is continued.

Deputy District Attorney Dan Goldstein is prosecuting Rossum but not Robertson. The police call Robertson a suspect in connection with the murder, but he hasn't been charged.

"We've interviewed him," Goldstein acknowledges, outside the courtroom. But that is all he will say about Robertson.

Robertson is back in his native Australia now. His work visa was tied to his job at the medical examiner's office. No job, no visa, no Robertson. He did talk to a newspaper reporter in Melbourne a few months ago and says he is shocked to be considered a suspect.

Rossum gets her new attorney in early July and pleads not guilty of murdering Greg de Villers. Prosecutor Goldstein has filed special circumstances in her case, charging her with poisoning de Villers. If Rossum is found guilty, she could spend the rest of her life in prison. If Goldstein decides to seek the death penalty and wins his case, she could be executed.

After Rossum's latest court appearance, I ask Goldstein again about Robertson. "We're still investigating Michael Robertson," he says. I want to know if Robertson would be available to testify in Rossum's case. Probably not unless he's charged, Goldstein admits. Then he could be extradited.

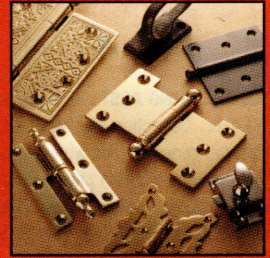
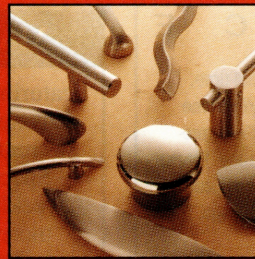
"So he'll have to return voluntarily, should you want him to return?" I ask.

"Probably," Goldstein says.

"What are the chances of that?" I ask.

"Why don't you ask him?" Goldstein replies.

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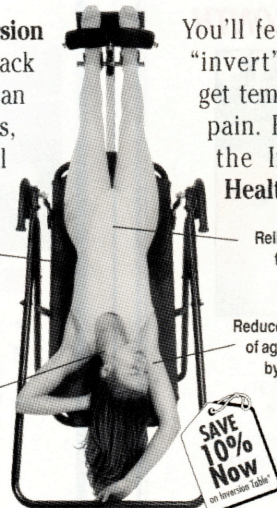
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"Why don't you ask him?" Goldstein replies.

In late August, I'm back at the courthouse. I see Goldstein walking by. "How's Mr. Robertson?" I ask. Goldstein smiles and keeps walking.

A source familiar with the case says Goldstein has sent an investigator to Australia, just to interview Robertson. Again. "You sent someone to talk to him," I call after the prosecutor.

Goldstein just keeps walking. As of mid-September, Robertson still hasn't been charged in connection with Greg de Villers' death.

NOT EVERYBODY is convinced of Rossum's guilt. A forensic pathologist familiar with the case says neither Rossum nor Robertson should be charged.

"If I were going to kill somebody, I'd never give 'em Fentanyl," he says. "Certainly there are other drugs that I think forensic people are aware of, that are impossible to find [in an autopsy]."

"If [you] get somebody stoned enough, there are a couple of other things you can use that people will never find. It's one of the problems I have with this so-called homicide. Both those individuals know enough to use something far better."

An interesting defense—and Rossum will need one. Her preliminary hearing is scheduled for October 9. Because of the evidence against her, the judge will almost certainly order her to stand trial. Not even a good attorney could stop it.

And Rossum has a good attorney—Alex Loebig, a well-respected public defender. Two years ago, Loebig defended a surfer named Roy Lacsina, who shot and killed two skinheads who crashed a party at his Imperial Beach home.

Loebig got Lacsina acquitted. Loebig may save Rossum if he can convince the jury that Greg de Villers killed himself by overdosing on Fentanyl.

"There were problems in this marriage from beginning to end, and it intensified in the weeks leading to the suicide," Loebig says. "She had confided in [her parents] that she was looking for an apartment, and they have evidence of that."

He describes a dinner attended by de Villers, Rossum and her parents just

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three days before he died. It was supposed to be a birthday dinner for de Villers—"a normal family function," according to Loebig. But he says there were obvious undertones of seriousness, if not sorrow, in de Villers that night.

"I have no problem believing that this guy was obsessed with her, and that makes it significant that he knew he was losing her," Loebig says.

Rossum's parents describe an even darker de Villers, who gave their daughter what they call "the silent treatment" and spent days at a time in bed. They also offer explanations for what they call his suicide—a "cry for help" by de Villers, or a vindictive "If I can't have her, no one will." The Rossums even suggest that "Kristin was framed" by de Villers—who they say planted the rose petals and wedding photo at his death scene.

What the Rossums see as obsession, the de Villers see as infatuation. In fact, in a reception scene from the wedding video, Bert de Villers says this about his brother Greg: "I know we give you a hard time about being so hung up on Kristin. At this moment, we feel like we're losing you ... I can tell you're totally infatuated."

But Craig McClellan, the de Villers family attorney, dismisses the Rossums' version of events. "I would expect that parents would defend their daughter," he says, "regardless of the facts."

There's another scene in the wedding video that reveals a different side of Kristin Rossum. Her father, Ralph Rossum, offers his toast at the reception.

"I think of events in her life that make me very, very proud," he says. Kristin Rossum was once a ballerina, and she tried out for a professional production of *The Nutcracker*. As her father tells it, she was picked to be an understudy, because the director wanted a pro for the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

But Kristin danced so well that the director cast her instead. "She performed flawlessly," her father says.

Soon, Kristin Rossum will be back in front of an audience—this time trying to convince a jury she's falsely accused of murdering her husband. Could Ralph Rossum be a proud father again? ■

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