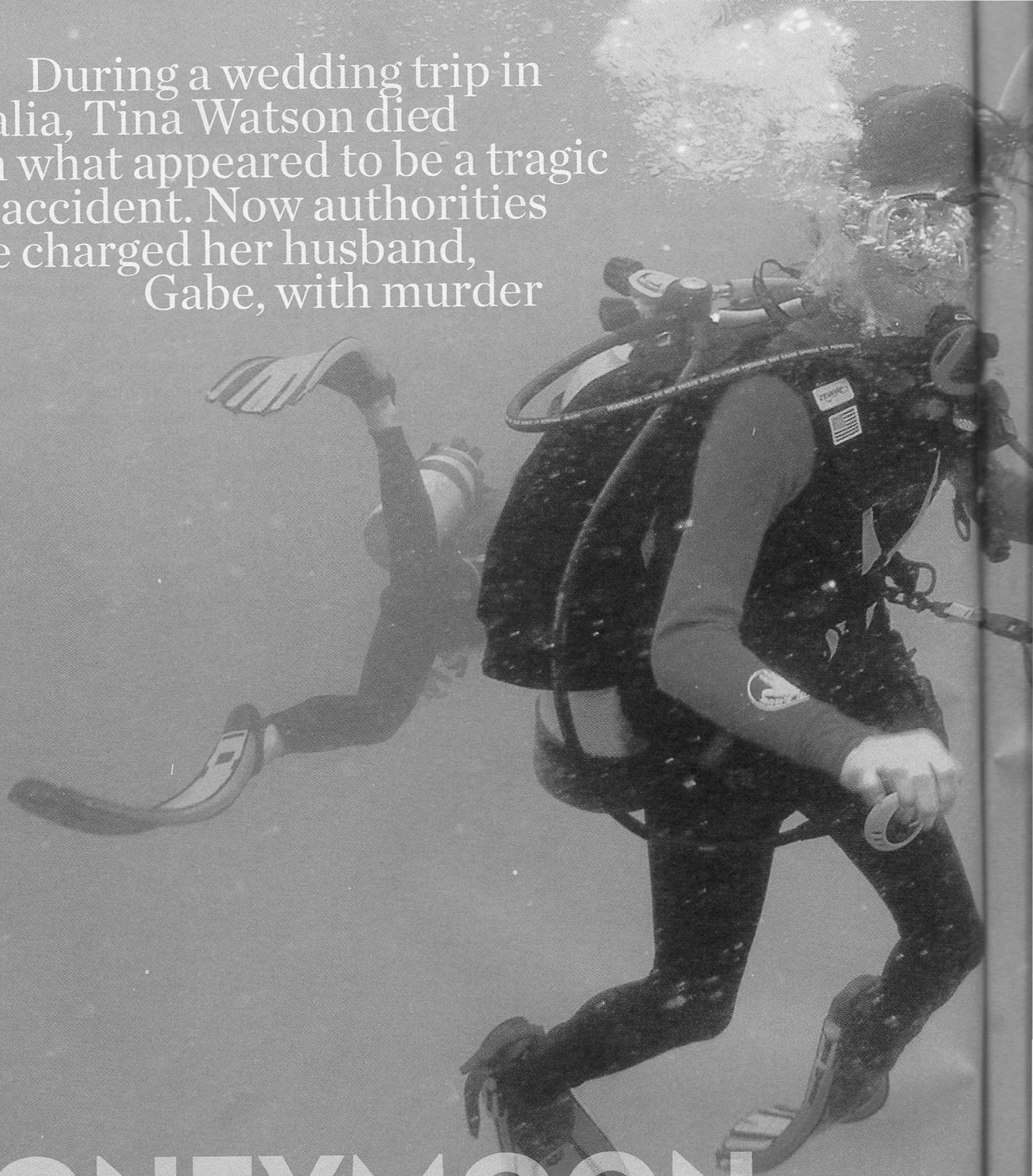
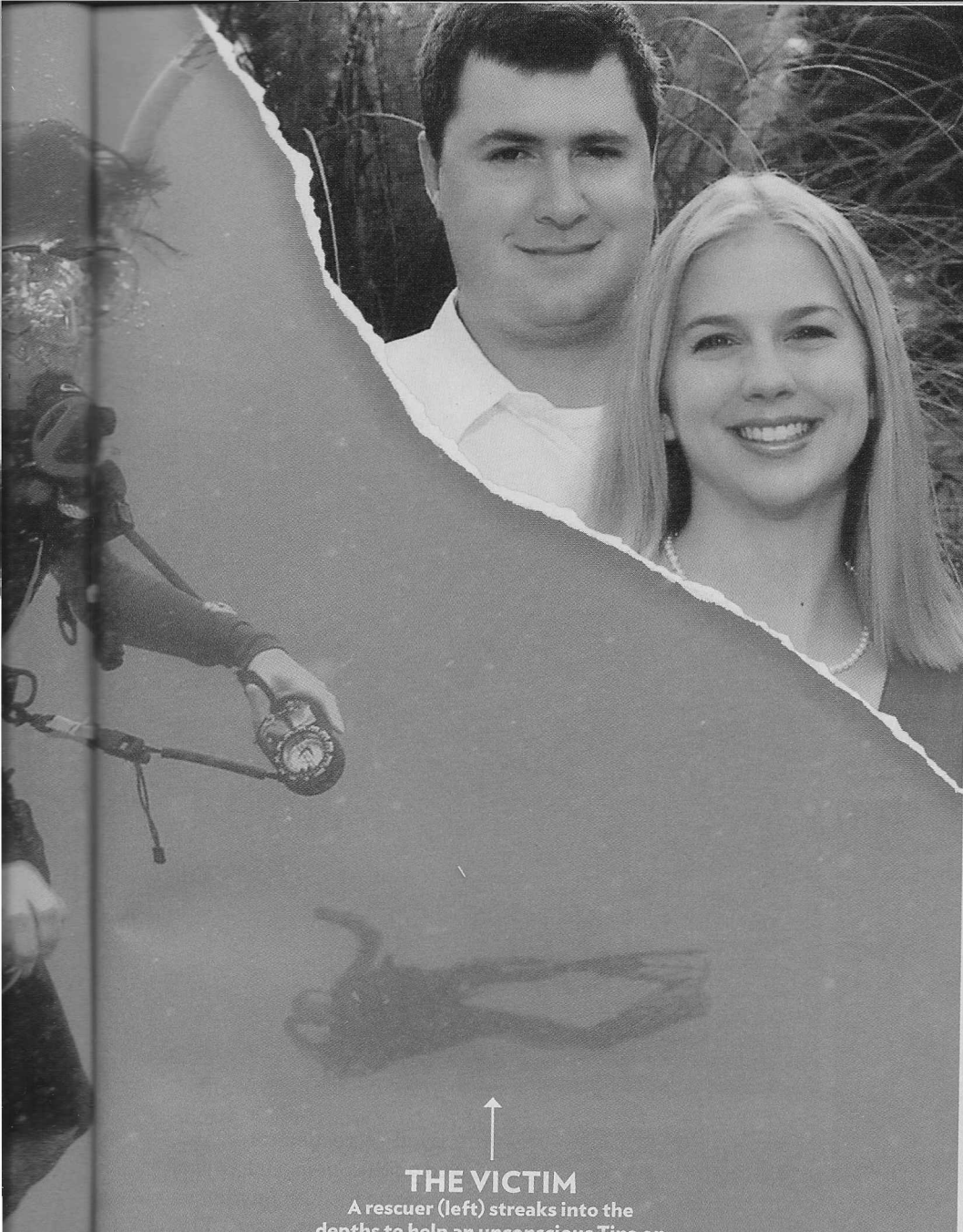


During a wedding trip in Australia, Tina Watson died in what appeared to be a tragic diving accident. Now authorities have charged her husband, Gabe, with murder



HONEYMOON

DEATH



THE VICTIM

A rescuer (left) streaks into the depths to help an unconscious Tina on the ocean floor (above) in this Oct. 22, 2003, photo taken by a fellow diver who was photographing his wife (in foreground). Gabe (with Tina, top) had been diving with Tina just moments before.

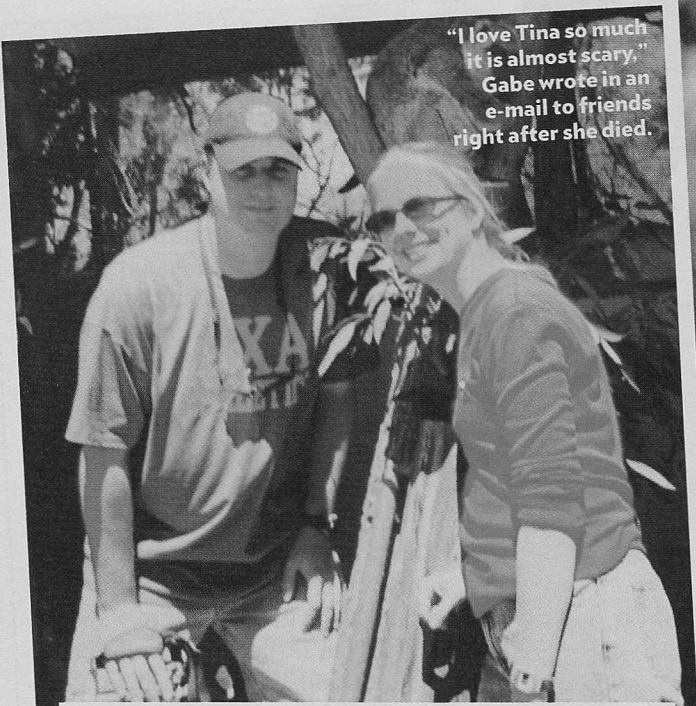
WID DIVE

Tina Watson would rather have been doing anything than scuba diving. But there she was in her wetsuit and equipment that day in the spring of 2003, at a diving course near her home in Helena, Ala. Her instructor Craig Cleckler recalls how nervous she was, clinging to the pier even though she was only in four feet of water. "She was by far the most stressed out, panicked diver I had ever been around," says Cleckler. He told Tina, a department store manager, she shouldn't be doing something like diving if she didn't want to. Says Cleckler: "That's when she said, 'You don't understand. If I don't do this, my boyfriend will kill me.'"

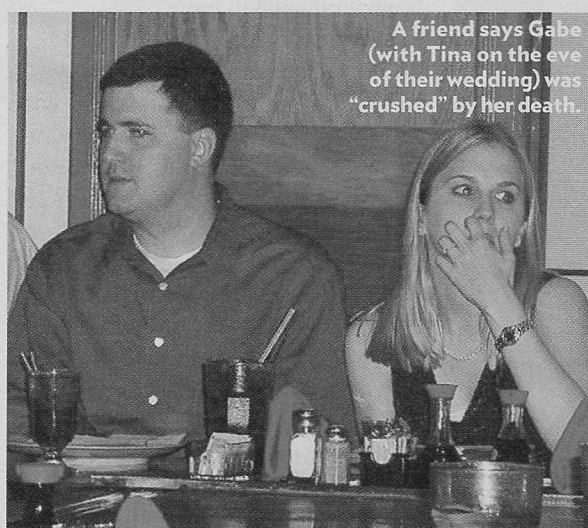
He didn't take her literally, of course. But months later, while on her honeymoon in Australia with new husband Gabe Watson, Tina, then 26, did die under bizarre circumstances during a dive on the Great Barrier Reef. And now, more than 4½ years later, authorities in Australia have charged Gabe, 31, an experienced diver who works for his father's packaging business, with killing his wife of 11 days. For Tina's family, who began to have their suspicions about Gabe within weeks of Tina's death, the formal charges on June 20 are just the first step in seeing justice done. "This is about getting to the truth about what happened to my daughter," says her father, Tommy Thomas, a management consultant. But for Gabe, who has denied the charges, and his family and friends, the allegations have only heaped fresh anguish on his grief. "The police have, at some point, decided Gabe Watson was guilty of murder and formed a case to support that hypothesis," said his Australian lawyer Steve Zillman.

On the morning of Oct. 22, 2003, the dive boat *Spoilsport*, with Gabe and Tina and 23 other passengers aboard, was anchored 50 miles out from port. The plan was to dive the remains of a sunken ship, the *Yonga*-

FROM LEFT: QUEENSLAND POLICE/AP NEWS/UTD/AP



"I love Tina so much it is almost scary," Gabe wrote in an e-mail to friends right after she died.



A friend says Gabe (with Tina on the eve of their wedding) was "crushed" by her death.



Amanda Phillips says Tina (at her wedding) didn't seem overly thrilled at the prospect of marriage to Gabe: "It was definitely disconcerting."

la, lying 100 feet below. He and Tina, off by themselves, began to descend along a chain fixed to the bottom. They had only gone about 40 ft., Gabe later told authorities, when the underwater currents started to buffet them. As Gabe told it, Tina suddenly signalled that she wanted to return to the surface. The next thing he knew, she started to sink fast. Grabbing her by her buoyancy vest, he started to swim back to the chain. That's when Tina's hand hit his mask and regulator, knocking them askew. He said as he tried to readjust them, she started to sink to the bottom. "She was looking up, had both her arms out," he later said in a police interview, "almost

he did his best to try and reach her, but "she was going down just as fast." At that point, he said, he had to make a decision: Either chase her to the bottom and hope he could get her back to the boat on his own, or go for help right away. He elected to go for help. "I pretty much turned," he said, "and just rocketed to the top."

Breaking the surface, he called for assistance. Staff diver Wade Singleton immediately dove down and found Tina lying unconscious on the bottom. Inflating his buoyancy vest he raced back up with her in his arms and got her into another boat, the *Jazz II*. And that was when the suspicions about Gabe began. As doctors unsuc-

like looking at me, reaching her arms up to grab." He said

cessfully tried to resuscitate Tina, Gabe stayed on the *Spoilsport*. One of the other passengers, Ken Snyder, an insurance executive from Estero, Fla., who is a certified dive master, asked what had happened. Snyder says Gabe's reply made no sense. "I wanted to hit him in the head with a scuba tank. I was just infuriated this guy left her," says Snyder. "Everything he told me, nothing was plausible." Including the description of Tina's sinking to the bottom with her arms outstretched, which didn't jibe with the notion of her panicking. "If she was panicking and knocking stuff off him," says Snyder, "she would have been clawing her way to the surface. The fact that she started sinking and looking up at him—dead people sink." Yet an initial inquest ruled Tina's death an

“The thing that’s hardest is I see her in the water, at the bottom of the sea. I dream about her fighting for her life” —TINA’S MOTHER, CINDY

apparent accidental drowning. (The autopsy showed no pertinent physical problems, and all her gear appeared to be in proper working order.)

Weeks later, back in the United States, Snyder sought out Tommy Thomas and spent hours sharing his suspicions about Gabe’s account. That conversation prompted Thomas to enlist the help of the Helena, Ala., police and to begin prodding Australian authorities to dig deeper.

In fact Tina’s family had long harbored doubts about Gabe. The outgoing, vivacious Tina met Gabe while they were students at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. Her family and at least one friend now say they found him aloof with them and controlling with her. “She told me that Gabe had told her that if she wanted to hang out with him, she had to pick up some of these hobbies he had, like fishing and scuba diving,” says her best friend, Amanda Phillips.

According to Tommy Thomas, shortly before the couple married, Tina told him that Gabe had requested that she increase her life insurance benefits from her employer—the payout would have come to \$165,000 in the event of her accidental death—and make him the sole beneficiary. But she didn’t make the switch. Gabe’s behavior in the weeks after Tina’s death also raised eyebrows. For Christmas in 2003, he sent Phillips a card that stunned her. It was a wedding picture, and he had written, “Who’s that sexy guy next to Tina? Oh, yeah. That’s

me.” Says Phillips: “I threw it down in disgust.”

The case against Watson is largely circumstantial. The key piece of physical evidence is his dive computer, which he wore on his wrist and which recorded important information, such as elapsed time and his depth. Among other things, says Det. Sgt. Brad Flynn of the Helena police, who has spearheaded the American end of the investigation, the computer shows that rather than streaking to surface for help, as Watson maintained he did, he took between 2 and 3 minutes to cover just 40 feet. “He made a leisurely ascent,” Flynn says. “Wade Singleton, who recovered Tina’s body, shot to the surface from 100 feet in less than a minute.”

Police investigators say that Watson possibly shut off Tina’s oxygen supply, then turned it back on when she was dead and let her drift to the bottom. But Watson’s civil lawyer Bob Austin scoffs at such speculation.

“Gabe had no reason to do this,” says Austin, maintaining that before the honeymoon, the couple had initiated plans to increase their life insurance to \$250,000 but never got around to signing the paperwork. Says Austin: “If someone’s going to do something, don’t you think he would make sure he had the insurance in place?” Although extradition to Australia may take as long as two years, Watson could face life in prison if convicted of murder.

In their way Tina’s friends and family also have a hard time accepting that anyone, let alone her husband, would do her harm. “She would have found a way to get a million dollars, if that’s what he wanted,” says Phillips. “There is nothing she wouldn’t have done to make him happy.”

By Bill Hewitt. Siobhan Morrissey and Nancy Wilstach in Helena, Sean Scully in Philadelphia, Tiffany McGee in New York City and Michael Crooks and Helen Chryssides in Australia

Tina’s parents, Tommy and Cindy Thomas (in Australia last November), made four trips Down Under to press the case.

