THE LAST RIDE OF JESSE JAMES HOLLYWOOD

BY JESSE KATZ

WANTED for KIDNAPPING AND MURDER, A VALLEY BOY GANGSTA LIVES UP TO HIS NAME

ILLUSTRATION BY GEOFFREY GRAHN

JESSE JAMES HOLLYWOOD

THE BOY IN THE VIDEO IS NAMED JESSE JAMES HOLLYWOOD. That is what his birth certificate says. He is close to 20 but could pass for 15. His hair is short and blond. His eyes are blue. He is nearly as small—five feet five, 140 pounds—as most of his friends were in junior high school. ■ Jesse James Hollywood is drinking a Heineken. He is smoking weed from a long yellow bong. He is wearing baggy jeans, a baby blue Dodgers cap turned backward, and a T-shirt manufactured by Serial Killer Inc. The shirt has a black-and-white movie frame on the chest, a scene from *Heat*, the 1995 L.A. crime saga. It shows Robert De Niro and Val Kilmer making their getaway from a downtown bank heist. The caption is a single word: MONEY.

The music thumping on the stereo is Mac Dre, an Oakland rapper. He once got five years for conspiring to rob a bank. The chorus goes like this: *I live day by day not giving a fuck / And when they ask me why I pause for a minute then I reply / Because life's a bitch and then you die.* When Jesse James Hollywood speaks, he mimics the cadences of the hood, an act that is alternately reverential and derisive. He is pretending to be a Crip—a meticulous study—yet the fakery is spiked with contempt. "One time I was walking down the street, cuz," he says, mugging for the camera. "Some nigga hit me up, cuz. I'm like, 'What up, cuz?' Nigga straight ran my ass over. That's why I'm a little fucked up right now, cuz." When he decides the shtick has grown old, Jesse James Hollywood says, "Get the camera away from me, cuz. Before I have to bust yo' lip, cuz."

The party is in Jesse James Hollywood's home, a three-bed, two-bath staple of 1950s suburbia that he bought on his own. There is a big-screen TV in the living room, along with a wave-shaped bubble lamp and a vase of artificial flowers; the kitchen has a built-in microwave and a double-door refrigerator; a gas barbecue grill sits on the patio. The house is in West Hills, at the far edge of the San Fernando Valley. It is among the whitest corners of Los Angeles—an affluent, educated, conservative bedroom community, once part of Canoga Park until home owners decided that a name change would enhance their neighborhood's image. The pride of West Hills is its youth baseball complex, a collection of mini stadiums with padded outfield fences and electronic scoreboards, Marathon Sod and crushed-brick base paths. As a child Jesse James Hollywood played on those diamonds. He was an All-Star pitcher and third baseman. His dad was a coach. His mom brought snacks. At least three of his guests here—all drinking beer, smoking dope, taking turns with the camera—played in the same league, some years on the same team. One of them is Ryan Hoyt, a lefty first baseman. He aims the lens into the face of another ex-Little League friend.

"You been drinking tonight?" Ryan asks, in a mock interrogation.

"Fuck the police!" his subject howls.

Ryan follows him with the camera, then breaks into the theme from the TV show *COPS*: *Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do?* he sings. *Whatcha gonna do when they come for you?*

The tape is more than an uncensored testament to cocky, middle-class, Valley Boy indulgence. It is evidence in a murder. By this time in his life, Jesse James Hollywood was the boss of a thuggish little drug ring. He trafficked in vacuum-sealed bricks of British Columbian marijuana, a potent strain known as "B.C. Bud." His clownish friends were his marketing staff, breaking the pounds into ounces that went for $300 on the street. The arrangement served them all, funding their nightly binges and paying for Jesse James Hollywood's mortgage, except for one problem: His cartel had a habit of smoking more than it sold. Ryan was the worst. His consumption had reduced him from dope dealer to indentured servant. He arrived at Jesse James Hollywood's house every day to clean, garden, paint, and pick up after an ill-mannered pit bull named Chump, yet even after months of menial chores he was unable to erase his pot-smoking debt. At the time of the video he was in for $1,200, and Jesse James Hollywood was not about to let him forget.

"Now how much money you got in your bank?" Jesse James Hollywood asks, cornering Ryan in the kitchen.

"Stop recording," Ryan says.

"How much? How much can you get from the bank?"

"Enough to pay you some money."

"What's gonna be there tomorrow, Hoyt? I'm serious, man. I can see it's gonna be like nothing."

"It's not gonna be nothing."

"What's it gonna be then? Just tell me."

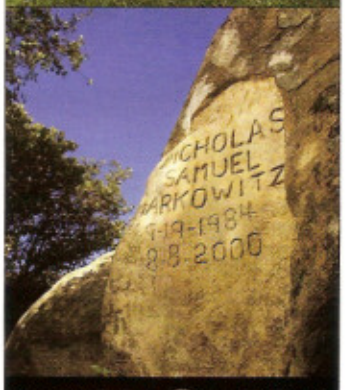
The video was shot in early 2000. Six months

THE PLAYERS

FROM TOP: William Skidmore is awaiting trial on murder charges. Ryan Hoyt has already been sentenced to die. Jesse James Hollywood is on the FBI's Most Wanted List. All met as Little Leaguers in the Valley

later the party would be over, the tape seized by homicide detectives. A drug dispute had gone haywire, and Jesse James Hollywood and his crew were now implicated in the kidnapping and execution of a 15-year-old boy, the younger brother of one of their own henchmen. As a bunch, they might best be described as slackers with an edge, children of relative privilege yet barely functional as adults. They came from nice homes but broken families. They attended the finest schools without opening their eyes. When they lost their way, it had more to do with abundance—too much freedom, too much money, too much time—than with deprivation. Their violence was committed while numb, not in a rage. Part of that was surely the drugs, which turned their world into a full-scale PlayStation, no more real than the lives taken and restored onscreen. But there seemed to be something else going on in West Hills, a malaise born of entitlement, of parents who found it easier to grant independence than to set limits. How does a community without gangs breed an entire team of gangsta disciples? To what extent does living in a "good" area allow a false sense of security, even laziness, to creep into the work of raising kids?

To settle his debt Ryan agreed to be the triggerman. He was found guilty in November and sentenced to die. Three cohorts were accused of abducting the victim and digging his grave. They are being held without bail, awaiting trial. The final defendant is the ringleader himself, the one with the unforgettable name. He is nowhere to be found.



THE VICTIM

Nicholas Markowitz, 15, was about to start his junior year at El Camino Real High School. His parents, Jeff and Susan Markowitz, have sued more than two dozen people who knew about the kidnapping. In the Los Padres National Forest, where his body was found, they carved a memorial

OF ALL THE WEST HILLS STONERS selling Jesse James Hollywood's pot, the one least in awe of him, the one most capable of doing him damage, was a neighbor named Benjamin Markowitz. He was in the same baseball league as a child but a couple years older—bigger and badder and just a bit nuttier.

By the time he was 15 Ben had slashed tires, stolen a car, cracked open a boy's forehead with brass knuckles, and done eight months in a juvenile probation camp. His nickname was Bugsy. He had covered himself in tattoos, including the insignia of the Peckerwoods, a San Fernando Valley gang with white supremacist leanings—never mind that he was Jewish. His father, who makes aerospace parts in a family-run machine shop, tried everything he could think of to turn Ben around, from psychotherapy to Ritalin to martial arts. He tussled with Ben. He dragged him to work. He paid a tae kwon do instructor to take him in as a ward. "I didn't know what the hell to do," says Jeff Markowitz, who divorced Ben's mother when their son was 4 and assumed custody when he was 12. "Ben was an urban legend in our town."

Remarriage had introduced a stepmother, Susan, and a half brother, Nicholas, seven years younger than Ben. If the Markowitzes had tried to blur those lines of separation in the beginning, they took to drawing them more sharply as Ben careened through adolescence. Susan was especially doting with Nick, hoping to insulate him from his older brother. "My whole life, I was trying to keep Nick from seeing or knowing the truth about Ben's trouble," she says. "It was a lot of work keeping them apart." In the end it was also futile. Nick came to idolize Ben, and Ben somehow managed to keep dragging the family into his craziness, like the time he showed up drunk, with a shaved head, at Nick's bar mitzvah and demanded to drive his brother home in a low-rider Impala.

It would be trite to say that West Hills was too small for both Ben Markowitz and Jesse James Hollywood, but that might not be far from the truth. They lived only a dozen blocks from each other and attended the same prestigious high school, El Camino Real, winner of the state academic decathlon for five of the last ten years. Ben got expelled for hitting a girl who threw a milk carton his way. Jesse got expelled for spewing obscenities at an administrator who objected to the tank top he was wearing. Ben never finished school, but Jesse went on to graduate from Calabasas High in 1998. Compared with Ben—and every other member of his crew, for that matter—Jesse was the model of success, ambitious and status conscious. With five to ten dealers each netting him about $500 to $1,000 a month, Jesse was living on maybe $50,000 a year, tax free—enough for a thick bankroll in his pocket, a girl on his arm, and an endless supply of weed for his friends. He used to show up for school in a tricked-out silver '95 Honda Accord DX coupe, the '57 Chevy of the *Fast and the Furious* generation. Loaded with hydraulic switches, fluorescent lights, $2,000 Niche Gefell rims, and a sound system capable of rattling windows, the car drew envious stares in the student parking lot, even from kids who had no interest in the dope business. By 19 Jesse owned a $205,000 home on Cohasset Street, just a few blocks from his parents'. "He was slinging some spliff," acknowledges his father, Jack Hollywood, employing a Rasta-flavored lexicon somewhat at odds with the image of a Little League coach. "But it wasn't even that much of a bad rhythm. There was no trouble until this Ben Markowitz guy came around."

Like most of the dealers in Jesse's circle, Ben was often careless about money, losing product—or using it—and falling into debt. Unlike them he was a genuine hoodlum, refusing to take orders and damning the consequences. "Ben was a fly in the ointment," says Ken Reinstadler, a Santa Barbara County sheriff's lieutenant, who would later oversee the murder investigation. "Jesse James Hollywood is a wannabe bad boy. Ben is one tough hombre." During the first half of 2000, the two were locked in a tit-for-tat feud, at once childish and menacing. Ben would get messages on his voice mail: "I thought we were homies.

Why don't you come kick it? Let's straighten this thing out." Jesse would also get messages on his voice mail: "I know where you live, too, buddy, so you make the first move." One night in February Jesse and his girlfriend went to a restaurant in Woodland Hills where Ben's girlfriend worked. They ate and drank up a tab of $50, then left a note: "Take this off Ben's debt." Ben upped the ante, threatening to expose a $35,000 insurance scam that involved the customized Honda. Jesse had chopped up the car, sold the parts, then reported it stolen. "This is what Ben's been doing forever—latching onto people, terrorizing them," says Jack Hollywood. "My son was scared to death. He was going to move out and try to get away from the whole situation."

The pissing match came to a head on August 6, 2000, a Sunday. Jesse had packed up his house and put everything in storage. Sometime during the previous day or two, Ben had come over and busted a couple of windows with a metal pipe. Jesse piled his crew into a cargo van, lent to him by a friend of his father's to help with the move. In the driver's seat was Jesse Rugge, a speedy center fielder from their baseball years. After his parents divorced, he split his time between his father's house in Santa Barbara and his mother's in West Hills. A high school dropout, he had a shaved head and a body covered with tattoos—scorpions on both arms, a skull on his right leg, and a simulation of ripped skin, with exposed muscle, on his left—all courtesy of a brother-in-law who works at a parlor called Iron Cross. In the back was William Skidmore, probably the best hitter and fielder of them all. He was living in Simi Valley but grew up in West Hills, halfway between the Rugges and the Hollywoods. The others sometimes called him *vato loco*, a crazy dude—his mother is Latina—and he once told police, after being arrested on a minor drug charge, that his gang name was Capone. But his affiliations, oddly, were Asian; he had the logo of a Filipino gang, Satanas, tattooed across his stomach and chest. Ryan Hoyt stayed behind, ordered to sweep up the broken glass.

They had been planning to go up to Santa Barbara for Old Spanish Days, a Mardi Gras–style festival. But everyone inside the van agreed that Ben's latest incursion could not go ignored. They talked of hunting him down, or maybe just swinging by the Markowitz home and shattering a few panes as payback. As they cruised the quiet, pine-shrouded streets of West Hills, the last thing they expected was to stumble upon Nick Markowitz, wandering past Taxco Trails Park at about 1 p.m. Nick was hardly the ruffian that Ben was—he had appeared in Shakespeare plays at school, volunteered as a peer counselor, and once signed a journal entry "Rabbi Nick"—but he was still having his troubles. He was regularly popping Valium and smoking dope. He had already been caught at school with a bit of weed and arrested. On Saturday night he had gone with friends to CityWalk and come home looking zonked. This morning, rather than face a confrontation with his parents, Nick had sneaked out while his mom was making breakfast. "He was just picking everything apart," his father says, "the life that he was deciding to choose or not to choose."

THE TOOLS

The Santa Barbara home of Jesse Rugge, where Nick spent his final two nights. The weapon, a fully automatic TEC-DC9, could fire 12 rounds a second. Ryan Hoyt denied being the triggerman, but a jury heard his taped confession to detectives

The van pulled up to the curb and Jesse's crew jumped out. They pummeled Nick, kicking and hitting, then dragged him inside. As they did, Pauline Ann Mahoney came driving by on her way home from church. Before the van peeled out she got close enough to read the license plate. "All right, boys," she said to the three children in her Cadillac, "this is the number." They chanted it together, until Mahoney could get home and dial 911. "These guys were beating the crap out of this kid," she told the emergency operator. "Four versus one. All white." Two Los Angeles police officers were advised, but a series of missteps ended any chance of catching up. The 911 staff, it turned out, had coded the incident as an assault rather than a kidnapping in progress—even after a second witness made a similar call. Thinking the matter was less serious, an officer talked to Mahoney via cell phone but never took a direct statement. They also failed to reach the registered owner of the van, partly because they had misread his address. "This was not the LAPD at its best," says Xavier Hermosillo, a member of the department's Board of Rights, which investigated the lapse. The officers received written reprimands; two emergency dispatchers ended up with three-day suspensions.

It would be the first in a succession of opportunities to halt the crime, opportunities killed by an apathy that seemed to grip everyone who came in contact with Nick. Over the next 60 hours, at least two dozen people would meet him—or learn of his plight—and none would intercede. Jeff and Susan Markowitz would later sue them all, alleging that each could have, and should have, done something to save their son. To be fair, it was not always clear that Nick was a hostage. His captors acted haphazardly, sometimes leaving him unguarded. He went along with their instructions rather good-naturedly, believing that his cooperation would best serve his brother. At times he even romanticized the odyssey. "Don't worry," he said on the rare occasion that anyone expressed concern. "It's just another story to tell my grandkids."

WITH NICK IN THE VAN, FIESTA WAS PRETTY much out of the question, but Jesse James Hollywood and his crew drove up to Santa Barbara anyway, not knowing what else to do. On the way, Nick's pager began to beep. His parents had given it to him the previous week, on the condition that he respond immedi-

THIS STORY DREW FROM dozens of sources, including extensive interviews with Santa Barbara County prosecutors and detectives; more than 800 pages of grand jury transcripts, featuring the testimony of 27 witnesses; and evidence presented in the murder trial of Ryan Hoyt, the first of the five defendants to be prosecuted.

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

ately when called. Now his mother was punching in their number, over and over. Jesse took it away. "If you run, I'll break your teeth," he said to Nick. Jesse rummaged through Nick's pockets and pulled out several plastic bags of weed and Valium. He let Nick fire up and drop a pill. He also snatched a small address book from him. He ripped out the page with Ben's number and tossed the rest out the window. For all his bluster, Jesse would not call Ben that day, or ever again.

THE PIRATES: *A photo from the 1992 West Hills Little League yearbook shows the coach, Jack Hollywood, in the back row. To his left is center fielder Jesse Rugge and first baseman Ryan Hoyt. In the front row is the pitcher, Jesse James Hollywood*

When they got to Santa Barbara, they needed a place to stash Nick. That task fell to Jesse Rugge, the crew's northern connection. He steered them to the home of a friend in the Hidden Valley neighborhood, a guy he often partied with named Ricky Hoeflinger. They herded Nick into Ricky's bedroom, bound his wrists with duct tape, and blindfolded him with a sock. Ricky had a friend over, and he asked what was going on. "Hollywood is tripping out," Rugge explained. It was loud enough for Jesse James Hollywood to overhear. "Keep your fucking mouth shut," he snapped at Rugge. Then he whispered to Ricky's friend, "You don't say shit." Ricky and his friend took off, leaving the kidnappers and their captive alone in his house. "I didn't want to know what was going on," Ricky says. "I didn't want any involvement."

Two guys in the crew also wanted out. One was Will Skidmore; the other was Brian Affronti, whom they had picked up after grabbing Nick. Not wanting to rouse Jesse's suspicions, Brian made up a story about having a date that night back in the Valley. "That way it wouldn't seem like I was just trying to get out of something," he says. Jesse agreed to let them take the van, a concession that ended their role in the crime but not their liability. As one of the abductors, Will was legally responsible for Nick's fate, even if he had no idea what would later happen to him; a plea bargain is being negotiated. Brian, only tacitly involved, was given a grant of immunity, one of ten that prosecutors would hand out in order to piece together events.

Jesse eventually took off, too, though his phone card was used later that night to call Ricky's house, presumably to check on Nick. Freed of his duct tape, Nick was relaxed, maybe even a little tickled to be hanging with his brother's older crowd. He and Rugge took bong hits, sipped Tanqueray gin, and played a James Bond 007 video game, Nick's favorite. His computer screen name was remag—*gamer* spelled backward. "He was the best," says Jeff Markowitz, trying to envision his son at ease. "I'm sure he was beating the pants off every one of those guys."

At the end of the night, Rugge took Nick to his father's place, about a mile away. Barron Rugge manages a biological-science greenhouse at UC Santa Barbara. His wife is active in her church, playing guitar and singing hymns on a Christian radio program. They both saw Nick but never questioned why he was spending the night in their home.

The next day, Monday, August 7, brought a new parade of witnesses. Two of them were girls, Natasha Adams-Young, 17, and Kelly Carpenter, 16. They had been hanging out that summer with a 17-year-old boy named Graham Pressley, who was dealing dope for the crew in Santa Barbara. Now they were all at Rugge's house, along with Nick, watching TV, smoking pot, grabbing food from the fridge. "Like everyone was really friendly and the atmosphere wasn't tense at all," Natasha says. "It was mostly light and like fun." She took an interest in Nick. He lied, telling her he was 17, too. After a while they all jumped in Natasha's car and drove to her house. She had learned by then that Nick was not in Santa Barbara by choice. "He told me that it was okay because he was doing it for his brother, and that as long as his brother was okay, he was okay," Natasha says. "He was going along with it." He had a scrape on his arm from the beating, and she brought him rubbing alcohol and ointment. Rugge took off a little bit later, leaving Nick alone with Natasha, Kelly, and Graham—the only time that none of the original kidnappers was present.

THE FUGITIVE

Despite a $50,000 reward and seven appearances on Unsolved Mysteries *and* America's Most Wanted *during the last year and a half, Jesse James Hollywood remains at large*

It could be argued that the kidnapping had, in fact, ended. By every indication, Nick was free to leave. "Frankly, in hindsight, all of us wish and hope he had done something different and just walked away," says Santa Barbara County senior deputy district attorney Ron Zonen, who is prosecuting each of the defendants. He contends, however, that in Nick's mind he was still a hostage. "Being passive," Zonen says, "does not amount to consent."

When Natasha drove everyone back to Rugge's house later that day, essentially returning Nick to his captors, Jesse James Hollywood was waiting. He had introduced yet another person into the mix—a petite party girl named Michele Lasher, who was baring midriff and sitting in his lap. She lived with her parents in a gated community in Calabasas and taught children's gymnastics in Woodland Hills. She also had JESSE JAMES tattooed just above her butt. During the investigation police would have doubts about whether

CONTINUED ON PAGE 128

FROM TOP: WEST HILLS BASEBALL YEARBOOK (1992); SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS; COURTESY FBI

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 47

Jesse and Michele were actually there that day; they were never spotted in Santa Barbara again. But Natasha and Kelly were adamant. How could they be so sure? Neither could stop talking about Michele's boob job, reportedly paid for by Jesse. "Very lovely," says Kelly, "but a little unreal."

On Tuesday, August 8—his third day in Santa Barbara—Nick was still at the Rugges'. Of all the people who had seen him, only Natasha seemed to sense that something was wrong or that someone should speak up. She went to her mother, a criminal defense attorney. Natasha left out the names and addresses but explained that she knew of a boy who might be in trouble. Her mother urged her to call the police. Before sounding the alarm, Natasha wanted to be sure that Nick was really in danger. She went to see Graham and asked him to go for a walk in the park. Graham told her not to worry, that Nick would be fine. But he also told her to keep quiet or else they might all end up dead—"because Jesse Hollywood was quote-unquote crazy." Natasha then went to see Rugge. "He looked me in the eye and he swore to me that he was going to take Nick home," she says. Rugge told Nick the same thing, suggesting that he might give him some cash for a bus or a train that evening, but he wanted some assurance: "All I can say is there better not be a policeman coming at my door the next day."

To celebrate Nick's imminent release his keepers decided to rent a motel room and have a pool party. Needing a ride, Graham called his mother, a real estate appraiser. She was on her way to a 5:30 p.m. yoga class but agreed to swing by and pick everyone up. When they got in the car, Graham introduced Nick: "He is staying with Jesse for a few days." Christina Pressley turned to the backseat to get a good look. She was worried about her son's choice of friends, enough so that she had taken Rugge out to lunch a few months earlier, "because he had tattoos on him and my husband and I were concerned about the influence, because our son was coming out of his own rough time." She knew that Graham smoked pot—though she had yet to learn that he was selling it—and she was in the habit of checking for warning signs. "Nice to meet you," she said. "Nice to meet you, too, Mrs. Pressley," Nick said. "Thanks for the ride."

She dropped them off near the Lemon Tree Inn, a midrange motel on State Street, a good ways up from the tourist strip. For several hours they smoked dope and drank rum and Cokes. Nick even went swimming. The question of escape came up again. "I'm going home," Nick insisted. "Why would I complicate it?"

FOR THREE DAYS THE MARKOwitzes had been in a panic, driving the streets of West Hills, tacking up homemade posters, tracking down every friend they could think of. On the third day they formally reported Nick missing to the LAPD. They remembered how, just six months earlier, he had gotten lost riding his bike and had called them in desperation. "He was so relieved to have made it home," his mother says. "He didn't even know where he was around our own neighborhood." She used to sleep on the side of the bed closest to the door so that she could get to Nick's room faster in the event of an earthquake. Now she switched to the side of the bed closest to the window.

Jesse James Hollywood was also worried, afraid to hold on to Nick and afraid to let Nick go. On that same Tuesday, about the time the others were planning their trip to the Lemon Tree, Jesse went to visit his lawyer. Stephen Hogg had been a friend of the Hollywood family for nearly 20 years. He had already represented Jesse on two previous criminal charges, resisting arrest and being a minor in possession of alcohol. While smoking a cigarette on the back patio of Hogg's Simi Valley home, Jesse revealed that some friends were holding a boy hostage. When prosecutors tried to question Hogg about their conversation, he initially refused, citing attorney-client privilege. A judge later ordered him to testify.

"What do I do?" Jesse asked.

"You got to go to the police," Hogg told him.

"I can't."

"Jesse, you have got to."

Jesse asked what kind of trouble his friends might be in.

"If they ask for ransom," Hogg said, "they can get life."

Jesse bolted from the backyard.

Hogg grew worried and began paging him. Jesse never called back. Within an hour, though, Jack Hollywood called Hogg. He was in Big Sur with his estranged wife, Laurie, spending a few days at the Ventana Inn & Spa. Hogg explained the problem. "Get ahold of Jesse," his father said, "and sit on him for me."

Jack Hollywood also asked Hogg to track down John Roberts, another longtime family friend. Roberts was a 68-year-old retired wise guy with a checkered past in Chicago. He also

happened to be the owner of the cargo van that had been used in Nick's abduction. "I'm going to go out and find where the child is, and I'm going to do my Chicago act in front of these 20-year-old boys," he concluded after speaking with Hogg. He would give the victim some money to keep his mouth shut. "That's old-fashioned 1950s—you know what I'm trying to say?—it's old-fashioned gangster talk." Hogg continued to page Jesse. Before he checked out of the Ventana, Jack Hollywood made a flurry of calls: to Jesse's pager, to Jesse's cell phone, to Jesse's girlfriend, to Roberts, to Hogg again. The one call that none of them made was to the police.

Jesse had heard enough. He went to see Ryan Hoyt and asked him if he wanted to erase his debt. "He said there was a mess that needed to be cleaned up," Ryan says. "He said I needed to go take care of somebody." Ryan is tall and lanky, with dark, slicked-back hair, a heavy brow, and droopy, slightly flushed cheeks. He was the gang's whipping boy—"the quote-unquote lame guy," his attorney says—a high school dropout who tried to join the navy but failed the drug test. His mother has battled mental illness and alcoholism most of her life. His father, a construction worker, allegedly beat her. His older sister is a heroin addict. She once dated Ben Markowitz. His younger brother is doing 12 years for armed robbery. As a teenager Ryan went searching for a family and found it among the Hollywoods. He baby-sat Jesse's younger brother. He helped Jesse's mom clean house. When Jesse bought his own place, Ryan was there every day, getting high, trying to please. He claims that his debt to Jesse was down to $200 by the time of the abduction. If a week were to go by without payment, though, Jesse would add another $100 in interest to the tab. "That's pretty brutal, I know," Ryan says. But falling from Jesse's favor was an option Ryan could not afford. "Imagine how he would treat me if I had told him to just—excuse my language—fuck off."

Ryan's 21st birthday was two days away. To be given the opportunity to clear his debt before that milestone was a better present than he could have hoped for. Not only would he be free of Jesse's taunting, but he would be moving up in the hierarchy, having been entrusted with an assignment far weightier than beer cans and dog poop. "This could be the change in his lifestyle he was looking for," says Zonen, the prosecutor. "This had a certain feel to it that pleased him."

Jesse gave Ryan a duffel bag. Inside was an assault pistol known as a TEC-DC9, a model whose role in rampages, including the Columbine shooting, has led to numerous lawsuits and legislation. This one had been modified into a fully automatic machine gun capable of spraying 12 rounds a second. About 8:30 p.m. Jesse's phone card was used to make a call to the Lemon Tree. With Ryan on his way, "the thing with Nick is being taken care of," Jesse explained to another friend. His final task involved Michele. She was turning 20 this day. Jesse took her to the Outback Steakhouse in Northridge. It would keep her happy and help with his alibi. Dinner came to $108.98. He put it on his American Express card.

A couple hours later, up at the Lemon Tree, the party was coming to an end. "I'm sorry, ladies, I don't mean to be rude, but you have to leave," Rugge announced shortly before 11 p.m. "Someone is going to come and pick up Nick." On the way there, Ryan got lost and had to call for directions. When he arrived, Nick was alone with Rugge and Graham. Up to that point Graham's role had been minimal; Ryan had never even met him before. Now he guided Ryan out Highway 154, up through the San Marcos Pass, to West Camino Cielo, a single-lane road that winds along the crest of the Santa Ynez Mountains. It is a 15-mile drive, spectacular by day, precarious at night. They pulled over and began hiking through the brush. After a hundred yards or so they came upon a boulder with a large gap in its center, known to Santa Barbara teenagers as Lizard's Mouth. Graham began digging with a shovel. He would later tell police that Ryan was aiming the TEC-DC9 at him, saying, "You'll dig if you know what's good for you." Ryan denies ever threatening Graham: "I didn't have to." The ground was dense and rocky. The grave was only a foot or two deep.

They drove back to the Lemon Tree and picked up Rugge and Nick. It was sometime after midnight, the early hours of August 9. They retraced the route to Lizard's Mouth. Graham stayed in the car while Ryan and Rugge marched Nick up to the boulder. When Nick saw the gun, did he at last understand what was happening—or did he think they were merely trying to scare him? When they duct-taped his mouth, and his hands behind him, did he tell them that it was unnecessary, that he was still going along with their game? Detectives would later ask Ryan about that moment, if it haunted him, if he woke up at night thinking about someone saying "please"? Ryan sighed. "You don't even want to know that one," he said.

Ryan whacked Nick's head with a shovel, then pushed him into the grave. He aimed the gun and, with a single squeeze of the trigger, sprayed nine bullets—a fusillade that stopped only because the weapon jammed. The shots hit Nick in the stomach, chest, neck, and chin. Most of them ripped through his insides and out his back. Ryan slipped the gun under Nick's legs. They tried covering him with dirt, but the hole was too shallow. They piled branches on top. Rugge vomited. Ryan, for the moment at least, seemed pleased with his handiwork. "That's the first time I ever did anybody," he said, back in the car. "I didn't know he would go that quick."

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, EVERYone in Jesse James Hollywood's crew lied—to their parents, to their friends, to each other, to themselves.

They dropped off Graham at the Lemon Tree and told him to check out in the morning. His curfew was normally 11 p.m., but his mother had fallen asleep, not realizing that he had been out all night until he called, at 6 a.m., asking for a ride home. "I asked him why he looked so pale—was he all right?" Christina Pressley says. "He said he didn't feel very well and that he didn't sleep much. He was clearly sick or shaken or something was very wrong." When he got home, Graham called Natasha and told her that he had given Nick a ride back to the San Fernando Valley. Natasha was relieved and told her mom that everything had turned out okay.

Ryan drove down to West Hills. Jesse gave him $400. Ryan went shopping for new clothes at the 118 Board Shop, a skate- and snowboard store in Granada Hills. Most days for him were a blur of brew and weed, but the next, August 10, was even foggier. "Mass consumption," says Ryan, who was drinking, smoking, snorting lines, and popping muscle relaxants. "It was my birthday, my 21st birthday." Most of the crew partied that night at the home of Casey Sheehan, another West Hills baseball alumnus who had once sold dope for Jesse. In his stupor Ryan confessed. "He didn't show me that much emotion as far as, you know, like he had a lot of guilt on his conscience or anything like that, so I was still in disbelief about what had happened, what he had said to me," Casey says. It was Casey's car that Ryan had driven to Santa Barbara, and Casey was concerned enough to confront Jesse, who was also celebrating that night. "Just don't worry about it," Jesse told him.

The party might have gone on indefinitely had the killers only been more prudent in their disposal of the victim. Lizard's Mouth may have

seemed remote at two in the morning after a night of bong hits, but the grave was right in the middle of a trail—surrounded by graffiti, broken beer bottles, and the remnants of bonfires. That Saturday, August 12, three days after Nick's murder, a group of hikers discovered the spot, alerted by the smell and the swarm of flies. They thought a dead animal was under the branches. When they saw a bloodied pant leg, they called the police. The summer heat had done terrible things to Nick's body. His eyes and nose and wounds were filled with larvae. It took Santa Barbara County homicide detectives two days to identify him; a badly decomposed fingerprint matched the arrest record from the time Nick was busted with pot.

On Monday, August 14, detectives drove down to West Hills. They pulled up to the Markowitz home at 6:30 a.m. Susan was in bed. Jeff peeked out the window and told her that men in black suits were at the door. She knew Nick was dead.

The next day, August 15, the story was in the papers. It was accompanied by a photo of Nick at his bar mitzvah, in a white tuxedo and black bow tie. Natasha looked at the *Santa Barbara News-Press* that morning and saw him—the sweet, funny, gangly boy she had worried about the week before. She collapsed in tears. She called Jesse Rugge. "It's not what you think," Rugge told her. She headed to his house. He was not wearing a shirt. "I could see his heart beating through his chest," Natasha says. She went to her mom's law office and talked to an attorney, who arranged for a grant of immunity. By 4 p.m. she was sitting with detectives, spilling the entire story, this time with names and addresses.

Jesse Rugge was arrested early on the morning of the 16th, followed by Graham Pressley, Will Skidmore, and by the end of the day, Ryan Hoyt. They all talked, implicating themselves and each other. From jail Ryan called his mother, Victoria Hoyt, a conversation that authorities recorded and later played at his trial. With her voice wavering between a growl and a whimper she pressured Ryan into talking to detectives without an attorney, never pausing to think that he might be guilty.

"Ryan, Ryan, you are innocent, you are so innocent," she said. "You are guilty by association."

"I know," he said.

"Who did this? You tell them right now!"

"I don't know."

"Where is Jesse? Where the fuck is he?"

"I don't know."

"Then find him! Spill your fucking guts and get out now! Do it for me, do it for your family, do it for yourself. Tell them what you know. Ryan, you tell them now! You fucking asshole. Don't defend anybody. This is your life."

Then she recited the Lord's Prayer.

After hanging up, Ryan called a guard and said he wanted to speak to somebody about the crime. He was brought to an interview room equipped with a hidden camera and a microphone. He was wearing an orange jailhouse jumpsuit, slumped in a chair, rubbing his forehead. Two detectives arrived and asked him what he wanted to talk about. "If I talk, does it get said in court that I said it?" Ryan asked.

He would later claim to remember none of what he said, but jurors would get to see and hear him for themselves. He began to recount the story of the murder, hoping to minimize his involvement at every possible juncture. "What Ben owed Jesse didn't, in my opinion—I'm going to say this off the record—in my opinion, didn't justify this kid's death," Ryan said. He made it clear that he had nothing to do with the kidnapping. He was also offended by reports that he had dug Nick's grave. "I feel like I've been shit on, excuse my language." When he was told that the other defendants were ratting him out, saying he had put the duct tape on Nick, Ryan was indignant. "Really?" he said. "I love this one."

There was one matter he wanted to set straight: "The only thing I did was kill him."

WHILE THE REST WERE blurting out confessions, proving themselves to be as detached from their own interests as they were from Nick's, Jesse James Hollywood was demonstrating a slyness that would confound just about everyone.

That is not to say that Jesse was discreet. He had always had a flamboyance about him, a compulsion to live out the mythology of the dope man—the pimp, the playa, the mac daddy—to a degree that exceeded the fantasies of most suburban kids. Jesse's favorite alias, Sean Michaels, is the name of an African American porn star who sells replicas of his genitalia on the Internet for $69. When Jesse's ghetto-fabulous "Hollywood Honda" ended up in the fall 1999 edition of *Lowrider Euro*, under the headline RIDING OFF INTO THE SUNSET WITH JESSE JAMES' WILD RIDE, it was only because he had mailed photos of it to the magazine's editor. "I never thought that I would take it to this level," Jesse says in the article, referring to his investment in the car. "I guess I got addicted to it." But if Jesse was obsessed with projecting an image that few five-foot-five, 140-pound white boys can command, he at least understood the game he was playing better than any of the lost souls in his crew.

In the days after the murder he began collecting on old debts. Brian Affronti, one of the boys who had driven the van back from Santa Barbara, owed him $4,000. He was also storing a shotgun for Jesse, wrapped in a sleeping bag. Brian was not home when Jesse came for the money but had told him where it was hidden—and instructed him to pick up the sleeping bag while he was at it. "That way it wouldn't look odd to my parents," Brian says. Now driving a leased Lincoln LS, Jesse headed to Palm Springs, where Michele was attending a modeling convention. He drained $24,000 from his bank account, and they took off for Las Vegas. Jesse checked them into the Bellagio, a place that could not possibly have more security cameras. This time he paid cash.

The day Nick's body was identified in the newspapers, Jack Hollywood was stunned. Ever since he learned of the abduction, he had been pressing Jesse for answers but getting no response. He paged his son. Jesse finally called back to say that he was on his way to Colorado, where the family had lived for a few years in the mid 1990s. His father called Richard Dispenza, a 48-year-old assistant football coach at Woodland Park High School in Colorado Springs. Dispenza was Jesse's godfather. "I think my kid is in some kind of trouble, and I'm not sure, you know, how involved he is or what's going on, but the last I heard he was headed that way," Jack Hollywood told him. On the day of the arrests Jesse and Michele stayed with Dispenza. Then Michele caught a flight back to L.A., and Dispenza checked Jesse into a Ramada Inn. When Santa Barbara County detectives interviewed Dispenza the next day, Jesse was still at the motel. Dispenza had just been named his school's Teacher of the Year. He was the founder of an antismoking group called Tobacco-Free Teens. If he had wanted to, he could have ended the manhunt right then. But he lied. A judge later sentenced him to three years' probation and 480 hours of community service for harboring a fugitive.

Jesse left the motel on August 20. He had abandoned the Lincoln at Dispenza's house, along with a 12-gauge shotgun and an AR-15 assault rifle. He walked to the home of Chas Saulsbury, a friend from his early teens whom he had not spoken to in years. Jesse told Chas's mom that he had been pickpocketed in Vegas. Chas agreed to give Jesse a ride back there. Jesse paid for everything out of a plastic bag full of $100 bills. In Vegas he convinced Chas to take him all

the way to L.A., and during the drive he told Chas the whole story, saying they had snatched Nick to get back at Ben. "But, pretty much, like he said, they made a mistake grabbing him, and once they had him they kind of were just a little bit scared to let him go," Chas says. Only after consulting with his attorney did Jesse decide to cut his losses. "He talked to his lawyer to find out the implications of the kidnapping and whatnot, and at that point, from what he told me, the lawyer says that he was in enough trouble already and they should get rid of the kid."

By the time they reached West Hills, Chas was spooked. Jesse wanted to visit John Roberts. "Old John," as he is known to the Hollywoods, was watching a baseball game—one that he had made a little wager on—when he noticed Jesse standing at the screen door. "I got up and went to the door and grabbed him, pulled him into the house and shut the door, and it was a very emotional meeting, both of us," he says. Roberts had already taken it upon himself to have the van washed and wiped with solvent, hoping to erase any evidence of Jesse's role in the abduction. But when Jesse asked for a fake ID, Roberts says he balked. "I knew people that used to do it, I knew people in Chicago that do it, but I couldn't do it and I couldn't give him any money and he could not stay at my house." A week later Santa Barbara County sheriff's investigators showed up to serve a search warrant and thought they heard voices inside. When nobody came out, they called in a SWAT team. Roberts finally emerged, saying he had been asleep. Officers still bombarded the house with tear gas but found no sign of Jesse.

That was a year and a half ago.

Today Jesse James Hollywood is on the FBI's Most Wanted List. The bureau's Web site features eight color photos of him. Agents even took the unusual step of hosting an Internet chat, hoping to generate tips. He has been profiled three times on *Unsolved Mysteries*, and four times on *America's Most Wanted*. The reward for his capture stands at $50,000, of which $30,000 is being offered by the Markowitzes; if he surrenders voluntarily, they have pledged to put their share in a college fund for his 12-year-old brother. Yet for all of Jesse James Hollywood's splashiness, his posturing, his arrogance, and his youth, there has not been another verified sighting—no leads, no arrests.

Jesse, in fact, is just about the only person tied to the case who has shown any initiative or moxie. Nearly everyone else who played a role in the crime or watched it unfold was hobbled by a kind of nonchalance, impassively going along with things—from the killers to the witnesses to, sadly, the victim himself. Most of them were stoned, which is not that unusual; half of all U.S. high school seniors have at some time smoked pot. This group's pot smoking, however, was not merely excessive. Whether cause or effect, a stultifying moral indifference infected their partying; they stumbled through the ordeal with the vacancy of their video games, bereft of judgment or consequence. Even Natasha—the story's heroine, to the extent that one exists—deluded herself into thinking that things were not how they appeared. "It didn't really seem real," she says in perfect teenspeak. The parents who wandered in and out of the picture also missed signals. So many of them saw only what they wanted to see, never asking the inconvenient questions that might expose the lie.

Jesse's situation was different. He enjoyed not only a level of drive and talent that eluded the others but also a degree of support from his parents—especially his father—that set him apart. Far from being removed, much less disapproving, Jack Hollywood was Jesse's role model. "It's just that the father is much more sophisticated, savvy, low-profile, and seemingly has much better judgment than his son," says Bruce Correll, chief deputy of the Santa Barbara County sheriff's department. For the past two decades, according to authorities, Jesse's dad has been a large-scale San Fernando Valley marijuana trafficker—a pleasant, unassuming wholesaler who uses his love for baseball as cover. "Jack Hollywood is a mobster," Zonen, the prosecutor, has said in court, contending that Jesse was successful "because he went into the family business." Ben Markowitz has testified that Jesse got dope from his father. John Roberts also has testified that he and Jesse's father "were involved together at one time, some time ago. But may I say, never in conjunction, never in conjunction with Jesse, ever." During a search of Jack Hollywood's residence, officers seized tax documents, check stubs, and mortgage statements, along with several small bags of marijuana and a cardboard box containing $7,600 in cash, but have yet to file charges. "They don't charge me with anything," Jack Hollywood says, "so how can I prove I'm innocent?"

Unlike Jesse, who flouted the taboos of the suburbs, his dad knew how to blend into West Hills. At one point he opened a baseball-card shop. At another he ran a car-wholesaling business, advertising in Jesse's Little League yearbooks. His passion for the sport puts a new twist on the old Yogi Berra quip, a saying featured on the West Hills baseball Web site: "Little League baseball is a very good thing because it keeps the parents off the street." The case against Jack Hollywood has yet to be proved, but prosecutors and detectives believe it will eventually explain everything about Jesse—why he was able to manipulate his cohorts so effectively and, more important, how he has managed to survive so long on the lam. They believe that his father knows where Jesse is hiding and is using his own underworld connections to keep him there. In the beginning Jesse did what most novice fugitives do, visiting familiar people and places, flashing cash, discussing the crime. Once he returned to West Hills, though, he vanished.

"That's Jack Hollywood's personality taking control," Chief Deputy Correll says. "If he had not taken control, Jesse would be in jail right now."

IN THE TIME THAT JESSE JAMES HOLlywood has been missing, Jeff and Susan Markowitz have transformed their home into a shrine. The relics of Nick's life are everywhere: baby handprints, stuffed animals, the decoration from his first birthday cake—and his second and third and fourth and fifth—a karate robe, the cast from a broken right foot, an ornamental egg filled with soil from his grave. Susan has tried to console herself by writing poems, their titles blunt and raw: "Denial," "Fading," "Drifting," "What Day Is This?" The screensaver on her computer is a picture of Nick's marble headstone. Her e-mail address is aching4nick.

Evidence of Ben's life is scarcer. Four months after the murder he was arrested on a pair of armed robbery warrants. The cases were weak—one victim was a druggie; the other, a reputed prostitute, accompanied him to a strip joint and a cheap motel—but Ben still drew a 16-month prison term. Susan could not forgive his lack of repentance. "He's rubbing his brother's name in the dirt," she says.

When Susan talks, she seems to be floating. She wants to die. Inside, she says, she already has. Twice she has been hospitalized, after overdosing on a combination of sleeping pills and champagne. Instead of finding peace she managed only to rack up $20,000 in medical bills. She made it through the first trial by taking Nick's leather jacket to court, clutching it as his final hours were relived. She has vowed to stay alive long enough to see that all of his accused killers are brought to justice—and that includes Jesse James Hollywood, if and when he is captured. She does not know how long that will be. But she knows it will fulfill her last obligation as a mother. (LA)