

Jesse James Hollywood

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By Oliver Jones

The West Hills section of the San Fernando Valley, tucked away on the far northwestern edge of Los Angeles County, is a slice of what that sprawling suburb must have been like during the 1950's: white, rich and for the most part, free from the crime that has gripped many of the surrounding neighborhoods since the 1970's. The houses are huge and white and sell for half-a-million in a soft market. There are no signs of the ethnic restaurants and temples that in recent years have given the Valley flavor; this is the land of speed bumps and Presbyterian churches and afternoon lessons with the local tennis pro. In West Hills, Little League baseball is a religion the way high school football is in parts of Texas.

Jesse James Hollywood—accused drug dealer, murderer and one of the FBI's most wanted grew up here playing baseball, and he even pretty good at it. He was a short kid, and like a lot of smaller boys he tried to make up for it in the weight room, power lifting and taking supplements. He was hyper and a little anxious and wore a scowl on his face as if it were a favorite tee shirt.

While Hollywood may have been born with a name befitting a professional wrestler, what distinguished him from his peers was his amazing pot connection. He could easily put his hands on 25 to 50 pounds a month, which he sold on consignment to a loose coterie of his baseball buddies for \$4,250 per pound. They would turn around and sell it for upwards of 5 grand. Hollywood told his friends that he got it from his dad, Jack Hollywood, himself a respected former little league coach. The elder Hollywood, however, has adamantly denied furnishing his son with drugs.

Jesse Hollywood's drug money afforded him all the trophies of the modern California gangster. He took the Honda Accord his father gave him as a gift and tricked it out with low-rider hydraulics, mirror windows, and two-tone leather interior. He had several guns, including a shotgun he kept under his bed, an AR-15 assault rifle and a TEC-9 semi-automatic. He was 20 years old and owned a three-bedroom house where he lived with rottweilers and a model-skinny girlfriend who had had "Jesse James" tattooed above her ass. And like most drug dealers, he had enemies.

Chief among these was his former friend Ben Markowitz. A year older than Hollywood, Markowitz was everything he was not. He was a talented athlete who at 15 had won the US national Tae Kwan Doe championship for his age group and weight class. He may have grown up in West Hills and played in the same Lilly white Little League as Hollywood, but he was far from coddled. His parents divorced when he was very young and he ran away from home at 13. When he returned at 15, he was covered ankle to neck in tattoos, including the letters SFV, an insignia for a San Fernando Valley gang. Among a group of guys who faked gangster affectation, Markowitz was the real thing.

For the better part of a year, Markowitz was one of Hollywood's best earners and closest friends. Being one of the only guys he knew who could handle himself in a fight, he was also his chief debt collector. When a kid in San Diego who was slow in paying a \$2,000 drug debt he owed Hollywood, Markowitz volunteered to talk to him. In lieu of money, Markowitz agreed to assume the kid's debt in exchange for 200 ecstasy pills, which he hoped sell to Valley ravers for \$20 a pill and turn a nice profit. Unfortunately for Markowitz, after peddling about 30 of them, he discovered the pills were bunk. He took the \$600 he made, threw together another \$200 and gave it to Hollywood, leaving him with a \$1,200 debt.

Hollywood's relationship with Markowitz had already begun to fissure months earlier when Markowitz stopped hanging out with Hollywood and the rest of his old friends and started working in his father's machinist shop, where he made parts for the aerospace industry. The debt was the final crack. The two didn't speak, instead communicating through a series of gotcha pranks and threatening phone messages. Hollywood went to one of his favorite restaurants, BJ's Rib House in Reseda, where Markowitz's girlfriend at the time waited tables; instead of paying his \$50 bill, Hollywood left her a message on a napkin: "Put this on Ben's tab." Markowitz responded the only way he knew how: by threatening bodily harm. Then he took it one step further: he went to Hollywood's insurance company and told them that Hollywood's souped-up Accord, which he had valued at \$36,000 and reported stolen, had actually not been stolen and that Hollywood was committing insurance fraud. Hollywood was infuriated. In his mind, Markowitz now owed him the 36 grand.

Hollywood soon found out that Ben Markowitz was not a guy he wanted to be in a feud with. One day, he returned home and found one of his dogs hanging by the collar on his backyard fence; the dog was the victim of an apparent accident, but Hollywood was convinced that Markowitz did it. In the last week of July 2000, someone broke the windows of Hollywood's house with an axe, then left him phone message saying in a fake Mexican accent that their name was Little Shooter and asking him how he liked the window job. It was all too much for

Hollywood, and he decided to find a new place to live. He borrowed a white moving van from John Roberts, an old friend of the family's who had been in some sort of nefarious business with John Hollywood years earlier. During the first week of August, Hollywood moved his things into storage. On Sunday the 6th, Hollywood and his friends decided to use the van for a little road trip to Santa Barbara for the annual Fiesta celebration. But first they were going to stop by Ben Markowitz's father's house and either shake Ben down or perhaps exact a little revenge for the window breaking incident.



Jesse James Hollywood never ran into Ben Markowitz that hot afternoon in August, and he never got to his dad's house to break windows. What happened instead has sent shocks through the San Fernando Valley, Santa Barbara and the nation, reverberations of which will likely be felt for years. That was when a true innocent—Ben's 15-year-old half brother Nicholas Markowitz—became a pawn in an escalating game and when childish pranks shockingly, almost inexplicably, turned to murder.

Nick Markowitz was nothing like his half-brother, though at times he wanted to be. He emulated Ben taking Tae Kwon Doe lessons and smoking dime bags of weed with his friends but wasn't particularly tough or athletic. He was a shy, good-natured kid who took drama and thought about one day becoming an actor. "I have always been worried about [him admiring me]," Ben Markowitz told a Santa Barbara grand jury in October of last year. "Nicholas would try to be [like] me, but he had two loving parents that were together [and] spoiled him rotten. He wasn't being himself, whereas I had lived an everyday life of being myself. I didn't look up to anybody."

According to Ben, Nick started smoking pot socially, and that led to a taste for Valium. Nick would sometimes tell friends that he was addicted to Valium, but he may have just been being dramatic. Whatever the case, on that Sunday, he was out on the winding streets of his neighborhood retrieving the pouch in which he kept his weed, pills, and glass pipe. He had ditched it the night before when he had returned home obviously on something and his parents confronted him on it. By the time Nick was spotted by Jesse Hollywood, who was riding shotgun in a white van driven by Jesse Ruge, one of the guys that sold pot for him, he had already gotten his pouch back. Pauline Mahoney was driving back from church at the time and would tell in a police in a 911 call immediately afterward that she saw several young men "beating the crap out of some kid" and throwing him into the back of a van. She drove by slowly to get to the license plate number, which she gave to the police. (The fact that the police apparently did nothing in response to her call is the subject of an internal affairs investigation at the LAPD).

The men Mahoney saw were Hollywood, Rugge, and William Skidmore, a lanky loudmouth who Hollywood didn't trust enough to have deal pot for him but liked to have around because he was funny and loyal; the kid, of course, was Nick Markowitz. Apparently, Hollywood saw him, recognized him as Ben's brother, and rather instinctively decided to rough him up and abduct him. He didn't know exactly what he was going to do with him or how kidnapping Nick was going to help him get his money from Ben; there was never a plan. But they weren't going to let a kidnapping stand in the way of a good time, so they decided to take the kid with them to Santa Barbara.

During the 45-minute trip north, Hollywood made threats to Nick, saying that his brother better pay him his money now, and that if Nick ran, he was going to break his teeth. Nick told him he didn't even like his brother, and that his parents would pay for the windows Ben broke. As they spoke, Nick's beeper, which Hollywood had taken from him along with his wallet and pouch and placed on the dashboard, kept going off. Susan Markowitz had discovered her that her son was missing and was trying frantically to reach him.

When they arrived in Santa Barbara they went to the townhouse apartment of a Ricky Hoeflinger, a friend of Jesse Rugge's. Rugge, whose parents are divorced, lived half the time in the tiny coastal town, and half the time in the Valley. They took Nick to the back bedroom where Skidmore bound his wrists and legs in duct tape that he found in the apartment and covered his eyes with a sock. Several people saw Nick there, including Hoeflinger and Gabe Ibarra, one of Hoeflinger's closest friends, and though they recognized that something was seriously wrong and were worried about it, they chose not to say anything out of fear. "Hollywood walked up to me and kind of whispered, 'Keep your fucking mouth shut, you don't say shit,'" Ibarra told the grand jury. "Personally, I took that as a threat."

Hollywood didn't keep Nick bound up for long. Shortly after they arrived in Santa Barbara, Nick was on the couch, unshackled, doing bong hits. From the Sunday of the abduction to the Tuesday of Nick's murder, the guys kept Nick comfortably stoned,

lessening his desire to escape and making him feel part of the gang. By Sunday's end, Hollywood and Skidmore had returned to the Valley and left Ruge in charge of Nick. When Ruge took him home to sleep that night at his father's home, neither Nick nor apparently Ruge knew that Nick's life was in danger.

But someone did. On Sunday, Jesse Hollywood made the phone call that would grimly seal Nick's fate. He called Steve Hogg, he and his father's longtime friend and lawyer, allegedly told him he had abducted a kid, and wanted to find out what the sentence guidelines were for assault and kidnapping. According to court papers, Hogg told him that it could bring a life sentence, and then pleaded with him to release whoever it was that he had abducted. According to prosecutors, this was when Hollywood, perhaps fearing both the prison sentence and the wrath of Ben Markowitz, made the decision to have Nick killed.

Hogg had no idea what Hollywood was planning. That night he contacted John Roberts, the Hollywood family friend well versed in matters criminal, hoping he would know how to get Jesse Hollywood out of this increasingly desperate situation. "I'm 68-years-old and from Chicago," testified Roberts, who met up with Hogg that night at a Simi Valley McDonalds. "[I planned] to do my Chicago act and grab the kid and give him money to keep his mouth shut, which is ridiculous because there is no such thing as a 15-year-old keeping his mouth shut. The whole thing was to get the kid out. The idea of the money, that's just old fashioned 1950's gangster talk."

The next day, back in Santa Barbara, Ruge invited three friends over: two girls, Natasha Adams-Young, Kelly Carpenter, and 17-year-old Graham Pressley. At first, they thought that Nick was just a friend of Ruge's and talked to him about music and skateboarding; but when they saw him vacuuming Ruge's floors, they realized he was more captive than guest. Still, it didn't seem like a big deal. There were several times over the course of the day, as the group moved from house to house smoking pot and watching TV, that Ruge left and none of the original kidnapers were there. At one point, Natasha Adams, who had grown fond of this shy kid from L.A., cleaned the scrapes he got when

Hollywood jumped him with some peroxide. "He seemed happy," she testified. "I talked to him about it and he said he would tell his grandkids about it, just the story."



Nick Markowitz never made it home. Shortly after the girls left, Ryan Hoyt arrived at the hotel with Jesse Hollywood's TEC-9 and a fresh roll of duct tape. According to police interviews, Nick was taken to the mountains and the head of Lizard's Mouth, a popular hiking trail that weaves along the Pacific. Nick had been told that he was being taken to meet another car that was going to take him to L.A. While Graham Pressley waited in the car, Rugge and Hoyt took him to the gravesite, where Hoyt and Rugge bound his wrists behind his back and covered his eyes in duct tape. Then Hoyt knocked him out with a shovel, placed him in the grave, and shot him nine times. Immediately after the murder, Rugge vomited. Meanwhile, back in Los Angeles, Jesse Hollywood was with his girlfriend, Michelle Leshner, whom he called Sue, at her house in the Valley. Hours earlier, perhaps while Pressley was digging Nick's grave, they were out celebrating Leshner's 20th birthday at an Outback Steakhouse.

On Saturday the 12th, a hiker discovered a body at Lizard's Mouth. Monday morning, Natasha Adams' mother woke her up with a copy of the local paper that identified the body as belonging to Nicholas Markowitz. She was devastated. Within hours, she was in the Sheriff's office telling everything she knew. By Wednesday evening, Graham Pressley, William Skidmore, Jesse Rugge and Ryan Hoyt had all been arrested and charged with kidnapping, criminal conspiracy, and murder. They immediately confessed to their part in the murder, each pointing to Jesse Hollywood as the man who orchestrated it.

Hollywood had hit the road even before his friends were arrested. First he went to Palm Springs, where Leshner was enrolled in a modeling convention. From there, the two of them drove the 20 hours to Colorado, making a pit stop at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. Hollywood had spent most of junior high in Colorado Springs and it was the only place outside of California where he had friends. He stayed in Woodland Park with Richard Dispenza, his godfather, a high school teacher and football coach who would be forced to resign those posts when it was discovered that he had harbored a fugitive. When Hollywood got to Colorado Springs, he put Leshner on a flight back to L.A.; she was happy to go, telling police upon her return that Hollywood "had been acting like a shithead." Hollywood hooked up with an old friend of his from junior high, Chas Saulsbury, who agreed to drive him back to L.A.

During their long trip, Hollywood would tell him, in exacting detail, all of the circumstances surrounding the murder Nick Markowitz's.

On October 30th, with Hollywood still at large, a \$30,000 award posted for his capture and arrest, the trial of the People of the State of California V. Ryan Hoyt began in a Santa Barbara Court room. Hoyt pled not guilty, claiming that the videotaped confession he made to police was a lie to protect Hollywood. He said he did go up there that night, but only to deliver the gun, not to shoot anybody. If convicted, he could receive the death penalty. William Skidmore, who did not participate in the actual murder, is expected to cut a plea with the district attorney. Meanwhile, Jesse Ruggie and Graham Pressley, who is being tried as an adult, are expected to stand trial together in front of two separate juries later this year; each faces the death penalty.

Out of respect to his stepmother, Ben Markowitz did not attend Nick's August 19th memorial service. "Any peace of mind I can give her, I want to give her," he told reporters at the time. "She does not deserve me being in her face." When Markowitz's testified in Ryan Hoyt's trial, he was wearing handcuffs. Earlier this year, Markowitz was convicted of armed robbery and is currently serving a 3-year prison sentence in state prison.

August 23rd was the last night anyone was known to see Jesse James Hollywood. Chas Saulsbury dropped him off at the West Hills home of John Roberts, Hollywood family friend and retired Chicago tough-guy. Roberts had been watching a baseball game he had money on when Hollywood came in through the screen door in back. He had always turned to Roberts when he had problems he couldn't talk to his father or friends about; this time he was looking for a way to get identification papers. "I told him that I couldn't," testified Roberts. "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. After an emotional 20-minute conversation with Roberts, Hollywood left by the door he came in and disappeared into the soft, suburban night.

"He was terrified," said Roberts. "Absolutely terrified. In his head, his life was gone.