

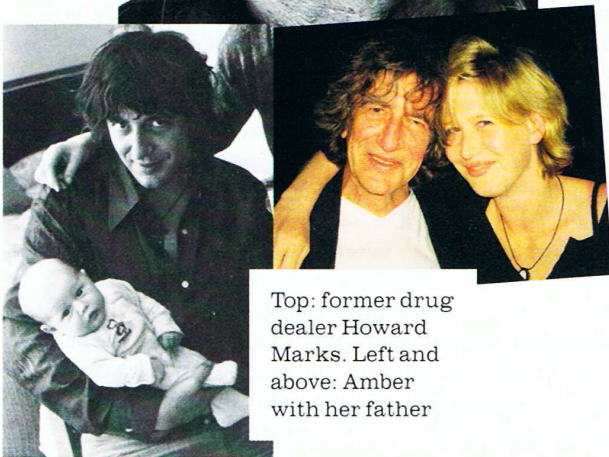
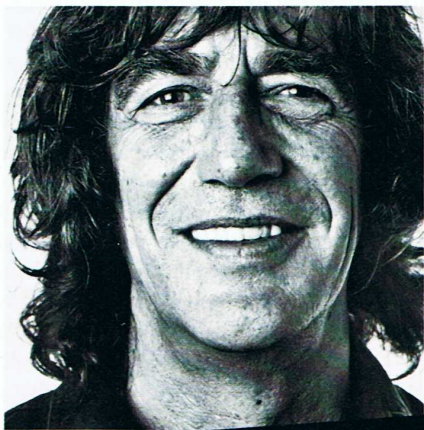
‘LOVING MY FUGITIVE FATHER’

Drug smuggler Howard Marks was one of the FBI’s most wanted men, but for Amber Marks he was an absent father. She tells ELLE how she was determined to stay close to the notorious fugitive known as ‘Mr Nice’

words by SALIHUGHES

On 26 July 1988, 10-year-old Amber Marks woke up to the sound of her younger sister Francesca screaming. She ran into the hallway of their Majorca home to find it teeming with armed police officers. Through the chaos, she could see her father being dragged away into a police car. An officer told Amber, Francesca and their toddler brother Patrick that their dad, notorious cannabis smuggler Howard Marks, was going to be locked up for the rest of his life. Most children would have been overwhelmed by fear, but Amber insists she was furious rather than afraid, and knew exactly what was going on. ‘I was angry that the police said they were looking for guns,’ she says. ‘There weren’t any in the house, that wasn’t my dad’s style. I was annoyed that they presumed to know him, just because he dealt dope.’ Then the police announced they were arresting Amber’s mum Judy on a conspiracy charge. ‘Mum broke down and had a panic attack,’ Amber recalls. ‘She wasn’t allowed to get a dressing gown, so she just stood in her underwear, crying. It was horrific to see her like that. But I immediately adopted the role of responsible adult and ran for a bowl for her to be sick in.’

They took Judy away, and you could say that Amber’s childhood was officially over. For a 10 year old, Amber was extraordinarily knowing. But then she was no stranger to police searches: her earliest memory is aged 18 months, watching the police ransack her home and charge her father with importing 15 tonnes of cannabis. She recalls an officer offering her a chocolate to distract her from the upsetting scene. ‘I still can’t eat Quality Street today,’ she says. That time, Howard Marks was sent to Brixton prison ➤



Top: former drug dealer Howard Marks. Left and above: Amber with her father

ELLEmemoir

for 18 months. Amber was told he was working at a toy factory, which she happily believed, but there's no doubt she had picked up on what had been going on. 'I remember getting stuck in a lift with Dad and a load of people. He started making a roll-up cigarette and I asked loudly whether he was going to put "that other stuff" in it.'

Amber's upbringing was far from conventional. Savvy and privileged, thanks to her father's huge drugs operation (he controlled an estimated 10 per cent of the world's cannabis trade), she travelled the world and had developed a penchant for foie gras by the age of three. She was close to her parents, Howard in particular. 'My parents respected us, enjoyed our company and we were made to feel their equals,' she remembers. For many years, she would ask her father to recount details of a previous court trial. 'I found it fascinating,' she says. 'It sparked my interest in the law and Dad encouraged me to work hard and pursue it.'

That interest in law led to a career as a barrister, but Amber refuses to conform to the stereotype. When we meet, her shaggy blonde hair is dishevelled after a rainy bike ride from the north London flat she shares with her long-term boyfriend Crofton, a rare-books seller. She's wearing a red skater skirt, sweater and flats. She's sharp, charismatic and direct, yet laid-back. Her expressive features are almost identical to Howard's, who I met while working at *Loaded* magazine in the late 1990s, where he became a columnist after his release. 'Out of everyone in my family, my dad and I are the most alike,' says Amber. 'We have the same interests and sense of humour, the same politics and ideals [both are fervently pro-legalisation of all drugs]. But I'm the responsible one and quite straight. I'm a good girl,' she smiles. 'People think my profession is an ironic choice because of my dad, but it's quite the opposite,' she says. 'I've spent my adulthood trying to get people out of prison – exactly what I desperately wanted to do as a child. But I have to be careful to do other things, too, otherwise I'd be dedicating my life to righting the wrongs of my childhood.'

Howard was sentenced to 25 years and Judy to two years (she served 18 months), in maximum-security American jails. Amber, her sister and brother remained in Spain. They stayed in the family home, cared for by their mum's younger sister. 'It was hard,' Amber admits. 'Money was tight and things were unstable, but we never complained because we were terrified of being separated and put into care.'

Amber was driven by a mature sense of responsibility, a child-turned-parent figure, that seems tragic in someone so young. 'Our problems paled in comparison to Mum and Dad's. Who were we to complain when they were locked up in prison? I didn't want a new pair of shoes or whatever, I just wanted my mum and dad home.' It's this stoic pragmatism that prevails in Amber's recollections. She doesn't so much deny her life was hard as insist she could cope. Unable to afford the airfare from Spain to the American jail in which Howard was serving his sentence, Amber only managed to visit her father once in seven years. 'We could see how much it cheered Dad to have us there for those seven days,' she says. 'I sensed a change in him after that, like we spurred him on to work on his appeal.' Back home in Spain, she kept Howard close by poring over scrapbooks full of holiday snaps. 'I'd lie

down in my parents' walk-in wardrobes when I was sad,' she says. 'I'd sniff his clothes to remind me of him.'

Howard wrote to his daughter every day, discussing everything from the intricacies of prison life and his appeal, to Darwin's theories and Amber's boyfriends. 'They were amazing, long letters, written to cheer me up and keep me educated in his absence. I could never forget him because his words were there all the time,' says Amber, who still treasures the letters. As a teen, she even wrote to him to tell him she'd lost her virginity, rather than confiding in her mother. 'My mum was the strict one,' she explains, 'but my dad was my friend, the one I confided in.'

Amber insists that she never resented her father for his actions. 'I was missing him, so how could I blame him? People are always surprised when I say that, but I love him. He just smuggled dope – I don't have a problem with that.' Her anger is directed at what she sees as an unjust legal system. 'What messed our lives up was my mum being locked up, which she never should have been. If that hadn't happened, there would have been no family trauma. We'd have missed him, but he can look after himself.'

After Howard had served seven of his 25 years, a judge agreed to consider his parole. Amber, then 17, took her chance and wrote the judge a letter. 'I explained what it was like not having him there, all the education I was losing out on [Howard is an Oxford-educated physicist and philosophy academic] and that I was missing the loving company of a very kind man,' she says. The appeal was successful, and relief came one morning in 1995. Amber waited nervously for him in the garden. 'I felt so happy. We had a really big hug. He told us he loved us and the house felt happy again; a huge weight had been lifted.'

Howard signed a deal to write his autobiography (*Mr Nice* [Vintage] from the nickname he earned due to his anti-violence/no hard drugs business code) and became a cult hero. 'It was so lovely to see him admired and appreciated. I'd always known he wasn't this dreadful person the police had said he was. I didn't have to convince anyone any more. It was a real validation for me.' Judy and Howard's marriage deteriorated and they finally divorced acrimoniously last year, which has been traumatic for Amber and her siblings. 'Throughout all those terrible times, while Dad was in prison, it was always really important to me that they were together; that we were strong as a family,' she says, sadly. When I ask her if she feels her parents would still be together now if it wasn't for her father's arrest, her sad expression says it all.

Amber and Howard are still close. Very occasionally they fight, the last time over Amber's decision to leave a safe desk job to write her book, *Headspace*, a funny investigation into flawed police search and surveillance techniques. 'He was worried that I wouldn't be able to do it, and wanted me to have the security [of a permanent job],' she smiles, the irony not lost on her. When Amber proved him wrong, Howard was the first to admit it.

Amber tells me about her recent book-launch party, when Howard cried. 'He was really proud of me,' she says. 'But he was pretty plastered, so I sent him home in a taxi!' When it comes to looking out for her dad, it's clear that old habits die hard. ■
Headspace (Virgin Books, £11.99) by Amber Marks is out now