



**WIFE #4**  
Robyn Brown  
*The Newcomer*

**WIFE #1**  
Meri Brown  
*The First Love*

**WIFE #2**  
Janelle Brown  
*The Career Woman*

**WIFE #3**  
Christine Brown  
*The Homebody*

**THE HUSBAND**  
Kody Brown  
*The Man of the House*

TV'S SISTER WIVES

# Four Wives **AND A** Firestorm

UNDER POLICE INVESTIGATION AFTER OPENING THEIR DOORS FOR A REALITY SHOW, THE POLYGAMIST BROWN FAMILY HAS NO REGRETS. SAYS THE MAN OF THE HOUSE: 'THIS IS BRINGING US CLOSER'

**BY JOHNNY DODD**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIGEL PARRY

**LEAVING THEIR 16 KIDS AT HOME**, Kody Brown and his four wives were in a celebratory mood as they sat down to dinner at a friend's house on Sept. 27: The night before, their TLC reality show *Sister Wives* had just premiered amid much buzz. But then came an e-mail on Kody's fourth wife Robyn's cell phone, followed by a flurry of calls on everyone's phones, with really bad news: The Browns' hometown police department in Lehi, Utah, was investigating Kody for felony bigamy. "It was like a gut punch," he recalls. Adds his second wife, Janelle, 41: "We all just got this pit in the bottom of our stomachs." • Brown, 42, and his supersize Mormon family have good reason to feel queasy. Since going public on *Sister Wives*, the affable polygamist with the rock star hair has found himself at the center of a legal showdown that could land him in prison for up to five years. Last week,

#1

**MERI, 39**, who just got laid off from her job in the mental-health industry, married Kody 20 years ago. They have one daughter, Mariah, 15.



#2

**JANELLE, 41**, the most outspoken wife, works in the field of public service. Her 17-year marriage has produced six kids: Hunter, 13; Garrison, 12; Gabriel, 8; Savannah, 5; Logan, 16; and Madison, 14.



#3

**CHRISTINE, 38**, is a stay-at-home mom. Wed for 16 years, she has six kids: (from left) Gwendlyn, 8; Aspyr, 15; Ysabel, 7; Truely, 5 months; Paedon, 12; and Mykelti, 14.



#4

**ROBYN, 32**, who has three kids from a previous marriage (Dayton, 10; Aurora, 8; and Breanna, 6), married Kody in May. Her sister wives jokingly call her the trophy wife.



Lehi police turned over their findings to the Utah County Attorney, who has yet to decide whether to charge Brown with a crime. Though it's reportedly been nine years since anyone has been prosecuted for polygamy in Utah, the Brown family has hired a high-powered lawyer to mount a defense of Kody—and their way of life. "I just hope," says Kody, tears welling up in his eyes, "they don't put me in jail for loving four women."

Brown and his wives insist that they understood the legal dangers of doing a reality show and discussed it with their kids. Still, they felt it was a risk worth taking in order to show a side to polygamy different from the most outrageous, headline-making cases. "We understand the outrage and confusion over our lifestyle," says Robyn, 32, whose recent "spiritual" marriage ceremony to Kody is chronicled on the show's Oct. 17 season finale. "We're still Frankenstein and freaks to a lot of people."

But rather than being scandalous or titillating, *Sister Wives* paints a picture of the Browns as a surpris-

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**I hear from people, 'I support you, but I would never live your lifestyle.'”**  
—Meri Brown

ingly normal family—with really complicated scheduling. (See box.) The wives have separate wings in the home (Robyn lives in a separate house two-thirds of a mile away) and separate date nights and week-

ends with Kody, with the occasional group outing. They share parenting duties, bills, chores and social circles. They even watch HBO's soap-opera polygamy series *Big Love*. "I like to laugh at it and think, 'That's not how it is for us,'" says Meri, 39, Brown's first—and only legal—wife. And, just in case you were wondering, they claim to take a straitlaced approach to the bedroom. "A ménage à trois is something college guys do with prostitutes," explains Kody. "Not something a loving husband does with his wives."

The Browns may be at peace with their decision to open their doors to TV cameras, but fallout from the reality show hasn't just been legal. "We

are in a community of [polygamists], and most of them are not fond of us being in public," says Kody. (There are an estimated 38,000 Americans in the western United States practicing polygamy, mostly those belonging to fundamentalist Mormon groups like the Browns.) Says his third wife, Christine, 38: "This is a fear-based society. They don't want to be outed."

Then there's the impact on Kody's job as an advertising salesman. Though his employer and coworkers have long known about what he calls his "plural lifestyle," being on TV has meant that "now there are those saying, 'We need this account assigned to someone who is not Kody Brown,'" he says. "Emotionally,

HAIR: JUNE WESTBURY; MAKEUP: KASILEE BISHOP; STYLIST: HOLLY COPELAND; ARTISTS BY TIMOTHY PRANO

## The Family-Go-Round

How do you schedule a family that includes 1 husband, 4 wives and 16 kids? It's not easy. "The experience has stretched me a bit," admits Kody, who uses a pocket planner to keep track of his family time. With each wife in her own living space, Kody—who has no closet or room of his own—shuttles among them according to a set schedule: "We established that each wife has a specific night, and we rotate the weekends [Friday to Sunday]," he says. There's one household bank account, in addition to each wife's personal account; Kody and Janelle handle most of the finances. And the family often relies on text messages (one just for the adults, another sent to everyone) to communicate. "It helps to have a little ADD when you have four wives," jokes Kody. Plus, "I'm a well-trained husband!"

# Will He Go to Jail?

Though Kody is only legally married to first wife Meri—the other three marriages are “spiritual”—Utah law considers his mere cohabitation with the other women bigamy. In the past, the authorities have only taken action when cases also involved child abuse, incest or welfare fraud. “There are a lot of considerations we need to assess before we make a determination, including the constitutionality of this statute,” says Julia Thomas, deputy attorney for the Utah County Attorney’s Office. Says the Browns’ Washington, D.C.-based lawyer Jonathan Turley: “State officials know of thousands of polygamists. . . . It would be a curious thing to select one family for prosecution simply because they appeared on television.”

the show has been the roller coaster ride from hell.”

Even the children—aged 5 months to 16 years, the oldest of which attend local public schools—have seen firsthand how divisive the issue of polygamy can be. “Two of my friends got grounded, sticking up for us to their parents after they watched the show,” says Aspy, 14, who, like her siblings, couldn’t imagine her family any other way: “We always have a mom to come home to. You are never alone.” But not all of the kids are planning to follow in their parents’ footsteps. Says Madison, 14: “I love my family, but I want one husband, and I want his attention to be focused on me. I don’t think I could handle the jealousy.”



“I just hope they don’t put me in jail for loving four women”

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg, critics say. “They paint a very pretty picture of this way of life,” says Carolyn Jessop, an outspoken polygamy critic and author whose former husband had numerous wives and dozens of children. “But those of us who’ve lived through it know that when you look a bit deeper, you’ll see this isn’t a natural way to live.”

The Browns’ response to the con-

troversy, meanwhile, has been a completely natural one: Kody and his wives have focused on keeping their kids from worrying about when—or if—police will come knocking on the door, armed with a warrant for Kody’s arrest. “We put on a brave face,” says Kody. “I have to keep believing that it is important that this story be told. No matter what, I have to stick to that for the sake of my kids and the future.” ●