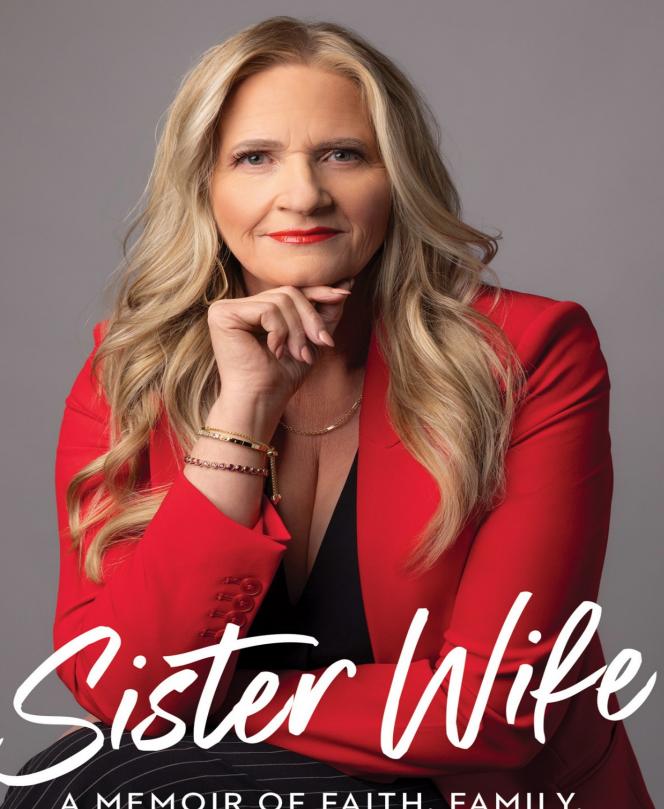
CHRISTINE BROWN WOOLLEY



A MEMOIR OF FAITH, FAMILY, AND FINDING FREEDOM

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Sister Wife

A MEMOIR OF FAITH, FAMILY, AND FINDING FREEDOM



CHRISTINE BROWN
WOOLLEY



Gallery Books

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi To Dad, for being my hero: I'm still a daddy's girl. To my mom, Annie, for helping me find my strength; to my other mom, Susan, for the sagest advice I've ever heard.

For David, the love of my life. Gosh!! I love our life together so much. You've helped me become stronger and recognize my value, and you have brought so much fun and laughter into our lives while helping me find a peaceful calm that I didn't know existed.

For the children I pushed out of my womb, as well as the children I've gained through my family: my favorite thing is being your mom.

Family Tree



KODY BROWN + MERI

Leon

KODY BROWN + JANELLE

Logan

Madison

Hunter

Garrison

Gabriel

Savanah

KODY BROWN + CHRISTINE

Aspyn

Mykelti

Paedon

Gwendlyn

Ysabel

Truely

KODY BROWN + ROBYN

Adopted by Kody from previous marriage:

Dayton

Aurora

Breanna

With Kody:

Solomon

Ariella

PROLOGUE



LOVE IS LOVE

On sunny days like this one, it feels as if light touches every surface of the home I share with David and Truely. It's summer, so I've placed sunflowers and other bright bits of yellow throughout. Cheerful. Happy. It feels different from any place I've been before.

Truely bounds down the stairs, a towel wrapped around her shoulders, ready to head to the pool with a new friend. She's just made protein pancakes for the family, and spice fills the air. Cinnamon. Over breakfast, she and David grin and toss puns back and forth across the dining room table, with Truely whispering "Pray for me" when the dad jokes are too much.

It's perfect.

I'm gloriously happy, in a way that brings my shoulders to my ears in an involuntary self-hug and a satisfied smile to my face, which looks glowier even to me. Take that, menopause.

(Girl. We'll talk about that.)

David checks in throughout the day. *All good? Did you see this? I'm on my last job.* I had no idea a phone-alert chirp could leave me besotted.

I bustle through the house dealing with *Sister Wives* tasks—I honestly thought we were done with the show, but here's to season nineteen?—or hiding the breakables for a visit with the grandkids, or wrapping presents for another baby shower or wedding.

Sister Wives began just before Truely made her appearance in this life, and she was the first Baby Brown born to an audience. She's fifteen. That's a lot of years on camera, and yes, it changed us. It forced us to see, and confront, the ways we interacted with each other. We thought we were fine. We wanted the world to see what polygamy could look like, and I do believe we demonstrated

that it wasn't what people envisioned. Our ethics were strong, and we raised our children with so much love.

And chaos. The children roamed through our homes depending on their snack needs or moods. Quiet time? Meri. Girl talk and makeup? Robyn. A place to relax without nagging? Janelle. One-on-one conversation, games, and hanging out? My house. No one got bored—someone was usually crafting or baking, and one of us always had time, even if it meant fewer moments to ourselves. We had seventy-five people at Thanksgiving one year, and untold hordes of people followed the kids home from school or practice for pool dates, movie nights, or homework. With twenty-three people in the household by the end, someone always had a birthday. Whenever I can, I invite it all back in.

I'm glad that love, down to all the sibling silliness, made it on film.

But the camera also shines a light. I saw the funny expression I make when I'm shocked. I decided my clothes were frumpy. And I realized I've spent years saying "It's fine" on repeat. It's fine because I'm angry and don't have the words for it. It's fine because it's not worth the effort to explain. It's fine, though I might be doing my best to hold the family together while feeling overwhelmed. It's fine because that's what I've been trained to be. Fine. Small. Not a bother.

I'm certain I come from a long line of women who have said "It's fine." The show forced me to see that it wasn't—and maybe recognize that my ancestors had figured it out, too. Strong women, all of them.

But was I in a cult?

Ahem. I can hear you.

If I was, I'm glad of it. I come from a family and a community filled with talent, nurturing, and love, and women who had the support and ability to make good decisions for themselves. I think of my grandfather as a hero because he pushed through his fear of outsiders after seeing his family torn apart to try to make our community safer. I'm glad I had the opportunity to do the same, even if I ultimately chose to leave that community.

I thought I had exactly what I wanted until I realized my husband had fallen in love. And then I realized I wanted some of that. I wanted to fall in love, to find my soulmate—an idea I hadn't believed possible until I saw it happen to Kody. But here's the funny thing about love: I couldn't find meaningful, deep, true,

heart-skips-beats, secure love until I understood some of the wonderful things about myself.

You came here for a story, and I have a tale with every element, from an enchanted family cut off from the world, to four women trying to fit their toes into one glass slipper, to fathers disappearing in the night, to a perfectly ordinary man developing knighthood status after years of tending by his many wives, to a woman finally understanding that she deserved the fairy-tale ending she'd dreamed of before anyone taught her to believe any differently.

My favorite part of the story comes with a kiss so intense that every self-doubt I'd ever felt fled from my body, if only momentarily, and pulled me fully into a place where love *is* love.

DAUGHTER



Chapter One

IT FEELS BETTER

Until I was about five I was bald—I don't know why. So, I wore a towel as a wig as a little girl. I'd imagine my hair flowed down my back in the most brilliant shade of yellow. Sunny. Happy. Beautiful. My favorite was the lemon-colored one because I knew princesses had yellow hair, and my daddy called me princess. He still does.

I remember sitting in front of a mirror brushing my towel, and I remember it floating up and gently down behind me as I played on the swing set. It was hard to keep it on, especially on the swings, but I found ways to attach it to my head. Dad wondered why I was so into this towel, but that's just me. I chose, as a young girl, to be positive. Bald? Solution! Part of that was my upbringing: We didn't complain. That's typical of big families—you learn to deal because every boo-boo won't get a kiss, mom won't always see who pinched you, and siblings tease if you act like a baby. I could have moped and felt sorry for myself, or been a clown to get attention, or stewed and struck out in anger. Instead, I became a mediator, assessing everyone's emotions and working to keep things smooth. I decided, and it was a decision, that I preferred to be cheerful and positive.

It feels better.

I remember being happy as a child and having fun. I played in the backyard all the time—playing, playing, playing. I loved makeup and dresses and dolls. That was my personality: having fun.

I would wait for my dad to come home from work every day, and he always made time for me, even after a full day. My normal looked an awful lot like most kids' normal spending their childhoods in the early 1970s, except for one thing.

By the time I was five, I'd gotten rid of the yellow towel and my hair was long enough for my mom to roll it in pink foam curlers when my dad married his second wife. I remember their wedding and the ringlets I wore with my pretty burgundy dress. I remember being excited because I liked her. My mom and I talked about whom I would marry—just being silly.

"Well, I'm going to marry my dad," I said.

"You can't marry your dad," she told me, smiling. That didn't make sense. My dad was my favorite person.

"Well, who am I gonna marry?" I asked, heartbroken.

She told me I would find a good man. I believed her. I knew so many good men. I was surrounded by adults who loved me and made me feel special, who held my hand, answered my questions, and showed me how to do what I wanted to do. I would find someone who would adore me just as they had, and whom I would adore back.

Everyone in my circle was kind, and I could go anywhere and feel safe. Someone's mom would inevitably include me with her kids for the day's activities, just as my mom did with my friends and cousins. We all believed the same things. We all knew the same people. We all worked toward the betterment of ourselves and our community. From the day I was born, I felt cocooned in love. That day, I weighed five pounds—I was premature. My grandpa Rulon delivered me—he was our midwife—and from that moment on, all I felt from him was love. I remember walking with him in the grass, holding his hand, and knowing that he was a kind, good, loving man.

I didn't yet know that Grandpa Rulon had to flee from the family when Dad was young, and that Dad didn't see him or many of his brothers and sisters for years. I didn't yet understand, at age five, that in our religion—a version of fundamentalist, polygamist Mormon—we had to be careful, that it was best to refer to children from another mother as cousins, to split up into smaller groups at the movie theater, and to not add Dad's name to school documents.

I didn't yet understand the darkness in our community, or in that of other communities like ours. I didn't yet know just how far apart we stood from everyone else, from presidential orders to attacks on compounds.

Grandpa Rulon was murdered when I was five. As usual, I sat on the porch one day waiting for my dad, and he got home early. I'm sure my first thought was that I would get to spend more time with him, but I remember that he looked so sad. I'm not sure I had ever seen him look like that before.

"Hey Dad," I said, "why are you home from work?"

"They killed your grandpa," he said, obviously in shock. Another fundamentalist church leader—a member of our family—had ordered his followers to kill my grandpa.

I don't remember a funeral or the days that followed, just that my dad was sad. I would hear the family's stories of trauma through the years, and they would become my own. But I would hold on to that feeling of being surrounded by love when I thought of Grandpa Rulon.

In a way, I would follow in his footsteps: he had tried to tell the world about our church to bring safety to our community.

But the threats to our group didn't always come from outside.