The Starting Over Credit Playbook™

The Complete Guide to Building — or Rebuilding — Credit in Your Own Name After Divorce

HEAL · RECLAIM · LOVE

Christine Moriarty · Attorney · Author

EmpoweredAgingWomen.com · RealMomLife.com

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A Note Before We Begin

In my years of practice, I've sat across from more women than I can count who were brilliant, capable, and completely in the dark about their own credit. Not because they weren't paying attention — but because for years, sometimes decades, it simply wasn't their department. The mortgage was in his name. The cards were joint, but he managed them. The retirement account statements went to his email.

Then the marriage ends, and suddenly it's all your department. Every bit of it.

That moment — the one where you realize you don't actually know your own credit score — is not a failure. It's a starting line.

This playbook exists because that starting line deserves a map. Not vague encouragement to “build good credit habits,” but the actual mechanics: what a credit score is made of, how to read a credit report line by line, how to get your name cleanly separated from your ex-spouse's debt, and exactly which financial products to use at exactly which stage of rebuilding.

Whether you're starting from a thin file, a damaged one, or no file at all, the path forward is the same in one respect: it is entirely learnable, and it is entirely yours.

Let's get you standing on your own financial footing.

THE BIG PICTURE

What's Inside

Ten chapters, moving from the fundamentals to a full 12-month action plan. Read straight through, or jump to the chapter you need most right now.

1 **Credit 101**
What it is, how it works, why it matters now.

2 **Know Where You Stand**
Pulling and reading your credit report.

3 **Clean It Up**
Disputes, joint accounts, and errors.

4 **The Five Factors**
What actually drives your score.

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What to pay first, and how.

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9 **Credit and the Big Purchases**
Housing, cars, and major loans.

10 **Your 12-Month Credit Rebuild Plan**
Month by month, with worksheets.

CHAPTER 1

Credit 101

What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters More Than Ever

Before we talk about building or rebuilding credit, let's make sure the foundation is solid. Many women discover mid-divorce that they have large gaps in their financial knowledge — not because they aren't intelligent, but because these things were never their department. This chapter fills those gaps.

What Is a Credit Score?

A credit score is a three-digit number between 300 and 850 that summarizes your creditworthiness — meaning how likely you are, statistically, to repay money that is lent to you. Lenders use it to decide whether to give you a loan or credit card, and at what interest rate.

The most widely used scoring model is the **FICO Score**, developed by the Fair Isaac Corporation. You also have a **VantageScore**, which uses similar data but weighs it slightly differently. Most mortgage lenders use FICO; most free score tools show VantageScore. Both matter.

What Is a Credit Report?

Your credit report is the full document that your score is calculated from. It contains your complete history of borrowing and repayment: every credit card, loan, and mortgage you've had; how you've paid them; how much you owe; and how long you've been using credit.

There are three major credit bureaus — Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion — and each maintains its own version of your report. They don't always have identical information, which is why you need to pull all three. Your score may vary slightly between bureaus as a result.

Why Does This Matter So Much Right Now?

Post-divorce, your credit score will affect more aspects of your life than almost any other single number:

- ☐ Renting an apartment — landlords routinely pull credit before approving applications
- ☐ Buying a home — a difference of 50 points on your score can mean thousands of dollars in interest over the life of a mortgage
- ☐ Buying or leasing a car — loan approval and interest rates are directly tied to your score
- ☐ Getting a cell phone plan — carriers check credit for postpaid accounts
- ☐ Applying for jobs — some employers (especially in finance or government) run credit checks
- ☐ Getting utilities in your name — some utility companies require deposits for applicants with poor credit
- ☐ Qualifying for business credit — if you plan to start a business, your personal credit matters

KNOW THIS

During a long marriage, it is common for one spouse to handle all financial matters while the other is largely absent from credit decisions. If that was your situation, you are not behind — you are simply at a starting point. Many women have rebuilt excellent credit from scratch within 18–24 months.

The Difference Between Credit History and Credit Score

Your credit history is the raw record: how long you've had accounts, what types, how you've paid. Your credit score is the mathematical interpretation of that history into a single number. You can have a long credit history and a mediocre score (if that history includes missed payments), or a short history and a solid score (if everything on file is clean and low-balance).

What About My Spouse's Credit?

Your credit and your spouse's credit are separate — even in a long marriage. There is no such thing as a "joint credit score." What does affect you is any account where both of your names appear: joint credit cards, joint loans, or accounts where you are a co-signer. We'll address all of these in Chapter 3.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> If your name is on a joint account — even one your spouse agreed to pay in the divorce decree — you are legally liable for that debt. A divorce agreement binds the two of you, but not your creditors. If your spouse doesn't pay, it shows on your report.

CHAPTER 2

Know Where You Stand

Pulling and Reading Your Credit Report

You cannot improve what you haven't measured. This chapter walks you through pulling your reports, understanding what you're reading, and creating a clear snapshot of exactly where you are.

How to Get Your Free Reports

The only federally authorized source for free credit reports is **annualcreditreport.com** — a site mandated by the Fair Credit Reporting Act. Do not use other sites that claim to offer free reports; many are subscription traps.

- ☐ Go to annualcreditreport.com
- ☐ Request reports from all three bureaus: Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion
- ☐ You are entitled to free weekly reports — take advantage of this
- ☐ Download and save each report as a PDF before reviewing

PRO TIP

Also check your free credit score through your bank app, Credit Karma, or Experian's free tier. These show your VantageScore and update more frequently than your full reports.

Understanding the Score Ranges

Range	Rating	What It Means for You
800–850	Exceptional	Best available rates on everything. You are in excellent shape.
740–799	Very Good	Qualifies for virtually all loans at competitive rates.
670–739	Good	Most lenders will work with you. Some room to improve.
580–669	Fair	Limited options, higher interest rates. Rebuilding is very achievable.
300–579	Poor	Significant barriers now — but this score can improve 50–100+ points within 12 months of consistent action.

How to Read Your Credit Report

Your report is divided into sections. Here is what each one contains and what to look for:

Personal Information

Your name, address history, Social Security number, date of birth, and employer history.

Look for: Check for any inaccurate names (maiden name issues are common), old addresses that are wrong, or SSN errors.

Account History (Trade Lines)

Every credit account ever associated with your name: credit cards, mortgages, auto loans, student loans. Each shows the account type, lender, date opened, credit limit or loan amount, current balance, and payment history.

Look for: This is the most important section. Look for accounts you don't recognize, joint accounts still open, and any late payments — especially recent ones.

Public Records

Bankruptcies, civil judgments, and tax liens. Since 2018, most civil judgments and tax liens were removed from credit reports — but bankruptcy remains for 7–10 years.

Look for: If you see a bankruptcy you didn't file, that is fraud. If you filed jointly during your marriage, confirm it is accurately reported.

Hard Inquiries

Every time a lender pulls your report when you apply for credit. Hard inquiries stay on your report for 2 years but only affect your score for about 12 months.

Look for: You should recognize every inquiry. If you see lenders you've never applied with, that is a red flag for identity theft.

Soft Inquiries

Pulls from employers, insurers, or your own checks. These do NOT affect your score.

Look for: This section is informational only.

My Credit Snapshot

Score — Equifax	
Score — Experian	

Score — TransUnion
Date I pulled my reports
Number of accounts on my report
Number of joint accounts still open
Any accounts I don't recognize? (yes/no)
Biggest item helping my score
Biggest item hurting my score

CHAPTER 3

Clean It Up

Disputes, Joint Accounts & Errors

Before you build new credit, make sure what's already there is accurate. Errors are more common than most people realize — and each one costs you points. This chapter covers how to find and fix them.

Common Errors to Look For

- ☐ Accounts that are still joint with your ex-spouse — these need to be separated or closed
- ☐ Authorized user accounts in your spouse's name with negative history — request removal
- ☐ Late payments that were made on time — check your bank records and dispute
- ☐ Duplicate accounts (same debt listed twice)
- ☐ Accounts that belong to someone with a similar name
- ☐ Incorrect balances, credit limits, or loan amounts
- ☐ Accounts marked 'open' that were closed, or vice versa
- ☐ Debts that have passed the statute of limitations still appearing as active
- ☐ Accounts you genuinely don't recognize — potential fraud or identity theft

How to File a Dispute — Step by Step

You have the legal right under the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) to dispute any item on your credit report that you believe is inaccurate, incomplete, or unverifiable. Here is exactly how:

1. Gather your documentation

Pull the relevant account statement, canceled check, bank record, or divorce decree. You need something that supports your position. "I don't think this is right" is not enough — "Here is my bank statement showing this was paid on time" is.

2. Write a brief, factual dispute letter

State the account name and number, what the error is, and what the correct information should be. Keep it calm and factual. Do not include emotional language. One page maximum.

3. File online with each bureau directly

Go to Equifax.com/personal/credit-report-services, Experian.com/disputes, and TransUnion.com/credit-disputes. File with all three — each one maintains its own separate file on you.

4. Send supporting documentation

Upload or mail copies (never originals) of your supporting documents with the dispute. Keep a copy of everything you submit.

5. Wait for the investigation

Bureaus are required by law to investigate within 30 days (45 days if you submitted new evidence). You will receive written notice of the outcome.

6. Escalate if needed

If your dispute is denied and you believe it is valid, you can file a complaint with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) at consumerfinance.gov. You can also add a 100-word statement to your file explaining the dispute.

> **PRO TIP**
>
> Keep a dispute log: date submitted, bureau, account name, account number, and outcome. This is your paper trail if you need to escalate to the CFPB or consult an attorney.

Handling Joint Accounts

Joint accounts from your marriage are one of the most important things to address. Here is how each type works:

Account Type	What To Do
Joint Credit Cards	Contact the card issuer and request to remove one party from the account. Most issuers will not do this — they will require you to close the account and each open individual accounts instead. Do this as soon as possible after the divorce is final.
Authorized User Accounts	If you were an authorized user on your spouse's account, call the issuer and ask to be removed. If the account has a good payment history, you may want to wait until you have your own accounts established first — that history currently helps you.
Joint Loans (Auto, Personal)	These cannot simply be 'removed.' The only way to separate a joint loan is to refinance it into one person's name. If the divorce decree assigned a joint loan to your spouse but it is not refinanced, you remain liable.
Joint Mortgage	Same principle — refinancing is the only true separation. If you are keeping the house, refinancing into your name alone is essential and requires you to qualify on your own income and credit.

My Dispute & Joint Account Tracker

Account name:	Bureau disputed:
Error description:	Date filed:
Account name:	Bureau disputed:
Error description:	Date filed:
Joint accounts I need to close or separate:	
Joint loans that need to be refinanced:	

CHAPTER 4

The Five Factors

What Actually Drives Your Score

Your FICO score is not random. It is calculated from five specific factors, each weighted differently. Knowing how much each one counts tells you exactly where to focus your time and energy.

35% Payment History

The single biggest factor in your score. Every on-time payment builds it. Every missed or late payment damages it — sometimes significantly.

- ☐ A payment 30 days late can drop your score 60–110 points depending on your baseline
- ☐ The damage from a late payment fades over time, but stays on your report for 7 years
- ☐ Set up autopay for at least the minimum payment on every account
- ☐ If you have a late payment history, it will take consistent on-time payments — typically 12–24 months — to offset it

30% Credit Utilization

The percentage of your available credit that you are currently using. This is calculated both per card and across all cards combined.

- ☐ Keep each individual card below 30% of its limit — below 10% is better
- ☐ A card with a $1,000 limit should carry no more than $300 at any time
- ☐ Utilization is calculated at the moment your lender reports to the bureaus — usually your statement closing date
- ☐ Paying your balance before the statement closes (not just before the due date) lowers your reported utilization
- ☐ Do NOT close credit cards to 'simplify' — this reduces available credit and spikes your utilization

15% Length of Credit History

How long you have had credit accounts, including the age of your oldest account, your newest account, and the average age of all accounts.

- ☐ Longer history generally helps your score
- ☐ Opening new accounts lowers your average account age temporarily
- ☐ Closing old accounts also lowers your average account age — keep old cards open even if you rarely use them
- ☐ If you have thin credit history, this factor will constrain your score for a while — that is normal and will improve with time

10% Credit Mix

Having a variety of credit types: revolving credit (cards), installment loans (auto, student, mortgage), and open accounts.

- ☐ You do not need every type of credit — this factor only matters at the margins
- ☐ If you only have credit cards, adding an installment loan (like a credit-builder loan) can modestly help
- ☐ Do not open accounts just to improve your mix — the hard inquiry and new account age effects may cancel out the benefit

10% New Credit Inquiries

Each time you formally apply for credit, the lender does a 'hard pull' of your report. Too many in a short period signals financial stress to scoring models.

- ☐ Hard inquiries stay on your report for 2 years but only affect your score for about 12 months
- ☐ A single hard inquiry typically drops your score 5–10 points temporarily
- ☐ Rate shopping for a mortgage or auto loan within a 14–45 day window counts as a single inquiry
- ☐ Checking your own credit is a 'soft pull' and never affects your score

CHAPTER 5

Building Credit in Your Own Name

Strategies That Work, Even From Scratch

Whether you're starting with a thin file, a damaged file, or no file at all — there is a clear, proven path. These strategies are ordered from most accessible to most advanced. Start where you are.

Secured Credit Card

The most accessible starting point for anyone rebuilding. You provide a deposit — typically $200–$500 — which becomes your credit limit. The card works like a regular credit card and reports to all three bureaus.

- ☐ Use it for one or two small recurring purchases each month (gas, a streaming subscription)
- ☐ Pay the full balance before or on the due date every month
- ☐ After 6–12 months of on-time payments, most secured cards convert to unsecured and return your deposit
- ☐ Look for cards with no annual fee: Discover it® Secured and Capital One Platinum Secured are highly rated
- ☐ Avoid secured cards from predatory issuers that charge high annual fees on low limits

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Credit-Builder Loan

Specifically designed for credit building. You make monthly payments to the lender; the money is held in a savings account and released to you when the loan is paid off. You build payment history and savings simultaneously.

- ☐ Available at most credit unions and community banks — ask specifically for a 'credit-builder loan'
- ☐ Self (self.inc) is a well-regarded online option with flexible payment amounts
- ☐ Loan amounts typically range from $300–$1,000 over 12–24 months
- ☐ Every on-time payment reports to all three bureaus — this is pure payment history building
- ☐ At the end of the loan term, you receive the saved funds (minus any fees)

Strategic Authorized User

Ask a trusted family member — parent, sibling, adult child — to add you as an authorized user on a credit card they have had for years with an excellent payment history. Their positive history may appear on your report.

- ☐ You do not need to use the card or even have the physical card in your possession
- ☐ The account's age, payment history, and utilization will show on your report
- ☐ This works best with an old account (5+ years) with consistent on-time payments and low utilization
- ☐ Choose someone whose credit habits you trust completely — their future behavior will affect you too
- ☐ This is a temporary bridge — you still need to build your own accounts

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Unsecured Credit Card (Starter)

Once your score reaches 620–650 or better, you may qualify for a basic unsecured credit card. These typically have low limits initially, but they cost you nothing to hold open.

- ☐ Capital One Platinum and Petal 1 are designed for people with fair or limited credit
- ☐ Use for small purchases and pay in full each month
- ☐ Do not apply for multiple cards at once — space applications 6 months apart
- ☐ After 6–12 months of responsible use, request a credit limit increase (without a hard pull if possible)

Retail and Store Cards

Store credit cards (Target, Amazon, department stores) are generally easier to qualify for than bank cards and can serve as a stepping stone — but use with caution.

- ☐ High interest rates make them dangerous if you carry a balance
- ☐ Only use them if you will pay the balance in full every month
- ☐ They report to the bureaus just like regular cards — on-time payments help
- ☐ Limit yourself to one at most while rebuilding — the temptation to overspend is real

CHAPTER 6

Credit Cards After Divorce

Choosing, Using, and Not Misusing

Credit cards are the most common — and the most commonly misused — credit tool available. Used correctly, they are powerful credit-builders and offer real consumer protections. Used carelessly, they can spiral into debt that takes years to undo. This chapter covers both sides.

How to Choose the Right Card for Your Stage

Score	Card Type	Examples
Below 580 (or no file)	Secured card, no annual fee, or a credit-builder loan	Discover it® Secured, Capital One Platinum Secured, Self Credit-Builder
580–669	Entry-level unsecured card for fair credit	Capital One Platinum, Petal 1 Visa, Credit One Bank Platinum
670–739	No-annual-fee rewards card; consider cash-back	Citi Double Cash, Chase Freedom Unlimited, Capital One Quicksilver
740+	Premium rewards card; consider travel or points	Chase Sapphire Preferred, Amex Blue Cash Preferred, Citi Premier

The Golden Rules of Credit Card Use

Rule	Why It Matters
Pay on time, every time	Set up autopay for at least the minimum. Missing a payment is the single most damaging thing you can do to your score.
Pay the full balance if at all possible	Interest rates on credit cards average 20–25%. Carrying a balance is expensive. Pay in full to avoid interest and keep utilization low.
Keep utilization below 30% per card	If your limit is $500, don't let your balance exceed $150 before your statement closes. Below 10% is ideal.
Don't open too many cards at once	Each application triggers a hard inquiry. Space new applications at least 6 months apart while rebuilding.
Don't close old cards	Closing a card reduces your available credit and can shorten your average account age. Keep old cards open with small purchases.
Never use more than you can pay off	A credit card is not supplemental income. It is a convenience tool and a credit-building tool — not a way to fund a lifestyle you can't afford.

CHAPTER 7

Debt Management

What to Pay First and How

Post-divorce finances often include debt — some from the marriage, some new. Knowing how to prioritize debt repayment protects both your credit score and your financial wellbeing. This chapter covers the two proven strategies and how to decide which is right for you.

Organize Your Debt First

Before you can tackle debt, you need a clear picture of everything you owe:

Creditor	Type	Balance	Rate	Min. Payment	In My Name?
			%		
			%		
			%		
			%		
			%		
TOTAL DEBT					

The Two Payoff Strategies

Once you know what you owe, choose one of these two methods and commit to it:

The Avalanche Method

Pay the least interest. Save the most money.

How it works: List your debts from highest to lowest interest rate. Pay minimums on all — then put every extra dollar toward the highest-rate debt first. Once it is paid off, roll that payment amount to the next highest rate.

Best for: Women who are motivated by math, want to minimize total interest paid, and can stay disciplined without quick wins.

The Snowball Method

Build momentum. Get quick wins.

How it works: List your debts from smallest to largest balance regardless of interest rate. Pay minimums on all — then attack the smallest balance first. When it is gone, roll that payment to the next smallest.

Best for: Women who need motivational wins to stay on track, have several small debts creating mental load, or are just beginning to take control.

What About Collections and Charge-Offs?

If you have accounts in collections or charged off — meaning the lender wrote off the debt — here is what you need to know:

- ☐ A collection account stays on your report for 7 years from the date of first delinquency
- ☐ Paying a collection account does not remove it from your report, but it changes the status to 'paid' — which is better
- ☐ Some newer scoring models (FICO 9, VantageScore 4.0) ignore paid collections entirely
- ☐ Before paying an old collection, confirm the debt is valid and not past the statute of limitations in your state
- ☐ You can negotiate a 'pay for delete' arrangement with some collectors — get any agreement in writing before paying
- ☐ If a debt collector contacts you, you have the right to request debt validation in writing within 30 days

CHAPTER 8

Protecting Your Credit

Fraud, Monitoring & Security

Divorce creates vulnerability — your personal information has been shared with attorneys, court systems, and a former spouse who knows your Social Security number, birthdate, and financial accounts. Credit protection is not optional. This chapter covers every tool available to you.

Credit Monitoring — Set It Up Now

Credit monitoring alerts you when significant changes appear on your report: new accounts, hard inquiries, balance changes, or personal information updates. This is your early warning system.

- ☐ Free option: Credit Karma monitors TransUnion and Equifax and alerts you to changes
- ☐ Free option: Experian's free tier monitors your Experian report and score
- ☐ Free option: Your bank or credit card may offer free credit monitoring — check your account benefits
- ☐ Paid option: IdentityForce, LifeLock, or Experian IdentityWorks offer all-three-bureau monitoring with identity theft insurance
- ☐ At minimum, set a calendar reminder to pull all three reports every 90 days

Credit Freeze — The Strongest Protection

A credit freeze (also called a security freeze) prevents new credit from being opened in your name without your explicit authorization. It is free, does not affect your existing accounts, and does not affect your current credit score. It is the single most powerful protection against identity theft.

- ☐ Freeze at all three bureaus: Equifax.com, Experian.com, TransUnion.com
- ☐ Each freeze is free and can be lifted temporarily when you need to apply for credit
- ☐ You will receive a PIN or online access to manage your freeze
- ☐ Strongly recommended for women post-divorce, especially if the marriage involved financial control or abuse

> **ACTION**
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> Place a credit freeze at all three bureaus. It takes about 10 minutes total and costs nothing.

Fraud Alerts

A fraud alert is lighter than a freeze — it doesn't block new credit, but requires lenders to take extra steps to verify your identity before opening accounts. You only need to file with one bureau; they are required to notify the other two. A standard fraud alert lasts one year.

Signs of Identity Theft — What to Watch For

- ☐ Unfamiliar accounts or hard inquiries on your report
- ☐ Bills or collection notices for accounts you didn't open
- ☐ Your tax return is rejected because one was already filed in your name
- ☐ Medical bills for treatment you didn't receive
- ☐ Calls from debt collectors about debts you don't recognize
- ☐ Credit applications denied for reasons that don't match your understanding of your credit

KNOW THIS

If you suspect your ex-spouse has misused your personal information to open accounts, contact the FTC at IdentityTheft.gov, place a credit freeze immediately, and consult your attorney. Fraudulent account opening using another person's information is a federal crime.

A NOTE ON SAFETY FIRST

Using access to your financial information to control, monitor, or intimidate you is a form of financial abuse — not a normal part of a divorce, even a contentious one. If you believe that's happening, the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233, thehotline.org) can help you think through both your safety and your next steps.

My Credit Protection Checklist

- ☐ Credit monitoring set up (service: _____)
- ☐ Credit freeze placed at Equifax
- ☐ Credit freeze placed at Experian
- ☐ Credit freeze placed at TransUnion
- ☐ Freeze PINs saved securely
- ☐ Calendar reminder set to pull reports every 90 days
- ☐ All accounts have updated email/phone for alerts

CHAPTER 9

Credit and the Big Purchases

Housing, Cars, and Major Loans

At some point in your post-divorce life, you will likely need to make a major purchase or take on a significant loan on your own. This chapter walks through what to expect — and how to prepare.

Renting an Apartment

- ☐ Most landlords look for a score of 620–650 or higher; some require 700+
- ☐ They look at your full report — not just your score. Collections, evictions, and recent late payments matter
- ☐ If your score is below a landlord's threshold, offer a larger security deposit or a co-signer
- ☐ Some landlords will accept proof of strong income (3x monthly rent) in lieu of a high score
- ☐ Ask the landlord's minimum score requirement before applying to avoid an unnecessary hard inquiry

Buying a Car

Auto loans are typically easier to qualify for than mortgages, but your interest rate will vary significantly based on your score:

Score	Tier	What to Expect
750+	Super Prime	Lowest available rates — often 5–7% for new cars
700–749	Prime	Competitive rates — a few percentage points higher
650–699	Near Prime	Higher rates — can still get financed at most dealerships
580–649	Subprime	Significantly higher rates — consider waiting 6–12 months to rebuild
Below 580	Deep Subprime	Predatory rates common — credit union financing strongly recommended over dealer financing

PRO TIP

Get pre-approved by your bank or credit union before going to a dealership. You'll know your rate in advance and have negotiating power. Dealer financing is often more expensive.

Buying a Home

A mortgage is the largest credit decision most women will make. Your credit score affects not just whether you qualify, but how much your loan costs over 30 years.

- ☐ Conventional loans typically require a 620+ score; 740+ gets you the best rates
- ☐ FHA loans allow scores as low as 500 (with 10% down) or 580 (with 3.5% down) — useful for rebuilders
- ☐ VA loans (if you have military service) have no official minimum score requirement and no PMI
- ☐ A 0.5% difference in mortgage rate on a $250,000 loan costs roughly $25,000 over 30 years — the stakes are real
- ☐ Start working on your credit 12–18 months before you plan to apply for a mortgage
- ☐ Do not open any new credit accounts in the 6–12 months before applying for a mortgage
- ☐ Get pre-qualified (soft pull) before pre-approved (hard pull) to avoid unnecessary inquiries

KNOW THIS

Many mortgage lenders use older FICO scoring models (FICO 2, 4, or 5) rather than the most current versions. Your score for mortgage purposes may differ from the score you see in credit monitoring apps. Ask your mortgage lender which model they use.

CHAPTER 10

Your 12-Month Credit Rebuild Plan

Month by Month — What to Do and When

Credit improvement is not instant — but it is entirely predictable when you are consistent. Use this plan to stay focused. Check off tasks as you complete them. By month 12, the difference will be measurable.

MONTHS 1–2

Foundation

- ☐ Pull all three credit reports at annualcreditreport.com
- ☐ Calculate your net worth snapshot (Financial Foundation Framework)
- ☐ Identify and list all errors, joint accounts, and unfamiliar items
- ☐ File disputes on any inaccurate information
- ☐ Open a secured credit card or credit-builder loan
- ☐ Set up autopay for every existing bill and account
- ☐ Place a credit freeze at all three bureaus
- ☐ Set up free credit monitoring (Credit Karma + Experian free tier)

Goal: Know exactly where you stand and put the right tools in place.

MONTHS 3–4

Building Momentum

- ☐ Confirm disputes have been resolved — follow up if not
- ☐ Use your secured card monthly for small purchases; pay balance in full
- ☐ Begin your debt payoff strategy (Avalanche or Snowball)
- ☐ Close or refinance any remaining joint accounts from marriage
- ☐ Update all beneficiary designations on financial accounts
- ☐ Check your score — expect early movement
- ☐ Remove yourself as authorized user on any negative accounts

Goal: Clean, separated, and building forward.

MONTHS 5–8

Growing Your File

- ☐ Continue on-time payments on all accounts — no exceptions
- ☐ Keep utilization below 30% on every card
- ☐ If score has reached 620+, consider applying for one unsecured card
- ☐ Continue debt payoff plan — celebrate each account paid off
- ☐ Re-pull all three reports; confirm errors were corrected
- ☐ Review your budget — are income and expenses still aligned?
- ☐ Research mortgage or rental requirements if housing is in your future

Goal: Consistent habits, growing score, measurable progress.

MONTHS 9–12

Planning Forward

- ☐ Pull all three reports again — compare to Month 1 baseline
- ☐ Most women rebuilding from scratch or fair credit see 50–100+ point improvement
- ☐ Request a credit limit increase on your secured or first unsecured card
- ☐ Consider whether a second credit card makes sense for your goals
- ☐ Meet with a fee-only financial advisor to review full financial picture
- ☐ If a home purchase is planned, begin mortgage pre-qualification research
- ☐ Set your credit goal for Year 2 — write it in the worksheet below
- ☐ Acknowledge what you have built — this took real discipline and courage

Goal: You are no longer reacting. You are planning.

My Credit Progress Tracker

Score at Month 1 (Equifax)	Score at Month 6 (Equifax)
Score at Month 1 (Experian)	Score at Month 6 (Experian)
Score at Month 1 (TransUnion)	Score at Month 6 (TransUnion)
Score at Month 12 (Equifax)	My goal score by Month 12
Score at Month 12 (Experian)	My goal score by Year 2
Score at Month 12 (TransUnion)	

Biggest financial win this year:
One financial goal for next year:

QUICK REFERENCE

Credit Terms Worth Knowing

A plain-language reference for the terms used throughout this playbook.

FICO Score	The most widely used credit scoring model, developed by the Fair Isaac Corporation; most mortgage lenders rely on it.
VantageScore	An alternative scoring model used by most free score tools; weighs similar data slightly differently than FICO.
Trade line	An individual account listed on your credit report — a credit card, loan, or mortgage.
Hard inquiry	A record of a lender checking your credit because you applied for something; can temporarily lower your score.
Soft inquiry	A credit check that doesn't affect your score — checking your own report, or a pre-qualification pull.
Credit utilization	The percentage of your available credit currently in use; a major factor in your score.
Charge-off	A debt a lender has written off as unlikely to be collected — it still counts as owed and still affects your credit.
Statute of limitations	The state-specific time limit during which a creditor can sue you for unpaid debt; varies by state and debt type.
FCRA (Fair Credit Reporting Act)	The federal law giving you the right to dispute inaccurate information on your credit report.
CFPB (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau)	The federal agency you can escalate a credit dispute to if a bureau denies a valid claim.
Secured credit card	A card backed by a cash deposit that becomes your credit limit — the standard starting point for rebuilding.
Credit freeze	A free protection that blocks new credit from being opened in your name without your explicit authorization.
Avalanche / Snowball	The two standard debt payoff strategies — highest-interest-first versus smallest-balance-first.

CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY

You've Come Full Circle

If you started with the Divorce Discovery Checklist and worked through the Financial Foundation Framework, this playbook is the last piece: turning the financial clarity you built during your divorce into a strong financial identity afterward.

If you're arriving here first, it's never too late to go back and build the fuller picture.

The Divorce Discovery Checklist
The free starting point — the 7 documents to locate before you file, so you walk in already organized.

The Second Act Financial Foundation Framework™
The complete pre-divorce financial strategy guide — expenses, income, assets, debts, and a negotiation-ready summary for your attorney.

Find both at www.realmomlife.com

Your Credit Is Yours Now. Build It Intentionally.

Credit is not complicated — it requires consistency. Pay on time. Keep balances low. Keep old accounts open. Protect your report. Check in regularly.

Do these things and your score will reflect exactly the woman you are becoming: independent, informed, and in control.

— Christine Moriarty

Attorney · Author · EmpoweredAgingWomen.com · RealMomLife.com

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